Complete Transcripts

Episode 01 Danger Close

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TOM BOWMAN, HOST: Before we get started, you should know that this podcast contains graphic depictions of war. And we're talking to Marines, so there's a lot of cursing.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GRAHAM SMITH, HOST: Camp Pendleton in Southern California is the West Coast home of the United States Marine Corps - 200 square miles of hills and wetlands and long stretches of beach just outside San Diego. On its edge, there's a sharp hill covered with scrub trees and bushes that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. It's called Horno Ridge. And over the last 20 years, it's become a place of pilgrimage, where Marines sweat and suffer to honor their dead.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: The hike up is steep and rocky, with two false summits and, at the top, a small field of crosses and memorials, dozens of them of all sizes, some pieced together from tree branches or lumber, some weighing hundreds of pounds, each one carried up by Marines and sailors. Scott Radetski has climbed Horno Ridge many times. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of keepsakes and mementos.

SCOTT RADETSKI: I mean, everything from a coin to a wedding ring to, you know, a medal, a Purple Heart, to, I don't know, bottles of liquor that were poured out, you know, a drink for their fallen comrade.

G SMITH: Radetski is a retired chaplain. He doesn't like the messy piles of empty bottles and cans, but he knows they're only part of what people leave behind on the ridge. More important are the unseen burdens - the sorrow, the sadness.

RADETSKI: The anger, regret. Ooh, here's a big word - shame. When someone dies and you don't, the grief that's there - survivor's guilt. And hopefully, the lingering that takes place on the hill is part of that - that you can move past the horrific things that you've maybe seen or done.

BOWMAN: Chaplain Radetski got the hilltop memorial started. In the spring of 2003, his unit lost a Marine in Iraq, killed just minutes after the invasion began. Months later, those Marines were back at Pendleton, preparing for yet another deployment to Iraq. And that death? It still hung over them.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: One day, the chaplain gets an idea. He finds some sections of old telephone pole and bolts them together. The Marines already trained on the ridge. He thought, maybe the pain and suffering of carrying this massive cross up the trail could create a bond, and they'd leave the cross itself on top as a memorial. So Radetski and six others - two officers, two riflemen and two medics - become the first to do just that. They carry the cross on their shoulders up until almost the end. The final stretch is so steep they have to push it, drag it, a foot or two at a time, until they reach the top. And they're the ones who inspired this field of crosses, which grows year after year as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan drag on.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: In time, three of the seven men who carried and pushed that first cross up the trail in the summer of 2003 would themselves be memorialized on Horno Ridge. One was killed in a firefight in Baghdad, another by a roadside bomb. And that last Marine - his death has always been kind of a mystery.

BOWMAN: A mystery we've spent the last three years investigating, not just because of this one man - others died with him - but because, as we started to find out, it was all part of a greater tragedy covered up by powerful people looking to keep the American public and even the families of those who died from hearing the truth. It's a story about mistakes, faulty assumptions, miscalculations, lies.

This is TAKING COVER from NPR. I'm Tom Bowman.

G SMITH: And I'm Graham Smith. This is the story of our efforts to learn about the lives lost and why families and even the men who were badly wounded still don't know the truth about what happened to them on the worst day of their lives.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DAVID COSTELLO: See the hole in that?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: Yeah.

COSTELLO: The building? It's like a square. And when they launched that mortar, it hit - boom. I mean, one out of a million shot.

JASON DUTY: We're sitting on those stairs. And he looked really pale, and he looked shaken, and I don't think he'd slept. And he said, Doc, I think I f***** up. And I was like, well, what did you f*** up? And he's like, well, I can't really talk about it, but I think I fucked up. I think I fucked up.

ELENA: They're hiding something for a reason, and they don't - there's something that hasn't been disclosed yet. There's got to be some - why are they keeping it such a - why did they keep it a secret to begin with?

JOHN SMITH: The fact that nobody has said anything concrete, no paperwork, nothing, and I'm just now finding out there was even an investigation - that's kind of unsettling.

ARKAN: I don't care. So why he didn't tell us, why he lied to us, that's - I want to know.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Well, for us, this whole thing started with a tip, a stunning and disturbing allegation from a trusted source.

How's it going?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: Yeah, good. You?

BOWMAN: Good. All good. That was a final security check. Now I'm in the building itself.

The building - that's what people here call the Pentagon. I've worked here covering the U.S. military for the last 25 years.

Walking along the E-Ring.

Typical morning - you see people in the hallway.

How are things in China?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #3: That report came out. I learned from NPR, the...

BOWMAN: I might run into a colonel I knew in Afghanistan or a general visiting from his overseas command who can tell me what's really going on. But there are some things, well, people just don't want to talk about in the building. So I might call them at home at night, or...

(SOUNDBITE OF DRINK POURING)

BOWMAN: ...We might meet up at a bar, which is what happened one night at a whiskey bar in D.C. Actually, this very bar, a guy who spent a lot of time in Iraq told me a story very few people knew. He told me that early in the Iraq War, there'd been this tragedy. U.S. Marines had dropped a mortar or a rocket on their own people. That's what they call friendly fire. Now, in this case, he said, one Marine was killed and another seriously wounded. Friendly fire deaths - they happen. They happen in every war throughout history. That's not what made his story shocking. Here's the thing - he said that the Marine brass had actually covered it up, burying the truth about this terrible incident because, he said, the son of a powerful politician was involved in the screw-up.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: Tom came to me the next day, asked if I could help dig on this tip he'd just gotten.

BOWMAN: Since 9/11, Graham and I have spent years reporting from combat zones. We've gone on dozens of patrols...

G SMITH: Dug foxholes together.

BOWMAN: ...And come under attack while embedded with Marines and soldiers. He's working on the investigations team now, and it felt like we could team up again.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: The source who gave me this tip, he was, you know, a little fuzzy on the details - said this Marine had been killed in the spring of 2004 in Fallujah.

G SMITH: The Iraq War, if you lived through it, covered it, maybe fought there, it feels like it was just yesterday. But this was 20 years ago now. And we know for some folks this is ancient history. Maybe you were 5 when it kicked off - so very basics. The U.S. invaded at the beginning of 2003 and within a few weeks defeated the Iraqi army, though they never found any of the weapons of mass destruction that were the whole reason for going in. Chemical, biological, maybe nuclear - they found nothing. Still, the Americans occupied the country. They were running things. They figured they'd won. What they didn't realize - a new war was just beginning because a lot of Iraqis hated the American occupiers. They felt humiliated, brutalized. And this city of Fallujah - it's where the whole nature of the war started to change. It became the center of an insurgency that America would fight to this day, really.

BOWMAN: So was there a friendly fire incident there? There was a major battle there in 2004 in the spring - didn't last long, just a couple of weeks in April. And these days, there are pretty good online lists of casualties. So we did what anybody would do - a quick Google search. It was a deadly month both for Iraqis and for the U.S. Nearly 150 American troops were killed, 27 of them in Fallujah. That narrowed things down a bit, but still, none were listed as friendly fire. Nothing seemed to fit. For weeks, we pored through small-town newspaper obituaries and press releases the Pentagon sends out whenever a service member is killed. Finally, we got a break.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: It was on one of those memorial web pages, like the ones funeral homes set up for family and friends to leave condolences. Only this site is for fallen Marines. And the entries for two different Marines killed on the same day - Robert Zurheide and Brad Shuder - actually told a different story from the military press releases. Each of the two pages said the Marine was killed by friendly fire rather than hostile, like the military reported, and they were both from the same unit, Echo Company, Second Battalion, First Marine Division - or as the Marines would say, Echo 2/1. And another thing caught our attention - a comment from someone named Corporal Gomez-Perez. He wrote, April 12 is always on my mind, and every time I think about it, I just get mad. Man, it's bulls*** what happened.

BOWMAN: Now, the initial tip was one dead, one wounded, but here we have two Marines from the same unit who died on the same day. Was this the friendly fire? We filed a records request with the Marines looking for any information about this incident. Was there an investigation? Now, this is where things get weird. It usually takes months to get an answer from the government, but here, after just a couple of weeks, we got a response. A thorough search was made, the letter said. No records on file.

No records? It made no sense. Look; the military investigates and documents everything, whether it's a major screw-up or just someone losing a piece of gear. Two Marines killed? Even if it wasn't friendly fire, there should be some record of the day. We filed an appeal asking them to look again. It was incredibly

frustrating. But you know what? There are other ways. I started asking around at the Pentagon, calling up both active duty and retired officers, especially those who served in Iraq. Have you guys ever heard about this? Who was involved? We'll hear more about that later.

G SMITH: With Tom working the brass, I went looking for grunts - the guys who served in Echo Company. I dug through books about the fight in Fallujah, including one called "No True Glory." I knew the unit, Echo 2/1, and the names of the Marines who died, plus a date - April 12. But across 378 pages, there is no mention of a friendly fire incident that day or any other. In fact, no mention of April 12 at all. It was as if nothing had happened that day in Fallujah.

But I did find one clue - that Corporal Gomez-Perez from the memorial web page, there's a picture of him in the center of this book, staring into the camera, half his shoulder torn away by a bullet. The book says he was with Echo 2/1. Between that and the comment - April 12 is always on my mind, and, every time I think about it, I just get mad - I figured that corporal, Carlos Gomez-Perez, must have been with Shuder and Zurheide when they were killed. I found a number and called him. He was on the road. He works in the cannabis industry now. We set up a time to talk the next day. That's ahead on TAKING COVER from NPR.

(SOUNDBITE OF PHONE RINGING)

G SMITH: Hey, Carlos?

CARLOS GOMEZ-PEREZ: Hi. Good morning. How are you doing?

G SMITH: Hey, I'm great. It's good to hear you, man.

It turns out Carlos was part of Echo Company for the 2003 invasion, too, so he served with Jose Gutierrez. He was the Marine memorialized with that first cross on Horno Ridge. They were pretty good friends. And like Gutierrez, Carlos says he first came to America illegally.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: I grew up in Mexico City. I grew up in Mexico City. And when I was 9, I ran across the border to get to San Diego. We got caught. So I got - we got pushed in jail.

BOWMAN: He kept trying. And looking back now, it's clear from those trips across the desert that Carlos was already driven by character traits that the Marines champion.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: I call it my first mission, honestly. After being in the Marine Corps, I call it my first mission because, basically, I was always in the rear, not because I couldn't keep up but to ensure that everybody in front of me was making its way forward.

BOWMAN: He finally made it - grew up undocumented, not far from Camp Pendleton. And as soon as he turned 18, he became a U.S. resident - basically, just so he could join the Marines.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: I was told that the Marine Corps was the hardest branch in the military. So I'm like, let's see if that's true.

G SMITH: I'd read in that book, "No True Glory," about the battle where Carlos had been wounded and how he was recognized for his valor that April.

So forgive my ignorance. Did you get a Silver Star?

GOMEZ-PEREZ: Yes. I was awarded the Silver Star. And I didn't know what Silver Star was, so I had to Google it before I received it.

BOWMAN: It's kind of strange he had to Google it because the Silver Star is a big deal. Just two steps below the Medal of Honor, it recognizes conspicuous gallantry. That means ignoring the danger, putting your life on the line to help fellow Marines in combat.

G SMITH: When Carlos got home, he was pretty messed up - not just his shoulder, but mentally.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: Sure enough, April comes around. Unintentionally, my mindset goes somewhere else. My body reacts differently, emotionwise. But it's now - it's been so long that now my son feels the same way. April rolls around, his whole demeanor change.

G SMITH: He's been in treatment for PTSD, and he's getting better. But Carlos says his family suffered with him.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: In what sense does it fit that my son's 14 years old, and I tell him, I wish I would have died in Iraq rather than come back. Not because I don't love you, not because I'm - not because you don't mean the world to me; because if I would have died, it would have ended right there.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: We talked about the incident, April 12, that whole month fighting in Fallujah, and how it still lingers for him almost 20 years later.

BOWMAN: Carlos, he's still the kind of Marine who keeps tabs on his buddies, looking to make sure everybody makes it forward. And over the next two years, he helped us to get in touch with some of them, including Ben Liotta, Doc Liotta as they call him.

G SMITH: Ben was traveling in South America with his girlfriend, a musician, when I reached him. I set up a time to talk. And a week later, I called him from a studio here at NPR.

(SOUNDBITE OF PHONE RINGING)

G SMITH: Thanks, Stu.

STU: Can you hear it?

G SMITH: I hear a ring.

BEN LIOTTA: Hello?

G SMITH: Hey, Ben?

LIOTTA: Yes.

G SMITH: Graham here.

LIOTTA: Graham?

G SMITH: Yeah.

LIOTTA: Yeah. How are you doing, Graham?

G SMITH: OK. Hey. Thank you so much.

He was in the Navy, a battlefield medic for the Marines. He said he'd been there when the explosion took place.

You were a corpsman, right?

LIOTTA: Yeah.

G SMITH: Can you tell me - well, would you mind just telling me your name and, you know, where you're from? Just the sort of basics so I can make sure I don't screw that up.

LIOTTA: Well, real quick before we get into it.

G SMITH: Yeah.

LIOTTA: I just wanted to ask a couple...

G SMITH: Sure.

LIOTTA: ...Questions myself.

G SMITH: Absolutely.

LIOTTA: What is the purpose of your documentary?

G SMITH: Well, I'll tell you the truth. Right now, I'm still kind of trying to...

I told him about a clue I'd found. Echo Company's captain, Doug Zembiec, wrote a letter to his wife on April 12, 2004. He wrote, one of my Marines called in a mortar mission. The round landed short, killed two of my Marines. Zembiec's wife published the letter years later in a book about their relationship and his death. But from the letter, it's clear the company commander knew immediately it was friendly fire.

And one of the things specifically that came out was how long it had taken to notify the families in this incident.

LIOTTA: So it's about that.

G SMITH: Yeah. So that's where I'm at.

LIOTTA: Yeah. I mean, I will say this. I am always down for the truth to come out. I mean, I think we both understand, like, the climate today is insane. And I'm not looking to be a part of a smear campaign that's, like, meant to make the Marines look bad. You know what I mean?

G SMITH: Oh, believe...

LIOTTA: If your goal is truth, I'm down with that.

G SMITH: Yeah. I mean, I've spent a lot of time with Marines over in Afghanistan. I went in 2009 with 2/8 out of Lejeune on the whole, like, insert into the Helmand River Valley and, you know, dropped in with them on the helicopters.

LIOTTA: So you've been through your own s***.

G SMITH: Yeah. Yeah. And let me preface this whole thing by saying I, you know, like - even after talking to Carlos, you know, I was, like, back in the zone for, like, a week. And my wife was like, why are you being such a b****? And...

LIOTTA: (Laughter).

G SMITH: You know, 'cause...

LIOTTA: It's been me this whole week waiting for this call.

G SMITH: Yeah, 'cause it - you can't not respond to it on those levels. And so thank you.

LIOTTA: No, I appreciate that. And no problem. Yeah. All right, so let's do this officially.

G SMITH: OK.

LIOTTA: Need my name and where I'm from?

G SMITH: Yeah.

LIOTTA: My name is Benjamin Liotta. I'm originally from kind of all over New York, was born in...

BOWMAN: Ben Liotta was just one of the men we talked with as we tried to unravel this mystery about Echo Company. If we're going to get to the bottom of the allegation about a cover-up, we first had to understand more about what happened on the ground. Bill Skiles was there. He's a retired sergeant major - invited us to his house in Virginia about an hour south of D.C.

BILL SKILES: ...If you like.

G SMITH: You have...

BOWMAN: I heard buffalo...

G SMITH: Just - before we even get into this stuff, I - we are obviously in your Marine room or something.

SKILES: Well...

G SMITH: What do you call this place?

SKILES: It's my Marine room.

G SMITH: So some of these are replicas of weapons.

SKILES: Well yeah, these are real.

G SMITH: He pours us a couple of whiskeys...

(SOUNDBITE OF CORK POPPING)

G SMITH: ...And settles down into a leather recliner.

SKILES: So expectations going - we'd never heard of the city.

BOWMAN: Skiles was the right-hand man to company commander Doug Zembiec.

SKILES: I remember Zembiec going on a map in the hallway in Camp Horno. We're going to a place called Fallujah or - I go, what the hell?

BOWMAN: They got back to Iraq in March.

SKILES: And our compound - it was called Camp Volturno, and we renamed it Camp Baharia - Navy term. We called it Camp Diarrhea. Of course, we did. Terrible place. So here we are, a battalion of Marines going to Fallujah. Remember, President Bush said as of - what? - May of '03...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

GEORGE W BUSH: Major combat operations in Iraq have ended...

SKILES: ...The war is over.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BUSH: In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed.

(CHEERING)

SKILES: So, OK, yay. So...

BOWMAN: Mission accomplished.

SKILES: Yeah. Anyway, so we go up there, and the expectations of all the Marines - I mean, we actually played football. I remember being the quarterback...

G SMITH: We spent more than five hours with Bill Skiles that night. Between what he told us, Carlos and Ben and dozens of others, plus audio recorded in the city that month, we've pieced together this account of their arrival in Fallujah and the days leading up to the April 12 explosion that killed Brad Shuder and Rob Zurheide.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: This is TAKING COVER from NPR.

TONY PAZ: We had just gotten the brief. The new commander had some, you know, words of wisdom. And we were doing all the Mattis - the Mad-Dog-isms 'cause he was our division commander.

BOWMAN: Brigadier General James Mattis. Years later, Mattis served as defense secretary under Trump, but Iraq is where he made his reputation - became an icon in the Marine Corps with nicknames like Mad Dog, St. Mattis. He's very quotable.

PAZ: No greater friend, no worse enemy. We're here with the velvet glove approach.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: It's late March. The Marines are in Fallujah to take over from the Army.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: You will go in there and win the hearts and minds. You've got to be there almost as police officers. I'm like, OK, fine. We'll do that. It was something far from the truth.

DUTY: We thought we were moving in for, like, security and stability - to, you know, win the hearts and minds of the people. And it seemed like that was just not something the locals in Fallujah were interested in.

BOWMAN: One reason? The heavy-handed tactics of the 82nd Airborne, the Army unit they were replacing.

LIOTTA: I mean, I looked it up, and everything online said it was a hornet's nest. You know, you read everything that the 82nd Airborne went through over there. And we still were like - more like we just didn't know what to expect. And then we got there and started asking the Army how everything was, and it seemed like the Army didn't really know what they were doing. And, like, I don't mean to say that just to talk crap about the branches. But from their own stories, they were like, no, we just drive through and, like, don't even stop when we hit somebody, and, like, we just shoot when we're shot at without even knowing what we're shooting at. And it's just like, oh, well, then I think there's a reason they don't like you.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SKILES: All I know is we prepared for hugging and kissing and love and just spreading the gift of giving. Battle was thought about a little bit.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SKILES: But interesting to see through satellite imagery during April how many were coming in, crossing the Euphrates to come at us. The great jihad was coming.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: So then you have the insurgents coming in. Insurgents became recruiters. Oh, I saw the Army shot up your house. I saw the Army shoot your hospitals. I saw the Army shoot your schools. I saw the Army destroy your vehicle, which was your only means of work. Come help us. Get back at them. The Army at that time was the best recruiter for the combat that was about to happen.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: You know, in one way, the Army tactics, riding in their vehicles rather than patrolling on foot, worked - for them. They took few casualties.

SKILES: They had one dead, 10 wounded. So they're there for six months, seven months, one dead, 10 wounded. And this is important to remember that because the Marines have landed now. We're back. In all of our arrogance, we're back. OK.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: But this time, you can feel the difference. The first time in Iraq, I'm walking through the streets, doing patrol, and people are smiling. They're saying, go Bush. Thumbs up. Mister, Mister, we love you, whatever. Second time around, going to the streets of Fallujah, that demeanor was different.

SKILES: I remember having pens. And we had soccer balls that weren't inflated. I couldn't find air. So we'd throw some soccer balls that were inflated. I remember the kid flipping me off because I gave him a soccer ball without air.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: You could see hate in the people's eyes. There's no little kids running to us this year. What the hell is going on?

BOWMAN: The day the Marines took over, there was a mortar attack at Fallujah's city hall. Now, a mortar, if you're not familiar, it's kind of like a grenade, but shaped like a bowling pin. Recently, we watched some Marines train, launching them out of metal tubes and on tripods.

UNIDENTIFIED MARINE: When ready, gun one.

(SOUNDBITE OF MORTAR FIRING)

BOWMAN: The round rises high up into the sky and drops down onto the target with a deafening explosion.

(SOUNDBITE OF EXPLOSION)

SKILES: Whoom (ph), a mortar hit here then. OK, it's kind of like, welcome Marine Corps. Welcome back.

G SMITH: Thirteen Americans are wounded. Skiles and Captain Zembiec help evacuate the casualties, get soaked in blood.

SKILES: Once we got back, Zembiec and I walked the chow hall with the same cammies we had. He was a lot more red. I remember the company looking at us going, this is not f****** Kansas anymore.

BOWMAN: April is fast approaching, and that hearts and minds thing? That's not going well. The day after that mortar attack, the Marines lose their first man. An insurgent fires a rocket-propelled grenade at a Marine truck.

SKILES: RPG hit the Marine vehicle, dead stopped. RPG got him and killed him. Next day, General Mattis - personally - they killed a Marine? Send in the Marines. I can't blame somebody for getting revenge. You know, you don't f*** with the Marine Corps. We're back. And how dare you. So send a company in.

LIOTTA: We gave everyone a chance to get out. And we basically - we dropped leaflets and did loudspeakers. And we're like, there's a fight coming. If you don't want to fight, get the f*** out of the city right now.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: (Non-English language spoken).

LIOTTA: And while people were streaming out, fighters were streaming in.

(SOUNDBITE OF GUNFIRE)

J SMITH: Like, we were going through this open, like, courtyard thing. And I always thought something was off. We're walking down, and we turn to the right. And I'll never forget. This little Iraqi girl came out, and she kept pointing down, like just pointing down the street. And, I mean, I'm looking at her. And I'm like, all right, either she's warning us or a signal. So it's one of the two.

G SMITH: Wow. That's kind of a brave little girl right there, if she was warning you.

J SMITH: Yeah. I guess she was warning us because as soon as we turned the corner to the left, shots came down from the roof, everything. And one of them hit Elrod. And they almost got Doc Watt because he was - he got against the wall, and all the bullets started spraying up on the side. And I'm like, all right. So...

LIOTTA: It was all a video game to me, to be honest. It was - until someone got shot, it was all surreal. And I do remember that. I remember once Eric Elrod got hit, it all stopped being a game to me. And it all stopped being interesting. Yeah. And I started to just get my head right, take it in the right way.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: The Marine offensive was having an effect.

SKILES: Two days went by. It was evil. No more mosques. No more prayers. I mean, we went in the city and killed a couple of them or more. Who drew first blood? They killed a Marine. General Mattis, go in there and teach them a lesson. We didn't teach anybody a lesson.

G SMITH: It turns out the insurgency was waiting for a chance to teach the Americans a lesson.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED NEWS ANCHOR: We're going to begin with Iraq this evening. Four American civilians were killed there today. And, as sometimes happens, the cameras were there for the gruesome aftermath. Here's ABC's John Berman.

JOHN BERMAN: On the streets of Fallujah, the brutal attack was met with celebration.

UNIDENTIFIED PEOPLE: (Chanting in non-English language).

BERMAN: We are from Fallujah, they chanted, this is our work. Witnesses say the two SUVs were ambushed as they drove through town.

BOWMAN: It isn't just ABC. The mangled and charred remains of Blackwater contractors hanging off a bridge flash across TV screens around the world, a clear message from the insurgents.

SKILES: They didn't kill them. They killed them 20 times over. They couldn't get to us, so they wanted to take out those four.

BOWMAN: This is the last thing the White House needs. Almost a year after mission accomplished, troops still haven't found any evidence of the alleged weapons of mass destruction. The insurgency is growing stronger. Support for the war back home is dropping. But these are Americans - dismembered, burned. The White House doubles down. The Marines are ordered to clear Fallujah.

DUTY: Some of us had recently returned from a patrol, like, outside the wire a little bit. And I remember just over the loudspeaker, an announcement was made. You know, all Marines report back to your company areas.

G SMITH: Hearts and minds? Forget it. General Mattis is forced to drop the velvet glove. The mission now? Search and destroy. That night, Captain Zembiec jumps up on the hood of a truck to motivate the men.

SKILES: It's pitch black, but you see a figure (laughter) - the Lion of Fallujah. There he is. Marines, this is our Okinawa. This is our Tet Offensive. This is our Saipan. This is our time in history. Pretty cool. And he goes, we're fighting for - look to your left and right - those are your brothers. You're fighting for him. Don't you ever disrespect or dishonor the American flag and what we stand for through our history of battle in the Marine Corps. And he finishes with this - may the dogs of Fallujah eat hearty off our dead enemy.

BOWMAN: May the dogs of Fallujah eat hearty off our dead enemies.

(CROSSTALK)

BOWMAN: By now, it's the early hours of April 1.

SKILES: That's when the hornet's nest started.

J SMITH: Oh, no. That was full-on we're taking over the city and the whole nine. Like, we tried to be nice. Now it's - we got to do what we came here to do. And that's where we just started going through.

BEN WAGNER: We didn't even allow the idea of what this city is going to look like after the fact influence how we fought. And what I mean by that is if you needed to put a tank main gun round into a building, you put a tank main gun round into the building. You know, if we needed to blow down trees to clear our fields of fire, we blew down trees to clear our fields of fire.

DUTY: Every day it was kicking in doors, house to house, clearing operations, sometimes with fights. And a lot of times, it would be the house next door would have some bad guys in it. And then the Marines would assault towards that house, and the bad guys would pack up and move on down the block some, you know? It was kind of like chasing a ghost, almost.

(SOUNDBITE OF GUNFIRE)

WAGNER: So, yeah, we were in the fight. We had the enemy on their heels.

G SMITH: For more than a week, the men of Echo Company and about 3,000 other Marines pushed into Fallujah, dense neighborhoods of concrete buildings normally housing 280,000 people.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED JOURNALIST: The U.S. military says some insurgents are using children to spot targets for them and deliberately firing from heavily populated areas inside Fallujah.

G SMITH: The Al Jazeera TV network sends out brutal images of hospitals crowded with dead and wounded, some of them women and children. Other networks run the footage, too.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED JOURNALIST: Hospitals are full, and doctors say they're running out of medical supplies. The Iraqis claim hundreds of civilians have been killed or wounded in the last four days. It's too dangerous to bury the dead.

BOWMAN: Iraqi politicians threaten to resign if the Americans don't stop the assault. That would be a disaster because the Americans are just about to hand responsibility for governing the country over to their Iraqi allies. So the White House orders the Marines to stop.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: We've been going for about a week, and we're told to cease fire. Like, what? Yeah, cease fire. We don't have to push forward anymore? No, we can't. OK. Fine. Cease fire.

WAGNER: And just to be clear, you know, we talk about a cease-fire. Cease-fire was in effect for U.S. forces, but the insurgents didn't have that same order. And so we were in gunfights on a daily basis throughout.

DUTY: Well, the running joke was that there was a pause in combat operations. And eventually, the enemy guys had agreed that they were going to turn their weapons in and stop fighting. It was just that the joke was that they were going to turn in all their ammo first because they never stopped. They never paused. They just kept shooting at us all the damn time.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: We get to a schoolhouse. We stopped there. And now we're in the schoolhouse. That's when CNN got embedded with us.

BOWMAN: Tomas Etzler from CNN.

TOMAS ETZLER: So what happened, you know, in the morning, they took us to the school. They were kind of sticking out from the line of the houses which the Marines occupied behind them.

BOWMAN: Now, Marines are quick to tell you, in combat, they move, shoot and communicate. But now they're forced to hunker down at the schoolhouse.

EVERETT WATT: Think of like rectangular-shaped building. And there's an open courtyard. So there wasn't no roof over that area.

LIOTTA: I know we were digging in for the long haul because they had me dig a s******. And then we, you know, sandbags around the windows like typical, sandbags around the entrances.

WATT: So we were just kind of like, hey, man, let's block this up just in case. Like, you know, mortars were being launched. We knew mortars would be launched.

G SMITH: So go forward a couple of days. Tell me about the 12.

J SMITH: I mean, it started as a normal day where, like, everybody wakes up. We're smoking and joking. And then...

GOMEZ-PEREZ: So we have - our first - we have our first watch in the morning, my team. So we got word that we were going to get attacked at night. So I'm like, OK.

ETZLER: There was still kind of a very sporadic gunfight going on. And at one point - and it was already April 12 - the school was hit by RPG. But the RPG hit the corner of the school. You know, it shook the whole school. It shook - you know, it made a big noise.

CHRIS COVINGTON: So that morning was the first time I remember getting blown up. I was in a window in that schoolhouse, bent over to pick something up, sat back up and some a**hole shot an RPG at the window, rang my bell pretty good. They wouldn't let me sleep for, like, 12 hours. Robert came off post. And this kid - instead of sleeping, he sat there for eight hours and just stared at me making sure I was - I mean, literally just sat there staring at me smoking cigarettes, making sure I was OK.

BOWMAN: The Robert he's talking about, that's Robert Zurheide. He'd be dead by nightfall.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

LIOTTA: Zurheide was the nicest person I've ever met in my life. I don't know how he became a United States Marine (laughter). He was honestly the nicest person I've ever met in my f***ing life. Like, the dude just had a heart of gold, unless you played cards, and he cheated like crazy.

G SMITH: (Laughter).

LIOTTA: And not that good either (laughter). That s*** was annoying.

(LAUGHTER)

LIOTTA: But what do you call it? Zurheide was funny, man. And he was like nothing you've ever met in your life. This dude around a bunch of Marines, d*** well knowing what the reaction would be, would put on Backstreet Boys and do, like, a choreographed, practiced f***ing dance...

(SOUNDBITE OF BACKSTREET BOYS SONG, "EVERYBODY (BACKSTREET'S BACK)")

LIOTTA: ...That you would expect, like, the Backstreet Boys to do.

G SMITH: (Laughter).

(SOUNDBITE OF BACKSTREET BOYS SONG, "EVERYBODY (BACKSTREET'S BACK)")

ETZLER: So after, like, one hour, two hours - I don't remember exactly - one hour, two hour of sleeping in that school, we went back to those positions. Then I had a discussion with the NBC guys. And I told them, listen. Let's split up. I thought that, you know, like - because I think that, you know, if something's going to happen tonight or anytime, you know, it's going to happen at that school. So I would like to be there.

BOWMAN: He does a quick interview with the company commander around 5 p.m.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ETZLER: What are the biggest challenges your men are facing here in Fallujah today?

DOUG ZEMBIEC: That's an easy one. The biggest challenges we're facing right now are just - my men want to go into the city and attack the enemy. That's what Marines do. They're fired up. They want to go on the assault, so I've got to hold back on the reins to keep them here, keep them from doing that, until we're given permission to do so.

ETZLER: And, of course, I informed CNN headquarters in Atlanta that I will call them every two hours. And in between, I will be - I had, like, I don't know, four or five extra batteries, but I had no idea how long I'm going to stay in Fallujah. So I said, listen. I will not have it switched on. I will turn it on every two hours.

J SMITH: And I mean, right before we got to rest and the incident happened, that - I actually ran to go get the MREs and everything for us to eat. So, I mean, we ran out, ran down the street, hit up HQ, grabbed the MREs, came on back. Yeah, I mean, just a little simple resupply. And then we went to stand-to. And then, I mean, yeah, right after that, that's when everything went down.

ETZLER: It was getting dark around after 6. After I make my phone call, it was getting dark. And the school was on the top of a T-intersection. There were some cars blown up. I saw some bodies in those cars. And I noticed there were guys on that street running from one side of the street to another, and they were dropping tires.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #5: Ran back into the alleyway...

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #6: All right.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #5: Then they rolled out another tire and another guy...

LIOTTA: We kept seeing guys setting up tires, and they were doing - they used to do this to set up signal fires.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #7: I wonder what the hell they're trying to do with those H3 f***ing tires...

LIOTTA: So it would help their mortars. So as they were setting up the tires and s***, our guys were shooting...

(SOUNDBITE OF GUNFIRE)

LIOTTA: ...And whatnot.

(SOUNDBITE OF GUNFIRE)

LIOTTA: So we knew an attack was coming. Like, we could see that they were preparing for an attack. So they told us to be on stand-to - I forget what time. It's usually, like, sunset - because we were expecting a fight. So everyone was in gear. We had that going for us.

COVINGTON: Where they were putting those tires up was the same house that shot the rocket at me that morning. We wanted that house gone.

LIOTTA: We were hanging out at this picnic table that was just underneath an awning that was on the side of the courtyard. And some people were sitting down. I was standing. Shuder was standing, and Shuder had gotten a mail package. Like, he'd gotten some mail with some pictures and s***, so he was showing us pictures of his family and his friends and whatnot at home, which was Sacramento and Lake Tahoe.

And earlier that day - this is a little separate, but it's connected. Earlier that day, I was with Smith, and I saw that he had Pop-Tarts, so I started begging him for some Pop-Tarts 'cause we'd been in - you know, doing this for, like, 10 days or whatever. You miss stupid things. And so the - we got done negotiating, and I was like - I - the deal was I would give him an already freaked Black & Mild. Like, you know, when you pull out the inside paper of a Black & Mild and then you put it back together?

G SMITH: I do not know. Is it like making a blunt but like...

LIOTTA: Oh, OK. Well, it's not making a blunt. I mean, the principle is similar, yes. But the Black & Milds are cheap, but they suck in taste. If you take out the inside leaf, though, the taste is actually smooth as s***. It's something weird about Black & Milds that us poor kids figured out. So that was the deal, is I would give him an already freaked Black & Mild in exchange for the Pop Tarts. And so while we're all bull********, it was me, Doug Hyunga, Brad Shuder - who was it? - Costello. I think that was it. And Smith walks over. And he's like, yo, Doc - he's like, where's my Black & Mild at? And I was like, all right, man. Let me go do that. I haven't done that yet. So like, I'm walking away with Shuder. And we're bull******** about - we're, like, finishing up our conversation about Tahoe. And I left him in the center of the courtyard as we ended our conversation.

And I went to walk into the f****** casualty collection point, like, our - the corpsmen's room. And I had taken, like, not even two complete steps. And, like, I remember seeing a flash in the corner of my eye. And I looked back. And the next thing I know, I'm on the ground waking up. Like, I blacked out. I got thrown across the room. I hit a wall. I was wearing my helmet, but I hit the wall headfirst. And f****** yeah, I came to. It was all f****** - sorry, I'm bugging a little bit. I'm going to hit my weed. But it was like I could see nothing. You know, it was just dust. And all I could hear was ringing, this extreme ringing, both my ears. And then, suddenly, all of my hearing came back like the rush of a fucking train. It was like, (whooshing). And then I could hear everything. And it was just screaming, like, the worst screaming you ever heard in your life.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Ahead on TAKING COVER, that explosion. What was it?

DUTY: We thought it was a Iraqi rocket, and they just got lucky with a pinhole shot, one round.

BOWMAN: And the chaos, the scramble to help the wounded amid a massive firefight.

ETZLER: All hell broke loose. There was fire coming out of everywhere. There was a lot of machine gun fire, a lot of RPG fire. The building was shaken by some of the grenades that hit the building and the rockets.

BOWMAN: Here's the thing, this explosion at the schoolhouse in Fallujah, it should be in the history books as the worst Marine-on-Marine friendly fire incident in decades, but it isn't. It's like it was scrubbed from the record.

SKILES: They said he died. I never knew his name. I can't find any document. He didn't go with me. Somebody took him out. Nowhere in this f****** investigation you see that. That's a sin.

G SMITH: As we continue digging up parts of this story, we have to wonder, why did the Marine Corps keep all of this hidden for so long? Why are we the ones revealing what really happened to the very men who were there?

JOHN TOOLAN: I mean, your instincts, I think, are correct. And those questions should be answered. But the worst thing that would happen is to break that bond of trust between us and the public, the mothers and fathers who send their sons to war.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: TAKING COVER is created and reported by us, Graham Smith and Tom Bowman. Our producer is Chris Haxel. Robert Little is the editor, with help from Kamala Kelkar. To hear our next episode early, sign up for Embedded+ at plus.npr.org/embedded. Or find the Embedded channel in Apple. You'll be supporting our work. And you'll get to listen to the entire season sponsor-free. That's plus.npr.org/embedded. And thanks to everyone who's already signed up and listening early.

We have production help from Nic Neves. Our music comes from Peter Duchesne, Rob Roswell, Brad Honeyman (ph) and the HumpMuscle Rolling Circus. Sound design by Josh Rogosin and me, with help from Nic. This episode was engineered by Josh Newell. Our researcher is Barbara Van Woerkom. We've had additional editorial input from Liana Simstrom, who is the Enterprise Storytelling Unit's supervising producer - also from the supervising editor for Embedded, Katie Simon, as well as Christopher Turpin, Andrew Sussman and Bruce Auster. We are also grateful for guidance and encouragement from Lisa Hagen, Chip Brantley and Andrew Beck Grace.

BOWMAN: Edith Chapin is the acting senior vice president of NPR News. Irene Noguchi is the executive producer of NPR's Enterprise Storytelling Unit. And Anya Grundmann is the senior vice president for programming and audience development. We'd like to thank and acknowledge Eric Niiler and Rick Loomis, journalists who were in Fallujah during the fighting in the spring of 2004, and who shared their recordings with us - and also, NPR member station KPBS and CNN. And finally, thanks to the men who shared their stories with us. In addition to those named in the episode, we heard from Jason Duty, Tony Paz, Everett Watt, John Smith, Chris Covington and Ben Wagner. We'll be hearing more from them ahead.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

Episode 02 Stand-To

MARCH 30, 20235:56 AM ET

GRAHAM SMITH, HOST: Before we get started, you should know that this podcast contains graphic depictions of war. And we're talking to Marines, so there's a lot of cursing.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

TOM BOWMAN, HOST: Previously on TAKING COVER...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

GEORGE W BUSH: Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed.

(APPLAUSE)

JASON DUTY: We thought we were moving in for, like, security and stability - you know, win the hearts and minds of the people - and it seemed like that was just not something the locals in Fallujah were interested in.

JOHN SMITH: I mean, it started as a normal day. We - like, everybody wakes up. We're smoking and joking.

CHRIS COVINGTON: Where they were putting those tires up was the same house that shot the rocket at me that morning. We wanted that house gone.

J SMITH: And then, I mean, yeah, right after that, that's when everything went down.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: Dawn and dusk are the worst times of day for any combat unit - the most uncertain, the most dangerous. Since people began fighting and killing each other - which is, to say, since forever - when the light is least is when you have to be most on guard for an attack. For the Marines, this state of heightened awareness - it's called stand-to. That's when they pull on their armored vests and helmets, end their conversations and go to their combat posts, especially if they're hunkered down in a defensive position, party to a one-sided cease-fire in a place like this - a little schoolhouse in Fallujah, Iraq, that's at the heart of our mystery. I'm Graham Smith.

BOWMAN: And I'm Tom Bowman. This is TAKING COVER from NPR.

This city - this schoolhouse - came up in an offhand remark more than three years ago - a tip that sent us searching for answers about a tragic mistake. The Marines in Fallujah, spring of 2004, face an increasingly angry local population and a tough fight with a growing insurgency. They've been telling us about that time and a deadly incident they can't forget and still don't really understand.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: The men described the school as a two-story, square building with thick walls, classrooms all around the outside. And in the center, a small courtyard open to the sky - a courtyard where, for a few minutes, maybe a couple of hours, they could almost feel safe.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: In this episode, a horrific explosion and the confusing minutes and years afterward, scrambling to help the wounded men, fighting off an attack and wondering what really happened. What more could I have done? Why did I survive and my friends didn't?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: We've been searching out and talking with the men who were in that schoolhouse. We've woven their stories together with recordings of the Marines fighting in Fallujah that month.

As the sun sets on April 12, 2004, the Marines can sense it. An attack is coming.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: Literally everybody was waiting for dusk, taking our positions. We were being surrounded, and that just amplified everybody getting to their positions quicker.

(SOUNDBITE OF EXPLOSION RUMBLING)

G SMITH: There's one Marine whose position was in that rest area - the courtyard. His name is Brad Shuder. He would be dead before dawn. A few other guys are finishing up their cigarettes by a picnic table, listening to the end of a joke. When we left off, Ben Liotta was telling us about this moment. He's a Navy corpsman, a medic.

BEN LIOTTA: So, like, I'm walking away with Shuder, and we're bulls****ing. And I left him in the center of the courtyard as we ended our conversation, and I went to walk into the f***ing casualty collection point - like, our - the corpsmen's room. And I had taken, like, not even two complete steps, and, like, I remember seeing a flash in the corner of my eye.

CARLOS GOMEZ-PEREZ: The biggest flash of my life coming from behind me.

J SMITH: As I'm lifting my flak jacket up to put it on - boom.

TOMAS ETZLER: A huge boom - a huge explosion occurred.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: And before I could turn to Tommy and say, what the f***, we both got thrown forward against the freaking wall.

J SMITH: Big-ass shockwave - shrapnel's ripping through everyone.

ETZLER: It just came out of nowhere. I saw flames everywhere for a few seconds.

EVERETT WATT: And then everything went black.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WATT: My ears were ringing off the wall, and I could literally almost hear every conversation that was going on. It sounded as if I was hearing everyone speak at the same time. They probably were.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: Everything was in slow motion. And, I mean, I'm crawling across the ground, trying to get my rifle. I didn't even realize I got injured. I knew I fell. I knew the explosion went off, but everything hit so quick and fast, I felt no pain. It was just happening.

ETZLER: I heard horrible, absolutely horrendous screams from that courtyard downstairs.

COVINGTON: I knew who some of the guys where that got hit because I recognized their screams.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WATT: I honestly didn't know what it was. My first thought was someone may have fumbled a grenade.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: We can't see anything. Everything was covered in smoke - the heaviest fog possible. And we start getting engaged.

(SOUNDBITE OF MACHINE GUNS FIRING)

LIOTTA: They just opened up fire. And what's crazy is they were obviously setting up for a - I mean, we know they were setting up for a battle. This is why we wanted to mortar them. But they took advantage of it.

ETZLER: All hell broke loose. There was fire coming out of everywhere. There was a lot of machine gunfire, RPG fire. The building was shaking by some of the grenades that hit the building on the rockets.

LIOTTA: And I got up. And I saw Watt stand up at the same time, and I was like, you all right? And he was like, yeah, you all right? And I was like, yeah. And then I went to go out, and there was an army guy. He was a psyops guy, and he was laying in our doorway. So I dragged him into there, and I was like, you got this guy? And he was like, yeah. So then I moved on, and the first person I came across was Shuder.

And, you know, he was the one screaming, pretty much. And he was laying there, right where I left him. And his legs were just f****** mangled - mush. So we tied off his legs, and then we moved him. And I did my secondary assessment of the rest of his body. And, I mean, I remember taking his flak jacket off, and his SAPI plates were not plates. They were, like, crumbled, like, inside his vest, you know? He was just f***** up, man. He took so much shrapnel.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: Medic - need a medic.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #3: Need a medic.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: Medic.

WATT: I got to Brad, and he was pretty much, like, making a joke about - he was supposed to go back and go to the club, and he's not going to get to dance. And I'm like, no, man. Like, you're going to be good, dude. We're going to go downtown, and we're going to go dance. And so I did a couple of tests on him, like, you know, I was like, dude, can you move your legs for me? And he was just like, I am moving my legs.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #5: Get his cammies off. Get his cammies off.

LIOTTA: Ugh. I remember Shuder - one of the last things he said - and he actually got calm. And he was like, I guess I'll never dance again. And then he was pretty much stabilized. There was nothing else I could do for him, so I moved on to other guys.

G SMITH: Other Marines a couple hundred yards away hear the explosion and news crackling over the radio.

DUTY: I can still hear his voice. It was like second platoon got hit and they took a lot of casualties. So I took off running.

BOWMAN: Nineteen-year-old Navy corpsman Jason Duty sprints across an open field to the schoolhouse.

DUTY: The first thing I remember is going to the door was - it looked like it was pitch black inside the building, and it sounded like hell.

(SOUNDBITE OF GUNS FIRING)

DUTY: There was screaming, there was noise, there was gunfire. It sounded like everything bad in life was happening in there right at that moment.

ETZLER: It was a carnage, what I saw. There were several Marines down. They were bleeding profusely from their legs. All of them had Kevlars, of course, you know, bulletproof vests and helmets, but their legs were unprotected. And, you know, I saw a marine's thigh, which was basically sliced by some sort of shrapnel. It was - there were literally geysers of blood coming out of these guys. It was absolutely, absolutely horrendous scene.

DUTY: I saw this, and I started getting the anxiety. I started freaking out in my head and I'm like, OK, just take your own pulse. Whenever you've got a casualty, the first pulse you take is your own. Take a second. One more second isn't going to kill anybody. Calm down and then go to work. All right, what do we got?

(SOUNDBITE OF GUNS FIRING)

DUTY: I get in the door, and the first person I see only a few feet inside the door, leaning up against the wall is Smith - Smitty.

J SMITH: It hit me from the left side, went through my arm, broke my tibia, fibia in my legs, hit around my groin area. There was - they said no matter - I was - they said I was dying on the floor and still somehow had a sense of humor because the first thing I'm asking him is make sure it's still there. Just make sure it's still there (laughter). Like, they were trying not to laugh. But it was like, Smitty, you're the only person I know who's bleeding all over the place and you're like, make sure your package is still there like (laughter)...

DUTY: We were bandaging his leg up and we put a tourniquet on there, and his leg was just mangled. And it sounds cruel, but in my head, it wasn't Smitty. It was just another dummy. It was just another mannequin from training.

BOWMAN: And you almost have to do that just to get through it.

DUTY: Detach, yeah, because that wasn't my friends anymore. That wasn't the guys that I went to the beach with on Saturdays. It wasn't the guys who came over to my house and drank beers on Friday nights. It was another mannequin, another dummy, another student dressed up like he's got injuries and you've got to bandage him, tourniquet him and move on to the next one.

ETZLER: I've never seen any anything like that before or after. And so I went for my camera. What happened at that point, there was this one Marine kind of saw me and he gave me this look of disbelief - disgust - that actually I'm going to film something like that. And, yes, I'm a journalist and it's my job to film that. But, you know, that look alone was enough that I said, you know, maybe he's right. I should - because these guys are dying here probably on the dirty floor, in incredible amount of pain, far away from home. They are not going to die in dignity. And I thought maybe this is not really right thing to shoot, to film. So I put the camera away. I didn't film.

(SOUNDBITE OF GUNS FIRING)

WATT: So in the midst of that, we didn't know exactly what was happening. Was there another shell that was going to land? We didn't know if we were being overrun. Like, people could have come busting through the doors.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #6: I thought some enemy blew himself up in our compound - my first thought. And that means we have people coming in the wire. So it was smoke. I couldn't see - flashlights everywhere and screaming everywhere.

BOWMAN: These flashlights, they aren't bright white. They have red filters, harder for the enemy to pinpoint. The dim beams compete with shadows, painting everything shades of crimson.

WATT: The hard part of using those red lenses was the fact that the blood is red. So you couldn't tell exactly where some of the wounds were. And as I was working on Zurheide, every time I would roll him, I'm like, what the - I stopped that one. And I would find another one. And it just got to the point where, you know, frustration kicked in. And I'm like, hey, man. Turn the damn light on. Like, I need to actually see. So at that point, you know, just, like, looking at him, at the same time, it's like, no, I'm not going to stop trying to help him.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #6: So Zurheide - I finally said, Doc, he's dead. Go to somebody else. Yep. We don't train like this. No, he's gone. Sorry. Go to somebody else. Zurheide was dead right there, instantly - because you could just tell. So he's dead. Well - I was, goddamn it. Go over there.

ETZLER: I saw some of the Marines throwing out hand grenades out of the window, and that really kind of freaked me out in a sense because if you throw a hand grenade, it means that somebody is very close.

G SMITH: Doc Liotta moves on to David Costello.

LIOTTA: Costello was screaming, cursing, wanting to f****** get in the fight. He was so angry that he got hit. Like, they had a hard time getting him out. Like, the whole time he was flipping out, wanting to fight. And it carried on afterwards, kind of f***** him up.

BOWMAN: As they're telling these stories, something keeps coming up that's remarkable - really surprising - another death. Now, there's very little in the record about the Marines killed - Brad Shuder and Rob Zurheide. But there's nothing about a third man, an interpreter.

LIOTTA: First off, there was three deaths that night.

G SMITH: Oh, oh...

LIOTTA: We got to count...

G SMITH: That's what I wanted...

LIOTTA: We got to count that interpreter.

G SMITH: Yeah. Do you know his name or anything about him?

LIOTTA: No. I have no clue.

DUTY: The interpreter was blasted pretty good. Sahib or Shaheen or something like that was his name. He was the interpreter for Second Platoon, and I don't even think I'd ever actually met the dude before.

COVINGTON: His calves were pretty much mangled. And tried to keep him talking to keep - you know, get him - get his mind off what was going on there. So we were talking about his family. And his sister is at university.

G SMITH: Like an Iraqi university or...

COVINGTON: In Baghdad.

G SMITH: In Baghdad.

COVINGTON: Yeah.

BOWMAN: Who was this guy? Did his family know what happened? Another mystery we have to figure out.

DUTY: I bandaged him up, and we got him on a stretcher. And two Marines started carrying him to the main doorway, which was our interim casualty collection point.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #6: First person I carried because he was awake - and he was heavy as s*** - was Smitty, Corporal Smith. But I'll never forget this. I said, hey. Somebody help me carry him. So I had to load up the meat wagon. That's what I called it - the goddamn meat wagon - terrible.

DUTY: Yeah. I helped carry Smitty. Me and two other guys helped carry Smitty out to the vehicle. And I turned back around, and I helped carry Zurheide out to the vehicle.

COVINGTON: They were taking Robert out. And yeah, he was gone. They thought he was still breathing, but it was just - it had to be his body settling. Half his face was gone.

G SMITH: So sorry about that.

COVINGTON: But what I didn't know was he - we had traded weapons. He had my 203 strapped to his back when it happened. So I spent the next two days - and I didn't realize it at the time, but I was literally scraping pieces of him off of it. And that was a little hard to take.

G SMITH: Yeah.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: More than an hour after the explosion, the gunfire and the grenades finally taper off. Robert Zurheide is dead, another dozen men wounded - seven of them badly enough that they've had to be evacuated. Those left at the schoolhouse await word on Brad Shuder and the others.

LIOTTA: When it all finished, they shoved me and Juan in a closet because it was the safest f****** room. And I'm not joking. They literally put us in a closet. And they were like, stay in here in case there's a counterattack. And we realized we had, like, no medical supplies left. So we had to walk around where we treated everyone and see - find bandages that weren't, like, soaked in f****** bloody water or were still sealed and all that shit.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

LIOTTA: And then we kind of just laid there, you know, for hours.

ETZLER: Some of the men just kind of came and rested after the battle. And at that point, they got - I was sitting with them. They got a message on a radio that the second soldier died - that they didn't manage to

save him either. And they became very upset about this. They were very angry. They said, why don't we nuke them? Why don't we go into Fallujah? We can take care of it, like, within a few hours. There was disbelief, frustration and sadness.

GOMEZ-PEREZ: Everybody is crying, shaking, smoking. All I could do was lay there with my Kevlar down as a pillow and go to sleep.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: We'll be right back.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: After the fight, the deaths and the anger comes the confusion.

WATT: It was more like, oh, shit, man. Like, what really just happened? Like, you know, what really just happened?

G SMITH: Doc Watt thought it might have been a fumbled grenade. Sergeant Skiles thought an insurgent with a suicide vest snuck inside the wire. Others blamed an enemy shell.

DUTY: We thought it was an Iraqi rocket, and they just got lucky with a pinhole shot. One round.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #7: Literally, the only way they could have got you was if a 1 in a million shot. And just that day, somebody hit the lotto.

BOWMAN: Pretty quickly, they decide the only possible explanation is a mortar. But whose?

G SMITH: Did you think that the Iraqis had managed to drop a mortar on you guys? I mean, was it clear?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #8: Yeah. I had no concept it was friendly fire. I didn't even know we were doing a mortar mission of our own. I was just f****** hanging out.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: So where are we at this point? Remember; the Pentagon released statements two days after the incident saying Rob Zurheide and Brad Shuder were killed by hostile fire. But we've talked with Marines who were in the schoolhouse that day. We know there were rumors almost immediately that this was friendly fire, just like our original tip said.

Here's what's supposed to happen whenever there's a death in a combat zone. The details get reported back to Marine headquarters in the States. That gets passed along to the families immediately. Who was killed? Where? When? Was it hostile fire? Was it friendly fire? Those are the regulations.

G SMITH: But it didn't happen in this case, as we learned when we turned up a congressional transcript online. It was from an obscure House subcommittee hearing in 2007. The names Shuder and Zurheide come up. It wasn't covered by C-SPAN. There's no video available on YouTube. But House archivists dug up a copy for us.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ROBERT MAGNUS: On behalf of the commandant of the Marine Corps, I apologize for our errors. We thank the subcommittee for this opportunity.

G SMITH: This is General Robert Magnus, the No. 2 Marine officer at the time, saying he wants to correct the record on friendly fires. He says back in 2004, there was an investigation into that explosion at the schoolhouse. The investigation found it was friendly fire, but the Marine Corps hadn't told the families.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MAGNUS: Chairwoman, that's correct. And they should have been notified in accordance with statute and regulation. Previously in the case of Lance Corporal Shuder and Zurheide, that incident on 12 April, that was not even in accordance with our regulation. Literally, it was over two years to the notification.

G SMITH: Yeah. He says over two years. To be clear, this hearing is more than three years after the explosion.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Here's something you should know about this hearing. It was forced on the Marines because of fallout from another friendly fire incident - an Army scandal involving maybe the most famous soldier at the time, former NFL star Pat Tillman. The military lied about his death, too. And we'll get more into Tillman later. But here you have the Marines' second in command dragged up to the Hill and promising to do better.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MAGNUS: I spoke to Lieutenant General Mattis, the commander of Marine Forces Central Command, last night. And he is redoubling efforts to go back and ensure that we make contact with every Marine who has been seriously injured or is very seriously injured as a result of wounds received.

G SMITH: The Marine Corps promises to set the record straight. So do they? John Smith is one of those very seriously injured men. He was in the courtyard when the mortar hit. The blast blinded him in one eye, peppered him with fragments, tore up his legs. He was evacuated to Germany and then back to the States. He spent a month in a coma. Eventually, his left leg was amputated above the knee, and he was medically retired. When I first talked with Smith, it was on the phone. Given the promises that were made on the Hill, you'd think he knew all about the finding. Wrong.

But so you never heard anything from the U.S. military directly telling you that they had had an investigation and that they had come to any kind of a...

J SMITH: Nope.

G SMITH: That's crazy.

J SMITH: Nope, I didn't hear anything. Nobody came. On a official level, nobody came to me and was like, hey; this is what really happened - like, no investigation or nothing.

G SMITH: And he'd asked.

J SMITH: I've requested, like, all of the paperwork from my injuries and military records and everything. And, I mean, I just started scouring over it. And they'll go so deep into everything. But I don't think the actual incident of what happened is anywhere in my paperwork right now.

G SMITH: John splits his time between San Diego and Baltimore, where I visited a few months later. He's super-tall, and his left eye is damaged. He's an aspiring rapper on the side, stage name Snake-eyes Uzumaki.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "YOUR A STAR")

SNAKE-EYES UZUMAKI: (Rapping) Young Black boy growing in the world today. I know the world seems small and there's nowhere left to play. You're viewed as a threat before you take your first steps. Utter your last words face down on the curb. They love your culture, but they silent, don't really know your plight.

G SMITH: He's holding his baby girl.

She's beautiful.

J SMITH: Oh, yeah.

G SMITH: Such a sweetie pie.

J SMITH: Violet.

G SMITH: Violet?

J SMITH: Hey, baby.

G SMITH: All right. Can I sit down next to your daddy?

J SMITH: Come here, fat girl.

G SMITH: Smith told me that until our phone call, all he'd had to go on as far as what really happened were the rumors from his friends.

J SMITH: They didn't know if it was a luck of the draw from the enemy or if it was a 100% friendly fire or what. And since I never got anybody to come - or that never - no one ever came to the hospital to tell me that it was a friendly fire incident or anything. Like, no investigation, no nothing that I've heard of.

G SMITH: I mean, you're a medically retired veteran who is getting regular services from the VA all the time.

J SMITH: Exactly.

G SMITH: There's no mystery where you are from the military point of view. Like, it should not be very hard to find you, right?

J SMITH: Exactly. Literally, like, they have to - when I call in for my pain meds, when I take an appointment, the whole nine. Hell, I'm still going to college on Camp Pendleton base. The fact that nobody has said anything concrete, no paperwork, nothing the whole time, and I'm just now finding out there was even an investigation - that's kind of unsettling. Like, what was so big about this incident that you had to bury or whatever? What did y'all have to hide?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: This question - it haunted us, too. What did they have to hide? And what's strange is the Marine Corps is still telling us they can't find the report on this incident, even after we appealed their response, even after we told them it was cited on Capitol Hill. And we're starting to see a pattern.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: Smith's best friend in Iraq - it was Everett Watt. Doc Watt. He's also over six-foot-five. Guys called them the Twin Towers. Like Smith, Watt got a Purple Heart, though Watt's injuries at the schoolhouse were less severe. Watt still struggles with that day, with what he calls what-ifs?

WATT: I think we all carry a certain burden of the what-ifs. You know, was there something that I missed? Did I wait too long to stop using the red flashlight lens? So all of those things, like - think we all got the what-if moment. Yeah.

BOWMAN: We told him about our conversation with his buddy.

G SMITH: John - he wasn't for sure that it was friendly fire. And I was like, dude, they did an investigation. It was friendly fire. And he was like...

WATT: Right.

G SMITH: ...You're the first person who's ever told me there was an investigation.

WATT: So the initial word that I got was that they - there was a mortar that got launched by the enemy. And we heard the rumblings about, that wasn't true. And myself and Ben did have a little bit of a conversation about that. So I was just kind of like - I try not to think about it, a lot of it, man, to be honest, because the way that I've compartmentalized this stuff, in a sense where I'm hoping that one day, like, this thing just doesn't come rushing back, you know?

G SMITH: Yeah.

BOWMAN: Makes a lot of sense.

G SMITH: I mean, I have to say, I feel bad, in a way, asking you guys to talk about this stuff because, I mean, Tom and I lost one of our best friends in an ambush. Tom was ambushed with him in Helmand five years ago last weekend. And so I - I'm not doing it lightly. Like, I appreciate you going into these spaces.

WATT: Oh, of course. Of course.

BOWMAN: So Ben thought it was friendly fire. You couldn't believe it. When did you hear officially that it was actually friendly fire?

WATT: Oh, I mean, it was officially, about, like, two minutes ago (laughter) when you guys said it, you know? Just...

G SMITH: So until we just mentioned that there was an investigation a couple of minutes ago, nobody from the Marine Corps ever, like, gave you a copy of the investigation or told you that your wounds were the result of a friendly - like, nobody ever contacted...

WATT: No.

G SMITH: ...You and told...

WATT: No, sir.

G SMITH: ...You that?

WATT: No, sir. I never got any notification or anything about anything, honestly, until you said that it was, like, official-official a few minutes ago.

BOWMAN: And what do you think about that?

WATT: I mean, I think it's - it almost like - honest to God, it almost like devalues the fact that I got a Purple Heart. Like, I don't even - you know, it's like it takes away from it a little bit, you know?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: So it's been more than a decade since the Marines promised lawmakers that General Mattis would redouble efforts to contact these wounded men and tell them what happened. I mean, if we could find these guys, how is it that Mattis can't? Why have men like Everett Watt and John Smith been left to wonder for so long?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: Not everyone had to wonder for all of those years. Some of them had a different burden - the truth - because a couple of the Marines in the schoolhouse did know almost immediately what really happened. One of them was the radio operator. And because he knew Chris Covington was Rob Zurheide's best friend, this radio operator told Chris what he'd learned listening to the radio traffic with other units - that it was a friendly round. And Covington, he ended up telling Rob's widow.

COVINGTON: I got in a lot of trouble afterwards because I was talking to Elena and her mom, off and on, from the internet center. And I didn't know that they had lied to them. And she would - and it came up because she kept asking, you know, why was it a closed casket? As far as she knew, he had been shot. And I didn't understand why she was asking that. And when I realized they lied to her, I told her the truth. And then I got in a s*** ton of trouble after that.

G SMITH: What kind of trouble?

COVINGTON: They didn't really care. They were just - they were angry.

G SMITH: No, no. You mean the Marines were angry that you had told them what actually happened?

COVINGTON: The Command was because I went to them.

BOWMAN: But if this was true, how had it happened? Who screwed up? Ben Liotta was a Navy corpsman, but he was tapped into what the Marines call the LCU - the lance corporal underground.

LIOTTA: Now, here's only what I've been told. I have no idea if this is factual at all - is Lieutenant McCoy - I guess, the guy that was supposed to call these in - he called it in, and he reversed the coordinates - that he gave our grid as the target grid, and the target grid as our grid. So they hit dead on. They hit what they were told to hit. I can't prove that. That is literally just what I've been told down the pipeline.

BOWMAN: This Lieutenant McCoy, his name came up a lot. We learned he was not in the schoolhouse but was nearby in another building. It was part of his job to request support from helicopters or gunships or mortar missions to help Marines under attack. Navy Corpsman Jason Duty told us that after the explosion, McCoy was a wreck.

DUTY: I remember because he was pale, and he looked shaken. And I don't think he'd slept. Yeah, it was the next day. And he said, Doc, I think I f***** up. And I said, how? He goes, I just think I f***** up. I think I f***** up. And I was like, well, what did you f*** up? And he said, well, I can't really talk about it. But I think I f***** up. I think I f***** up. And I think that was honestly the last time I ever saw him.

BOWMAN: We've spent months trying to find McCoy. One guy told us McCoy got kicked out of the Marines. Turns out that's not true. He'd been promoted - left as a major. We figured out he still works for the government as a civilian. We called his number, emailed, even had a letter hand-carried to where he

works. We never heard back. So whether it's Lieutenant McCoy or someone else, at this point in our investigation, it's really important that we talk with some of the officers who were involved. Guys like Smith, Watt, Liotta - they can tell us about what they experienced at the schoolhouse but not why and how the whole thing happened. It's the officers who decide whether to fire a mortar. What about the officer who was in command at the schoolhouse?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: This is TAKING COVER from NPR.

OK. Everything seems to be operating. So thanks again for coming out. And if you could just first off, tell me your name and just - I know you're a lieutenant colonel now. But you were at the time - what? - second lieutenant?

BEN WAGNER: Yeah, I was. Ben Wagner is my name now. It is my name and always has been. I am a lieutenant colonel now.

G SMITH: Two steps below a general, Wagner was stationed in Okinawa. But we got together when he visited Norfolk, Va. That's home to the biggest naval base in the world. After dinner, we sat down at a small park near the water, looking up at two massive warships. He told me about the arrival in Fallujah, the early patrol where he'd been wounded. You heard that earlier. And then I asked him what it was like at the schoolhouse, waiting out the cease-fire.

So I do want to talk to you about the 12 of April. Can you tell me just about that day?

WAGNER: In that schoolhouse - you know, it was a square building that was two stories high with an open courtyard in the middle. And then on the second floor, there was a kind of a balcony catwalk, kind of open hallway, that ran around three sides of the courtyard. That day, we had done our kind of daily routine and whatnot. And then we went to stand-to about an hour before the sun was supposed to set. And we had been taking pop shots from the south throughout the afternoon, and then things got a little bit livelier right around the time that we went to stand-to. And then that's when the 81 mm mortar mission was called in.

G SMITH: Did you call that in?

WAGNER: No, I did not call that in.

G SMITH: So you - so you're basically doing stand-to and taking some relatively light contact. And, all of a sudden, boom, is essentially - like, you didn't know a mortar mission had been called.

WAGNER: No, I did. I knew a mortar mission had been called. I had been informed that a mortar mission had been called. And so I was running, kind of shuffling along that exposed hallway on the second floor.

G SMITH: So he hears on the radio that a mortar round is coming in, and he heads to a room that overlooks the street. Wagner wants to see the round destroy that burning tire barricade. Instead, he hears a massive blast behind him, down in the courtyard.

Did you know the minute that it hit that it had been that mortar mission that had been called in versus an Iraqi round?

WAGNER: I don't think I made the connection immediately, but it was not - it didn't take me long to figure that out. Yeah. I didn't say it to the guys. But, yeah, I did.

G SMITH: Because I know you said that this was a day that you didn't really grapple with, I think, for quite a while, that it took you a while to sort of let yourself go back and process it...

WAGNER: Yeah.

G SMITH: ...A little bit.

WAGNER: Yeah.

G SMITH: Is that fair?

WAGNER: It's - no, it's certainly a true statement. You know, I absolutely learned the lessons - a lot of lessons that I took away from that day and applied them to follow-on situations that I found myself in. And, you know, the day kept - it came up all the time. You know, I stayed in touch with Brad Shuder's parents and some of the guys. And when I was stationed there in Quantico, I would go, and I visited Brad. He's buried there at Arlington. But from an emotional standpoint, yeah. I did not - I didn't really dive into it. I didn't necessarily have the emotional space and time to do that. And I also actively didn't give myself that space and time to do that.

Now, older, as a dad, it's the personal sorrow that remains with me. There's a sense that you're still paying off the price, you know, for those guys. And again, you could probably psychoanalyze that all day long and tell me that it's not supposed to be, or it's not real, or it doesn't make sense, or it's irrational or illogical, or whatever. That's - all that is fine. And I'm sure it might be true, but it's not real. Like, the reality is I feel guilty. So yeah.

G SMITH: He says part of the guilt, part of his what-ifs, is just because he was in charge at the school. He was the one who put Brad Shuder on post by the picnic table. Could he have made sure that the Marines got to their positions more quickly? Also, he told me, he disciplined Rob Zurheide for some minor infraction that week. Wagner said he felt bad and made amends by buying Rob some of his favorite cigarettes, Kool menthols. He asked me to guess what Rob was doing when the mortar hit. He was in the courtyard smoking one of those Kools Wagner gave him.

BOWMAN: About the investigation, Wagner said that a couple of years after the incident, he was at a Marine base outside D.C., and some colonel came by with a copy of the report - had him read it over. It's not really clear why. It was a long time ago, but Wagner remembers it pointed to a number of problems - both in how the mission was called in and how it was handled by officers inside the operation center. That's where they look at maps, plot out coordinates to make sure a mortar round in what they call a fire mission won't hit a friendly unit.

WAGNER: There is one way that you, you know, process and clear fires missions, and it's the way we've done it for a long time. And the reason we've done it that way for a long time is 'cause it works when it's done properly. You know, fires is not something that you cut corners on. Fires is not something that you rush. Fires is not something that you assume. And that is just because when you start slinging rounds around, especially in an urban environment, the situation is writ large. It's just fraught with risk.

G SMITH: So do you feel like you - having seen the investigation and whatnot - you have a very clear idea of exactly what happened and where it broke down?

WAGNER: Yeah, I think I do. I think I do.

G SMITH: I mean, part of what's confusing about this whole thing is that it was handled very strangely on the back end of things, like, to the point where I believe you were the first person to tell the families - well, not entirely true, like, 'cause I - Chris was telling me that he got his ass busted for, like,

communicating with Elena, you know, that it had been a friendly fire thing. But it took a very long time for the Marines to...

WAGNER: Yeah, and I'll be - I can't speak to...

G SMITH: And I don't want to get you out of your lane, and I know you're...

WAGNER: Well, I just - I mean, I just - I can't - that was, you know, one, two, three, four levels above me. I mean, it was a division-level investigation that was adjudicated by General Mattis. You know what I mean? That - four levels of command between me and him as the platoon commander.

G SMITH: But did you know when you visited them that you were going to be breaking them this news? Or...

WAGNER: I was prepared for it because I had made the decision that if they were asking me, I was going to tell them. I wasn't going to lie. I didn't give them any details, but when they asked if it was a friendly fire incident, I said yes because if I lied or I withheld that information and they found out later that I knew it and I didn't answer them, that would break down whatever trust existed - whatever remaining trust existed between me and them, that would go away. And I wasn't willing to sacrifice that.

G SMITH: This was not an official Marine Corps visit. Wagner felt a personal obligation to the Marines he'd lost to look their parents in the eye, to be there for him. Anyhow, before we parted, there was one more aspect of the original tip I needed to check on. Tom's source had said there was a congressman's son working in the command center that day in Fallujah. Was that true? No, Wagner said. He didn't think so. But you know what? He was wrong.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Next time on TAKING COVER, we've talked to so many of these men about their experiences that April day in Fallujah. What did it mean on the homefront? The confusion, the anger, the sadness and the frustration - it all lingers and spreads across generations. And that report the Marines can't find? Rob Zurheide's widow thinks she may have a copy.

ELENA ZURHEIDE: When I get home...

G SMITH: Yeah.

ZURHEIDE: ...Or - when I get home, I'm going to climb in the garage, and I have a sneaking suspicion I know where that folder is.

G SMITH: OK.

BOWMAN: We go looking for paperwork that might explain how the mortar landed in the courtyard and come back with a whole new set of questions about why the Marine Corps buried this report.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #9: We do not lie to our Marines. I mean, it's in our motto. It's in our motto. Semper fidelis. Always faithful. And faithful means we tell the truth no matter how much it hurts.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: TAKING COVER is created and reported by us, Tom Bowman and Graham Smith. Our producer is Chris Haxel. Robert Little is the editor, with help from Kamala Kelkar. To hear our next episode now before everyone else, sign up for Embedded+ at plus.npr.org/embedded, or find the Embedded channel in Apple. You'll be supporting our work, and you'll get to listen to the entire season

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We have production help from Nic Neves. Our music comes from Peter Duchesne, Rob Roswell, Brad Honeyman and the HumpMuscle Rolling Circus. Sound design by Josh Rogosin and Graham, with help from Nic. This episode was engineered by Josh Newell. Our researcher is Barbara Van Woerkom. We've had additional editorial input from Liana Simstrom, who is the Enterprise Storytelling Unit's supervising producer - also from the supervising editor for Embedded, Katie Simon, as well as Christopher Turpin and Andrew Sussman.

G SMITH: Edith Chapin is the acting senior vice president of NPR News. Irene Noguchi is the executive producer of NPR's Enterprise Storytelling Unit. And Anya Grundmann is the senior vice president for programming and audience development. We had legal assistance from NPR's Micah Ratner, plus Thomas Burke, Jean Fundakowski and Caesar Kalinowski. We're grateful to Eric Niiler and Rick Loomis, journalists who were in Fallujah during the fighting that spring of 2004 and who shared their recordings with us and to NPR member station KPBS and CNN.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

Episode 03 JAGMAN

APRIL 6, 20236:00 AM ET

GRAHAM SMITH, HOST: Before we get started, this podcast contains cursing and descriptions of violence.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

TOM BOWMAN, HOST: Previously, on TAKING COVER...

EVERETT WATT: I honestly didn't know what it was. My first thought was someone may have fumbled a grenade.

JOHN SMITH: Literally, the only way they could have got you was if - a one-in-a-million shot. And just, that day, somebody hit the lotto.

BEN LIOTTA: First off, there was three deaths that night.

G SMITH: Oh, oh - that's what I wanted.

LIOTTA: We got to count that interpreter.

BOWMAN: When did you hear officially that it was actually friendly fire?

WATT: Oh, I mean, it was officially, officially, officially about, like, two minutes ago (laughter), when you guys said it.

ELENA ZURHEIDE: When I get home, I'm going to climb in the garage. I have a sneaking suspicion I know where that folder is.

G SMITH: OK.

(SOUNDBITE OF CAR DOOR CLOSING)

G SMITH: All right, Tom - Tucson, Ariz.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: No word from Elena yet, but we're here.

BOWMAN: Graham's talking about Elena Zurheide. She's a war widow. And right now, it feels like she's our only hope. So far, we've been able to stitch together what happened in the courtyard of the schoolhouse in Fallujah that night by talking with the guys who were there. What we're still trying to figure out is how it happened. How did an American mortar drop onto a U.S. Marine combat outpost on April 12, 2004? How was that mistake made? Who was responsible? The answers could explain why the Marine Corps buried it all.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: In 2007, the marine brass got dragged before Congress, and it was only then that they admitted this horrible friendly fire had occurred - that it had been investigated, that there was a report and that the Marine Corps took three years to share the results with the families of those who died. We want that report.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Remember, we filed an official request to get it under the Freedom of Information Act. The Marines said they couldn't find it, which, honestly, we just didn't believe. So we appealed - even sued them in federal court. And still, they told us and the judge they just couldn't find it. They said they looked everywhere. And that raised a disturbing question - what if they were telling the truth?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: I'm Tom Bowman.

G SMITH: And I'm Graham Smith. This is TAKING COVER from NPR.

If our tip was right, and this whole thing was intentionally buried, that could mean the report and other records got scrubbed from the files.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: Well, there's one other way we still might get it - from the families of the Marines killed at the schoolhouse in Fallujah. We reached out to Brad Shooter's parents, but we never heard back. His sister told us her mom and dad - they wouldn't talk about what happened to Brad. It's too painful. And, she said, they wouldn't even share the report with her.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: That brings us to Elena Zurheide. She told us the Marines gave her a copy of the investigation back in 2007. She was pretty sure she still had it. So that's why we traveled here - to Tucson.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Yeah.

Hey there.

G SMITH: Is it OK to park right here?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: Yeah, you can cross.

BOWMAN: Thanks.

G SMITH: I'm yelling from the car because it's desert here, but, for some reason, it's raining today.

Hi.

ZURHEIDE: Hello.

G SMITH: Oh, hi.

ZURHEIDE: Hi.

G SMITH: Elena?

ZURHEIDE: Yes.

G SMITH: Graham.

ZURHEIDE: Hi. Nice to meet you.

G SMITH: It's so nice to meet you, too. I like your hair.

ZURHEIDE: Oh, thank you. Yeah. You only live once, so...

BOWMAN: Hey, how are you?

G SMITH: This is Tom Bowman.

BOWMAN: Tom - nice to meet you.

ZURHEIDE: Oh, nice to meet you.

G SMITH: Elena says she tried to dye it purple, but it came out more ocean blue. She lives in a stucco ranch house here in this residential neighborhood. It's busy inside - three kids, a cat, a couple birds.

JOEY: Hey, this guy ain't scared.

BOWMAN: What kind of bird is that?

ZURHEIDE: Just a cockatiel.

(SOUNDBITE OF COCKATIEL TWEETING)

BOWMAN: There's a lot of color - kids' drawings all over the fridge. Elena even let them paint in swirls on the concrete living room floor.

Nice to meet you.

ZURHEIDE: Oh, nice to meet you.

G SMITH: Hey, how are you guys doing?

JOHN: Not too bad.

ZURHEIDE: This is John, my boyfriend. This is Caleb.

BOWMAN: Hi there.

ZURHEIDE: This is Joey. And then Robbie's at school still.

BOWMAN: OK.

G SMITH: OK.

Robbie - he's a teenager, named after the father he never met - Robert Zurheide.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: Elena crafted a memorial on the wall of the living room. There's three big gold stars, a condolence letter signed by President George W. Bush and a picture of Robert in his uniform, arm wrapped around a smiling, younger Elena.

BOWMAN: Before we even sit down, Elena has some bad news. They've been looking all over the place for that report, digging through the garage - haven't been able to find it. She thinks maybe it was at her aunt's house.

I look over at Graham. Is this going to be a bust?

Anyhow, little Joey and his dad, John, go back to hunting for it while we start talking.

G SMITH: Elena, thanks so much for making time for us.

ZURHEIDE: Oh, no, it's all right.

G SMITH: We really appreciate it. I know that you got a lot going on.

ZURHEIDE: Yeah, we're busy, especially with the new job.

G SMITH: What's the gig?

ZURHEIDE: Just Dollar Tree - dollar store.

G SMITH: Yeah.

BOWMAN: Good.

ZURHEIDE: But it's a job.

G SMITH: Oh, yeah.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

ZURHEIDE: Job pays the bills.

G SMITH: Security. So how long had you been together? Were you, like, high school sweethearts?

ZURHEIDE: Yes, we were high school sweethearts. Yeah. But as far as married, we were only married for two years, 14 days. I'm sure I could get down to the hours, the minutes, the seconds and all that, but, you know, I was young, dumb and stupid. I thought life would go on forever.

BOWMAN: And what kind of a guy was he? Just talk about that a little.

ZURHEIDE: Oh, my gosh, he was the funniest person. He - everything was a joke with him. And he loved Backstreet Boys. Oh, my God, did he love Backstreet Boys. He was out there dancing Backstreet Boys stuff, even when they were out in Iraq. It's embarrassing, but it's funny at the same time 'cause it's him. It's his personality. It's who he is.

G SMITH: What did - so I guess can you tell us a little bit about that deployment?

ZURHEIDE: It was just a weird feeling. And we both knew he wasn't coming back.

G SMITH: Really?

ZURHEIDE: Yeah, we both knew it. I should have broke his leg. But two weeks before he left, his wedding band broke. Yeah, just right in half - just broke. And between the weird feelings and omens we were getting - he was having dreams about it, too.

BOWMAN: What kind of dreams?

ZURHEIDE: Just dreams that he wasn't coming back. And when I said goodbye to him, I didn't cry at all, which was weird because I bawled my head off the first time.

BOWMAN: That was the last time she ever saw Robert. That spring, nine months' pregnant, Elena was at their home in Camp Pendleton, near San Diego. Her mom had come to help her get ready for the baby.

ZURHEIDE: April 12 was my due date...

BOWMAN: There was a knock at the door.

ZURHEIDE: ...And my husband died on April 12.

BOWMAN: Through a small window, she sees someone in uniform.

ZURHEIDE: I remember the white glove, and I knew right away. You know. You're like - you know that Marine Corps outfit from top to the bottom. You know who it is. It's not like they're knocking on the wrong door. They double-check that s***.

BOWMAN: What did you do then?

ZURHEIDE: I freaked out. They had to let themselves in. I'm pretty sure they had to let themselves in because I was - I'm like - I knew what it was right away. (Crying) My mom was there, thank God. I'm so glad my mom was there.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: The thing is, that Marine Corps officer in his dress blues - some of the things he tells Elena about her husband's death just aren't true. He says Robert was killed by enemy fire - shot by insurgents. Within days, she hears a different story from men in Rob's unit.

ZURHEIDE: And it wasn't officially - it wasn't official. It was, like, hey, by the way, this could be friendly fire.

G SMITH: With these conflicting stories, in a state of shock, Elena had a hard time accepting that Rob was really dead. She went to the homecoming when the battalion returned from Iraq, hoping maybe there'd been a mistake.

ZURHEIDE: (Crying) 'Cause, you know, you sit there and you think. You think of - like, there's been movies done about it. Oh, maybe he's doing a top-secret mission, and he's really - he's not dead. He's really alive in the back somewhere. Yes, oh, yes. I was there, partly to see if he would walk off the bus. He didn't, of course.

BOWMAN: She kept wondering. Those stories about a friendly fire - were they true? 2004 bled into 2005, then 2006. By the summer of 2007, Elena is back in Tucson, moving on with her life, when - a second knock on the door. This time, there was a general and a lawyer. They had paperwork, and they told her it was true - friendly fire.

ZURHEIDE: It took them three years.

BOWMAN: That's...

ZURHEIDE: That's three years too many. I mean, the guys were already back. And, kind of, life is moving on again. And then they are like, oh, we want to do - we want to tell you about the investigation.

BOWMAN: Did they say why it took so long? Did they say...

ZURHEIDE: We had to make a full investigation.

BOWMAN: Three years.

ZURHEIDE: Three years.

G SMITH: Did they say we're really sorry, there was a big screw-up?

ZURHEIDE: Oh, no. They didn't apologize. And they said nobody is getting punished for it.

G SMITH: I could...

ZURHEIDE: They're hiding something for a reason, and they don't - there's something that hasn't been disclosed yet. There's got to be something. Why are they keeping it such - why did they keep it a secret to begin with?

BOWMAN: You can hear Joey and Elena's boyfriend, John, there, rummaging around for that paperwork the lawyer gave her - the investigation we've come here desperate to find. It's called a JAGMAN. It's an investigative report written by a judge advocate general - a JAG. That's a military lawyer. The JAG writes a report based on the manual. So JAGMAN - kind of a weird name but, you know, typical Pentagon. Anyhow, we wondered if it was worth looking at her aunt's place.

G SMITH: So I just want to - do you - so do you - have you guys been able to talk to your aunt and say, like, hey; these guys are here?

ZURHEIDE: I just talked to her this morning. Where's my phone? Let me message her.

G SMITH: Maybe we can go to your aunt's house.

ZURHEIDE: No, we can't go to my aunt's house. We don't want to go to her house.

G SMITH: 'Cause it would be really important to see the...

ZURHEIDE: But I'm trying to get her to get the papers, so if I don't get them by the time you guys leave, I will have them - like, I'll just mail you the whole packet then.

G SMITH: Can I just go sleep in front of her house and just...

ZURHEIDE: (Laughter) I wish.

JOHN: I got one box to look in.

G SMITH: OK.

JOHN: No, I mean in the garage. I'll go look.

G SMITH: Yeah.

JOHN: I need your help 'cause I can't reach it.

JOEY: That's what I'm coming for.

G SMITH: But you came out of that meeting with the Marines with an idea in your head. Like, I kind of understand now what happened, and it was this.

ZURHEIDE: I still don't know what happened. I just know that one person screwed up, and now my life is forever changed - not just my life. I'm sorry. I take that back (crying). It's not just my life. It's my son's. He deserved his father, and now he doesn't have his dad. I've had to be Mom and Dad, and you know how that - hard that is? It's stupid. This isn't the life I signed up for. This isn't what I wanted. I married him. I married him for full intentions to spend the rest of my life with him.

G SMITH: It's got to be so hard and hard to kind of figure out how you honor that life and that commitment. And, you know...

ZURHEIDE: Well, exactly.

G SMITH: You've got John, and you've got, you know, your kids who you love, you know?

ZURHEIDE: Yeah, I do. I do love them. I just sometimes wish it was me instead of Robert.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: Elena has a hard time talking about Robert, about these feelings. And she says in her experience, most people don't want to hear about it anyhow.

ZURHEIDE: Yeah, like, I drive for Uber. And it's like, people ask about your life, and you talk about your life, and then you get a bad review. It's like, well, then why did you ask about my life? It's like, I gave you a snippet of my life, and then you get a bad review. And quite honestly, I think it all boils down to people want to forget about it. I mean, this is Iraq we're talking about. We should have never been there to begin with. And so, I mean - but yet here my husband is dead for your freedom, and you guys don't care. Nobody cares.

G SMITH: How do you process that? I mean...

ZURHEIDE: You can't. I can't. I probably have all my mental health issues because of this. I can't even function having a normal job. I'm scared to death, with April coming up, I'm going to lose my job because I'm - something's going to happen, and I'm going to lose it.

BOWMAN: And then, from the other room, we hear Joey.

JOHN: ...Close if I remember...

JOEY: I found it.

ZURHEIDE: What?

JOHN: Did you?

JOEY: Yeah.

JOHN: Are you dead serious?

JOEY: Yeah.

ZURHEIDE: No, I don't think he did.

JOHN: No.

JOEY: No. Look. Marines - it says it.

ZURHEIDE: I'd be damned. The kid just found it.

JOHN: The kid found it. Where was it?

JOEY: It was in Mom's computer thing that doesn't have - the drawer that...

JOHN: I thought there was more in it than this.

JOEY: The drawer that doesn't have a handle.

JOHN: Casualties were caused by a friendly 81 millimeter round that was fired gun No. 1 out of an 80 millimeter mortar round - Platoon 2/1. I think this is all the stuff you guys want.

ZURHEIDE: Good job, Joey. We're proud of you.

JOEY: Do I get money?

BOWMAN: I wanted to buy that kid a pony and expense it. We'd been asking for this report, suing for this report. But the Marines said it didn't exist. They couldn't find it. Who came through? This little kid in Tucson. I started flipping through the report. It's 60 pages - kind of like a police report. A lot of names are blanked out, but it's right there - two Marine deaths, a dozen men wounded. All of it was caused by a Marine mortar. Not only that, but I can see Elena was right. Nobody was punished.

G SMITH: We'll be right back with TAKING COVER.

So talking with Elena, looking at this investigative report, this JAGMAN, we could already start filling in some of the names that were redacted.

Retired and he had to work. Hyunga and...

ZURHEIDE: Name is familiar.

G SMITH: ...John Smith...

ZURHEIDE: Smith.

G SMITH: ...And Costello.

ZURHEIDE: Costello I've heard.

BOWMAN: Costello. Remember that name. He's a Marine who was badly wounded in the explosion. We've been told he was struggling - drug addiction, in and out of rehab, prison time.

ZURHEIDE: Eleven total injured.

JOHN: What was Timmy's last name?

ZURHEIDE: No, 12 total injured and then the two that were killed.

G SMITH: Three killed.

ZURHEIDE: There were two. I was told two.

G SMITH: Two Marines. There was an Army interpreter.

ZURHEIDE: Really?

JOHN: Damn, didn't know about that.

ZURHEIDE: That's new news to me.

BOWMAN: She's also surprised when we show her satellite maps of Fallujah today, even a close-up of the schoolhouse.

ZURHEIDE: Is it a school again?

G SMITH: Yeah.

ZURHEIDE: Because I would love to help out with the kids because, you know, they deserve an education.

G SMITH: Thank you so much for giving us...

ZURHEIDE: No...

G SMITH: ...So much your time.

ZURHEIDE: ...Thank you for...

G SMITH: And sorry to, you know, drag everything up...

ZURHEIDE: No...

G SMITH: ...You know. It's difficult, you know?

ZURHEIDE: ...You've got to drag the dirt up in order to - you've got to get past the pain to deal with it.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

JOHN: Don't look back.

G SMITH: I'm going to run to...

ZURHEIDE: Enjoy the rain.

BOWMAN: Oh, man. Look at this now.

ZURHEIDE: Oh, God. It's coming down.

G SMITH: OK. Take care.

BOWMAN: All right, guys.

ZURHEIDE: Bye.

(SOUNDBITE OF PHONE RINGING)

G SMITH: We call up our editor from the car.

ROBERT LITTLE, BYLINE: Hello.

G SMITH: Hey, Bob.

LITTLE: How are you doing?

G SMITH: Doing all right.

Tell him we finally got a copy of the report.

BOWMAN: And the guy overseeing that report who - the report was handed to this general, and that general said no, that everybody was tired, you're in the middle of combat. There was no dereliction of duty. There was no negligence here. So the person said, we're not going to basically discipline these guys. That guy was called Jim Mattis.

LITTLE: Oh, man. Come on.

BOWMAN: Yep.

LITTLE: Is he named in the report? Like, did he sign it?

G SMITH: He's the one who signed off on it.

BOWMAN: He signed the letter saying we're not going to discipline these lieutenants.

LITTLE: Oh, my God.

BOWMAN: You know, he did the same thing in Haditha, and that was even worse.

G SMITH: Quick history lesson. The Haditha massacre, it was November of 2005, the worst documented U.S. atrocity of the Iraq War. After a Marine got killed by a roadside bomb in this city west of Baghdad, his unit went on a rampage, killed 24 civilians, including women and children. After it came out in the press, several Marines were charged but only one was convicted and that was just for dereliction of duty. He was demoted. Some officers were disciplined, sent back to the U.S., but nobody spent a day in jail. General Mattis, the guy who becomes defense secretary under Trump, was in charge of the disciplinary process. Years later, he told The New Yorker, you can't criminalize every mistake. Bad things happen in war. And in our case, this friendly fire in Fallujah, it's that same Marine general, James Mattis, letting people off the hook.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: OK. Now, this report I'm looking at, it's full of witness statements and analysis. Now, here's the bottom line - the investigator finds two big mistakes. First, the officer who requested the mortar mission - that Lieutenant McCoy some of the guys mentioned - they said they heard he flipped coordinates, gave the schoolhouse as the target. It's plain in the JAGMAN, that's not true. But he is cited for a different failure. He failed to include two key words - danger close - meaning U.S. troops are dangerously close to the target. That would have alerted officers in the command center to pay extra close attention, to double-check, triple-check before deciding whether to approve the mission. The second big problem occurs inside that command center, the place where that checking is done. It's where Marines map out the battle space, where are the friendly units? Where is the enemy?

G SMITH: In this case, the command center is a room in an apartment building about a half-mile behind the schoolhouse. And in that room, according to the report, there's confusion between two young lieutenants about which one of them is responsible for approving the mortar mission. As they're

discussing whether to fire the mortar, their boss, a lieutenant colonel, comes in to see how things are going. They tell him about the request from Echo Company and he asks, how close are friendlies? And here's that critical second mistake. One of the lieutenants gets confused, looks at a card for a different mortar mission, tells the battalion commander 400 meters. In reality, the barricade that they're trying to take out is just over 100 meters from the schoolhouse, about the length of a football field. And mortars, they're not precision weapons.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: Anyhow, that lieutenant colonel, he approves the mission. The order is radioed down to the mortar pit, and moments later, a Marine there drops a mortar round into the tube. And that round, it sails up into the Iraqi sky and drops down, exploding near the picnic table in the courtyard at the schoolhouse.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: So the investigating captain turns in his report to his boss, a colonel named John Toolan, with a recommendation that both the officer who failed to specify danger close and the one who looked at the wrong information get letters of caution, basically a slap on the wrist.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Colonel Toolan reads it, says that's not harsh enough. He recommends both of those men be charged with dereliction of duty, which could lead to dishonorable discharge or even prison time. Also, their commanding officer, the lieutenant colonel who came into the room and asked what was going on, Toolan said he should get a letter of caution for failing to staff the command center properly, leaving an overworked, inexperienced team in charge.

G SMITH: But the way it works in the military, Toolan doesn't have the final say. He passes his recommendations to his boss, General Mattis. And Mattis brushes all these recommendations aside, instead says there should be no punishment at all. He writes, the accounting has revealed the unique circumstances of friction, fear, fatigue and urgency. A series of small errors led to this event, but there was no criminal conduct.

BOWMAN: And then his boss, three-star General James Conway, the top Marine commander in Iraq, agrees, and so do his superiors the rest of the way up the chain. No punishment. It was all wrapped up in August, 2004, just four months after the explosion.

G SMITH: Reading all this gave us a better idea of what happened at the schoolhouse, even if it raised new questions about how it was handled by senior officers. And since we knew that none of the grunts we'd talked to had ever seen this JAGMAN investigation, we decided to share it with them. You might remember Bill Skiles. He told us about evacuating the casualties from the schoolhouse at night. We spent five hours sipping whiskey with him in his Marine room. He retired as a sergeant major, which is a big deal. It's basically the top enlisted rank.

BILL SKILES: Your JAGMAN opened my eyes. Danger close must be stated at all times. That means it must be triple checked by officers. Danger close - let's make sure. Let's make sure. No one mentioned triple checking that f****** COC. And look at that city. Are you kidding me? No danger close?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Skiles says Captain Zembiec, the commander of Echo Company, always blamed that Lieutenant McCoy for making a bad decision, calling in a mortar so close to the Marines. But Zembiec

died in 2007. And Skiles, he's certain that Zembiec never saw this report, never knew about the confusion in the command center.

SKILES: So I'm going to say this without any kind of remorse. Zembiec had never looked past McCoy. Never looked past McCoy. He doesn't know this. He doesn't know what happened at the battalion to bless that mission. So I know now. You guys provided me this. I never saw this.

BOWMAN: He's upset that he and Zembiec never saw the investigation even though it was completed while they were still in Iraq. This despite the fact that the investigator recommends the JAGMAN be shared with, quote, "all Marines within the fire support chain of command." Not only that, Skiles says they were ordered to keep quiet.

SKILES: Battalion said, you can't say a f****** thing to the parents until the investigation is over with. And no one ever told me, August, it was concluded. We just went about our business.

BOWMAN: Skiles doesn't understand why charges against the two lieutenants were dropped in the first place because, as the regimental commander Toolan wrote, procedures weren't followed.

SKILES: That statement alone...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

SKILES: ...Is a fact why they should have been investigated. They're not criminals.

BOWMAN: Right. Right.

SKILES: But when I read this - General Toolan, procedures weren't followed. That's enough for an investigation not to be stopped...

BOWMAN: Right.

SKILES: ...By a three-star general or General Mattis.

BOWMAN: Right. Right.

SKILES: And that's what I'm disappointed in.

G SMITH: Another thing that surprises him - and we noticed this, too - it has to do with that Iraqi interpreter, the guy who nobody knew. A couple of days after the explosion, Skiles went and checked with the medical staff to see if the interpreter survived.

SKILES: And they said he died. I have no idea his name, but he deserves - we deserve to know somehow that that interpreter died in that compound, too. Nowhere in this f****** investigation you see that. That's a sin.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: He's right. We've looked through this report over and over. And it's as if there was no interpreter killed. There's no mention. Why was he left out? It's hard to answer that question, seeing as Tom and I still can't even figure out who he was.

BOWMAN: Bill Skiles, he has a question for us, too.

SKILES: Two years. You've been on this case two years...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

SKILES: ...And to find an answer. What answer are you looking for?

BOWMAN: What were we looking for? Well, the truth is, if we prove this allegation of a cover-up, it's a hell of a story. But the more we get to know these guys and their families, who were treated disgracefully, we want to be able to tell them the truth, the truth they were denied not just about what happened that day in Fallujah, but about why it was hidden for so long. We feel like we're getting closer to an answer. We'll be right back.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: We told Sergeant Major Skiles about the congressional hearings in 2007 that forced the Marines to account for what happened. And Bill Skiles, he points out something that we've been thinking. About during those hearings, when the Marine Corps at first claimed no knowledge of this friendly fire incident, the guy running the entire Marine Corps was the same general who'd signed off on the investigation right after Mattis.

SKILES: The commandant was General Conway.

G SMITH: It was. That's right.

SKILES: The same guy that you see reading about here that knows exactly - he signed off on it. I'm sorry. I just want to connect the dots. So '07, the commandant had to know about April 12. He was a part of the investigation.

G SMITH: Think about it. Conway signed off on the investigation in 2004. Three years later, he's been promoted, and a general who worked for him stands before Congress and acts like it never happened. So why would Conway's Marine Corps withhold this information from the families of the dead Marines right up until they were called out by Congress?

BOWMAN: How do we explain this? Because we're looking at this - again, never told officially friendly fire, never told when the investigation wrapped up, right? And the only reason it appears they were told about the investigation was only because of another friendly fire death involving Pat Tillman. Pat Tillman was famous, a football player.

SKILES: And they covered that up, too, for a while. So that means Shuder and Zurheides are nobodies. But Tillman is a household name. We didn't know the truth about him. But Zurheides and Shuder - so when will - and I hate to say this. It's so long ago. And even this statement about next of kin will be notified, the wounded will be notified, injured will be notified - bulls***. The assumption on my part was that we did the right f****** thing at the higher levels. Who will ever take accountability to say, it's my fault, I apologize?

G SMITH: So what could explain all this, why they didn't do the right thing at the higher levels? Well, there's something we haven't told you yet about the tip.

BOWMAN: When we began this podcast, we told you how my source said this whole horrible incident had been covered up because a congressman's son was involved. Well, it wasn't just any congressman. It was Duncan Hunter. In 2004, Duncan Hunter, a Republican from San Diego and a former Army Ranger who fought in Vietnam, was the chairman of the powerful House Armed Services Committee. That committee has a hand in just about every important aspect of the military - policy plans and especially money. His oversight duties took him to Iraq that spring.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

DUNCAN L HUNTER: Having just returned from Iraq last week and visited the areas of Mosul, Balad, Tikrit, Ramadi, Fallujah and Baghdad, I can report that there are many more good things going on in that country to restore freedom and provide a modicum of democracy.

G SMITH: And the son? His name is also Duncan Hunter - at the time, Marine First Lieutenant Duncan Hunter. We hadn't wanted to name him until we confirmed he was involved in the friendly fire. Now, with this report in our hands, we have. The younger Duncan Hunter had his own political career. He won his father's House seat when the old man ran for president, the first Iraq combat veteran to serve in Congress. You may have heard he made big news a few years later.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

AILSA CHANG: Republican Congressman Duncan Hunter of California is facing federal charges. The Justice Department announced last night that it had indicted Hunter and his wife for converting hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign funds for personal use and falsifying campaign finance records.

G SMITH: Here he is on Fox News. He's certainly not taking the blame.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED JOURNALIST: You also said yesterday that your wife handled a lot of the family expenses and the campaign finances, so are you saying that it's more her fault than your fault?

DUNCAN D HUNTER: Well, I'm saying when I went to Iraq in 2003 the first time, I gave her power of attorney, and she handled my finances throughout my entire military career. And that continued on when I got into Congress. So - and she was also the campaign manager. So whatever she did on that will be looked at too, I'm sure. But I didn't do it. I didn't spend any...

BOWMAN: And he said all these accusations were purely political.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

DUNCAN D HUNTER: I'm not resigning. I'm not going to resign with a bunch of leftist government folks throwing allegations at me.

BOWMAN: Well, that may be what he told NPR member station KPBS, but he did resign and pleaded guilty to a felony for conspiracy to steal campaign funds. He used that money to finance travel, his kids' tuition and a number of affairs. He was pardoned by President Trump - so was his wife, Margaret - just before Trump left office. But before all that, back in April 2004, Duncan Hunter Jr. was a first lieutenant in Fallujah in the operation center when that mortar was called in. We told you before that there was confusion in that room between two lieutenants. He was one of them.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: In his statement in the investigation, Hunter says he had no responsibility for the friendly fire. He writes that he was just - and this is the term he used - bird-dogging - in other words, working with another officer to learn the job, although he then describes doing every aspect of the job - plotting the coordinates and marking the target on a map. But, he says, he didn't make the final call.

BOWMAN: That other officer tells a different story. According to Lieutenant Ben Deda, quote, "1st Lieutenant Hunter was the fires watch officer. This was 1st Lieutenant Hunter's first time as acting fires

watch officer." So what Deda is saying is the congressman's son wasn't just training. He was actually doing the job of plotting and approving mortar fire.

G SMITH: Nevertheless, Deda describes a scramble after check fire was called, and the radio crackles, second platoon got hit, and they took a lot of casualties. Deda describes looking at the maps, the cards - was that us? How could this have happened? In his statement, he writes, if I had paused, taken the time to go through all the steps myself, I would not have cleared that mission, and the mortar would not have caused friendly casualties.

BOWMAN: Deda beats himself up. And though the investigation concludes that there was no clear understanding between Deda and Hunter about who is responsible for clearing mortar missions, he cites Deda for failure to follow procedures. And Duncan Hunter, though he was clearly involved, is never singled out for punishment.

G SMITH: We tried to get a hold of Deda for two years. Emails, messages - no replies. I finally got through just once.

(SOUNDBITE OF PHONE RINGING)

BEN DEDA: Hi. This is Ben.

G SMITH: Hey, Ben. My name is Graham Smith. I'm a producer at NPR, and I've been working...

(SOUNDBITE OF PHONE BEEPING)

BOWMAN: It's clear Ben Deda isn't going to talk about it - not with us.

G SMITH: We wanted to know what to make of this report, this JAGMAN, from a legal perspective. And I happened to find the perfect person.

So let me introduce you guys. You haven't met before, I think. You've probably heard Tom, but...

MICK WAGONER: Oh, yeah.

G SMITH: His name is Mick Wagoner. I tell Tom he's a retired lieutenant colonel who worked for more than two decades as a Marine lawyer.

So Mick and I - when I was - Tom, when we first started digging into this thing, and I honestly didn't really even know what a JAGMAN was so much, I did, you know, a bunch of searching around, and - looking for somebody who had been a Marine JAG, and I came across Mick, who does work with veterans.

Not only was he a Marine JAG, Mick Wagoner was with 2/1 in 2003. He investigated one of the first U.S. losses in the Iraq War - that Marine whose death inspired the first cross on Horno Ridge at Camp Pendleton, Jose Gutierrez. Turns out his death was because of friendly fire too.

BOWMAN: We sent Wagoner a copy of the JAGMAN ahead of time. He took a close look at it.

WAGONER: Technically, I think it was proficient, especially for the gun part and the shoot part and the sequencing of the firing. I think that was right.

BOWMAN: But Wagoner wonders why commanders didn't send a JAG, or at least a higher-ranking officer, to do the investigation. This captain was an artillery officer, not a lawyer.

WAGONER: He's, like, a subject matter expert, but he's not an investigations expert. And that's what the lawyers should have been there to do 'cause the first thing I think of is, oh, s***, this is bad. You better have some answers because it's going to come downhill quick. Send the lawyer out. That's what we're supposed to be doing there in the first place.

G SMITH: That meant the scope of the inquiry was mostly technical. It didn't delve into root causes like why did the Marines even ask for a mortar?

WAGONER: There's so much more that you should be asking on those questions of...

G SMITH: Interesting.

WAGONER: ...I mean, if the enemy's that close and you just zapped yourself - you know, he says it's, like, 200 yards away, and they see them building. Why aren't they shooting them? I don't know why they're not engaging guys that are clearly doing a hostile act. You know, there's hostile intent there.

BOWMAN: It could have been direct fire easily.

WAGONER: Yeah.

G SMITH: But what about the other piece - the congressman's son?

BOWMAN: Clearly, *****

BOWMAN: ***** if this had come out back in 2004, that the son of the chair of the House Armed Services Committee was involved in a deadly friendly fire accident, that would have been big news. Even if he denied any responsibility, even if the report avoided citing him, it would have been an embarrassment for the Marines and the White House at a time when public support for the war is already waning and the president is running for reelection. So we ask what Wagoner makes of Duncan Hunter's involvement. Is that why it took congressional hearings to force the Marines to admit to the friendly fire?

WAGONER: The Marine Corps, of course, we like to be the best at everything, right? That's kind of our shtick. What we're not good at is bad news. When we've got bad news and we know it - I agree with your suspicions. They were protecting Duncan Hunter, protecting the Marine Corps from potential bad blood with his dad at the time. They knew who he was.

BOWMAN: But that's your gut telling you.

WAGONER: That's my gut that tells me that. Because they, you know, in essence, as a defense attorney, I mean, they barfed all over themselves and said, hey, we were wrong. We did this. Where the break really happens, where the screw-up happens, is the notification piece on down. I mean, that is one of the ethos of the Marines. Like, we tell the truth no matter how much it hurts. And this is not one of those cases where we've done that as well as we should have. But that's just - we do not lie to our Marines. I mean, that's one of those - we owe them that as an organization that f'ed them up, that we tell them the truth, and you tell...

BOWMAN: Not only that, it's in the Marine Corps hymn.

WAGONER: Yeah, it's in our motto. It's in our motto, semper fidelis - always faithful. And faithful means, you know, know your troops and look out for their welfare. And their welfare isn't just when they have the uniforms on. That's crap.

G SMITH: It is crap. These guys, the guys we've been getting to know, the grunts, they deserve answers. If there was an effort to protect Duncan Hunter or protect the Marine Corps, who was behind it? We've

finally got a copy of this report, but there are still missing pieces. We need to talk to Duncan Hunter - well, both of them - and all those generals who signed off on the investigation. But we also have other reporting to do. There's this guy who was wounded at the schoolhouse, David Costello. He's been really hard to track down. Some of the other guys even thought he was dead. He's not, and we talked to him. Turns out, he has his own copy of the report with some new details.

BOWMAN: And he tells us some disturbing stories about that deployment...

DAVID COSTELLO: She unfortunately is not alive anymore because I shot her.

BOWMAN: ...And about coming home. Remember what Mick Wagoner said - know your troops and look out for their welfare.

COSTELLO: First time I ever did heroin was in the VA hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. I was in there trying to get help, and this guy goes, come with me. Took me in the bathroom. There was a guy acting like he was cleaning. He would act like he was cleaning the mirror all day long. And no matter who came in, he would sell him heroin.

BOWMAN: That's next time on TAKING COVER.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: TAKING COVER is created and reported by us, Graham Smith and Tom Bowman. Our producer is Chris Haxel. Robert Little is the editor, with help from Kamala Kelkar. To hear our next episode early, sign up for Embedded+ at plus.npr.org/embedded or find the Embedded channel in Apple. You'll be supporting our work, and you'll get to listen to the entire season sponsor-free. That's plus.npr.org/embedded.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

G SMITH: We have production help from Nic Neves. Our music comes from the Humpmuscle Rolling Circus, including Ted Ehlers, Jim Rioux and Dean Clegg. Sound design by Josh Rogosin and me, with help from Nic. This episode was engineered by Josh Newell. Our researcher is Barbara Van Woerkom.

BOWMAN: We've had additional editorial input from Liana Simstrom, who is the Enterprise Storytelling Unit's supervising producer; also from the supervising editor for Embedded, Katie Simon, as well as Christopher Turpin and Andrew Sussman. We'd like to thank reporters Jane Arraf and Tony Perry, who were in Fallujah during the spring of 2004 and have helped us along the way; also, our colleagues, Margaret Price and Daniel Estrin. And this week, we'd like to especially thank Jessica Hansen, who has helped us and dozens of NPR hosts and reporters as a vocal coach. She made us sound wicked better.

Episode 04 Finding David

APRIL 13, 202312:03 PM ET

TOM BOWMAN, HOST: Before we begin, we want you to know that this podcast contains graphic and disturbing descriptions of war and strong language.

GRAHAM SMITH, HOST: So usually we start each episode with a few clips, voices you've heard, previously on. Today, we want to remind you of a moment that's tugged at us from our second episode. It's something that Ben Liotta, the Navy corpsman, told us as he was describing the chaos in the schoolhouse after the mortar hit. It's something he said about a specific Marine. We've mentioned his name a couple of times, and he's at the heart of this episode - David Costello.

BEN LIOTTA: Costello was screaming, cursing, wanting to f***ing get in the fight. He was so angry that he got hit, like, they had a hard time getting him out. Like, the whole time, he was flipping out, wanting to fight. And it carried on afterwards. Kind of f***ed him up.

BOWMAN: And it's what he said there at the end about how it carried on afterwards that stayed with us. What did Liotta mean by that? And Doc Liotta is not the only one who told us this about Costello, that he was having a really hard time. When the mortar hit, we've been told Costello was telling a joke by the picnic table in the courtyard. Guys said he felt like it was his fault that so many people were standing there at that moment - that moment Rob Zurheide and Brad Shuder died.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: It seems like everyone feels, on some level, that they were to blame. It's those what-ifs. Lieutenant Wagner wishing he hadn't given Rob Zurheide a carton of Kool menthols to smoke. Doc Watt wondering if he should have stopped using the red lights earlier as he tended to the wounded. And it goes beyond what happened at the schoolhouse. Doc Liotta - that whole deployment - it not only gave him PTSD...

LIOTTA: My spirituality was destroyed in Iraq. It's taken me decades to come back to a place I could find, like, as a reasonable spiritual existence, you know. Yeah. I think my soul took the most damage out there.

SMITH: And Doc Liotta, he's not even a trigger-puller. He's a healer.

LIOTTA: My fall from religion was rough. And it was hard coming home and hearing people be like, you know, God protected you, like, God sent his angels to protect you. And it's like, well, that's bull****. Because either he protected me or he chose to kill Shuder. And I don't believe it works like that. Like, I don't think God's out there, like, you die, you don't die. You know, like, it doesn't really add the f*** up.

BOWMAN: Now, David Costello was a trigger-puller. We learned Costello was in prison for a time, got deep into drugs. Guys kept telling us he'd be good to talk with, but even they didn't know how to get a hold of him.

CARLOS GOMEZ PEREZ: We all tried to still keep in touch, but I lost all contact with him. And all of us lost contact with him completely.

SMITH: That's Carlos Gomez-Perez, the Silver Star recipient. He stays in touch with a lot of these guys. And he told us, for a time, he wondered if Costello was dead.

GOMEZ PEREZ: He was suffering a lot more survivor's guilt at the time than I was, or our levels were different. We're both struggling with survivor's guilt - difference was that he actually saw Shuder die. He saw Shuder take his last breath.

BOWMAN: After we started digging into this story, Carlos decided to drive out from his home in San Diego to Ohio, where David's parents lived, see if he was OK. Carlos found him recently out of rehab. They hung out for a few days, and Carlos told us he got him back in touch with some of the other guys, too.

SMITH: He also told us some surprising news. Unlike every other grunt we'd talked with, Costello did get a visit from the Marine Corps, informing him about the friendly fire. It was three years after the investigation closed, but David had a copy of the report. The one we've been suing the Marines for. Why? What had they told him? Elena Zurheide - the widow - her copy had a lot of information blanked out, but Costello was in the schoolhouse, got seriously wounded. Maybe the copy they gave him had more information. Anyhow, for a while, we just had to wonder, because Carlos, like we said, he looks out for these guys. He was worried. He knew David was just out of rehab, that he might not be stable enough to talk with us about the war. And he was so worried that he wouldn't even ask him. Not yet. Until Carlos knew that David was stable, we would have to wait in limbo.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: In every war, you hear about guys who've survived combat coming home deeply troubled. Today, they call it PTSD - post-traumatic stress disorder. In the past, they talked about Vietnam syndrome, battle fatigue, shell shock. After the Civil War, soldier's heart. In this episode, as we're working to figure out what happened with the friendly fire, why and how the truth was hidden, we're starting to learn from David Costello and the men of Echo 2/1 how the wounds of this war, sometimes they're hidden, too. I'm Tom Bowman.

SMITH: I'm Graham Smith. This is TAKING COVER from NPR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: We went out to San Diego recently near Camp Pendleton because that's where the Marines of Echo Company were based, and many of them ended up settling down. Also, we wanted to talk with Duncan Hunter, the congressman's son. He and his father both represented this area. And he still lives here at his dad's house.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: We wanted to ask him what happened and what he did in the operations center. We couldn't get a response. Our plan was to go knock on his door, but it turned out he was out of town. So we kind of struck out there. But we wrote up a letter with a series of questions and later had it hand-delivered to him.

SMITH: Still, we had a lot of reporting left to do on the tragedy. And beyond that, we just felt a growing obligation to share the report with these guys who've already told us so much about their experiences, guys like Chris Covington. You might remember he was Rob Zurheide's best friend, told us he got his bell rung when an RPG flew through a window and into a room at the schoolhouse where he was positioned on April 12. And he was the one who first told Elena Zurheide the truth about how Rob died and got reprimanded for it. Chris lives with his family in Tijuana these days. We wanted to tell him what we were learning. He'd heard early on that the explosion was friendly fire, but he never saw any Marine report.

CHRIS COVINGTON: Again, I mean, 2004 - here we are 18 years later. I never even knew they had done a full investigation until we started talking. And if you look at how hard it was for you guys to get this, can you imagine how hard it would have been for someone that was there to walk in and say, hey, I need the official version? Like...

SMITH: And even when the shooters and Elena were jumping up and down saying like, we want to know what happened...

COVINGTON: They don't...

SMITH: They didn't...

COVINGTON: ...Care.

SMITH: Back then, Chris was so angry about what happened at the schoolhouse, he began having discipline problems. He ended up leaving the Marines and joining the Army, did some tours in Afghanistan.

COVINGTON: For a long time, I couldn't figure out if I felt guilty about it, or it was survivor's guilt because I went down three times in 2 1/2 months. And I'm - a couple scars, you know? But, like, I'm in one piece, whereas the majority of my friends got hit once, and they were in pieces. So that ate at me for a long time.

BOWMAN: He says he's largely past that now, but there's something else he just can't shake. It's a nightmare about a girl.

COVINGTON: There is an instance where I had to shoot at someone that shouldn't have had to be shot but was being used as a shield. And she was probably 15, 16. And the guy behind her really needed to be put down. That stayed with me.

BOWMAN: And what happened?

COVINGTON: I did it. And that always bugged me because it was one of those things. It made me angry that somebody else forced me into a position to hurt somebody that didn't need to be hurt.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: The shame, this remorse over something you did in the chaos of combat - in military circles, they talk about it as a moral injury. Losing a leg, losing an eye - that's one kind of wound. But it's not the only kind, maybe not even the deepest. There's no prosthetic to replace the piece of you that was lost. You might mask the pain with a pill or alcohol for a time. But these unseen wounds - they linger. Some Marines find solace sitting with their buddies, sharing stories, talking it out. For Covington, that's not really his thing.

COVINGTON: You know, I - when a lot of the guys get together, a lot of them get angry. Or they'll go into depressions. And I get it. Like, I do understand the depth of feelings there. You know, that kid was my best friend in the world. But I'm not doing him any favors by running around 20 years later acting like an a**hole about it. I'm doing him a favor by treating my wife right and raising my kids right.

SMITH: How to crawl out of the darkness, how to find a path to the rest of your life after war - some guys never do. Echo 2/1 lost a man to suicide a couple of years back, and others have just fallen off the map, guys like David Costello. We told you how for months, Carlos didn't want to bring up the idea of talking with us to Costello because he was worried he was too fragile, might relapse. Well, one day we got a message from Carlos.

GOMEZ PEREZ: Hey, good afternoon. Good afternoon. How you doing? I talked to David, and he said that, yes, he would not mind talking to you. He's like, I don't have to talk to him today, but, yeah, I don't mind it at all. I'm actually going to forward you some messages.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DAVID COSTELLO: And regarding the reporter, I don't have to talk to him today, but I do want to talk to him, you know, sometime, you know, in a little bit. But I definitely want to talk to him. It's not about me at all. It's just about the families that were lied to, man, especially, like, Brad's family. Man, that just - that really pisses me off, that they would be so spineless. I mean, people need to know the truth, and I think that'll take a load off me. That'll make me feel better, a lot better, knowing that, that people will know the truth.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: Check. One, two. OK, so this is rolling. So I'm with Tom. We are in the outskirts of Cleveland.

BOWMAN: Now, this is real country out here.

SMITH: Yeah. A place...

BOWMAN: Fields and barns and chickens running around.

SMITH: Wow. That's a big pile of wood. Holy moly.

BOWMAN: We'd heard from the corpsman how Costello's legs were torn up by the mortar fragments, wounds so bad he had to be medically retired. That was just the start of a very dark period for him.

SMITH: So we're looking for 10703. Say (ph) walk by faith, not by sight - 10703. Here we go.

BOWMAN: Is this it?

SMITH: Yep.

BOWMAN: This is it.

SMITH: Beautiful old brick house.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: Hey, it's David.

BOWMAN: Hey there. How are you?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: Hey, David. What a pleasure to meet you, man.

D COSTELLO: You too. Nice to see...

SMITH: How are you?

D COSTELLO: Good.

SMITH: Great to see you.

D COSTELLO: Yeah. How was your guys' flight?

BOWMAN: It was perfect, like an hour up and down.

D COSTELLO: Yeah, I bet.

BOWMAN: From D.C., it's pretty short.

D COSTELLO: I have material you wanted. Remember the paperwork?

SMITH: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

D COSTELLO: I have three different things.

SMITH: Cool.

D COSTELLO: I didn't know I had that. I have a bunch of stuff on the table if you guys want to see it.

BOWMAN: We had about three hours to spend with him before we'd have to head back to the airport. We weren't prepared for just how much he had to share with us.

D COSTELLO: This is my mother, Pam (ph).

PAM COSTELLO: Hi.

BOWMAN: We meet David's parents, his girlfriend, Tiffany. We all walk into the dining room, where the table is covered in memorabilia - newspaper clippings, Iraqi money.

D COSTELLO: I have a flag back there. This is all Brad's stuff. I took it from him when he passed away. I grabbed his lighter. He loved this lighter. It was just glasses and stuff. This is...

BOWMAN: This is rosary beads, too.

SMITH: I'm going to grab my other microphone and stuff, then.

D COSTELLO: Go ahead.

BOWMAN: There's a framed portrait of David on the table, too. He's in his dress blues, lean, square-jawed. He's changed a lot since then. His face is more round. His eyes focus off in the distance at times. There's a slight tremor in his hand as he picks up a black Army beret and a red-and-white-checkered headscarf.

D COSTELLO: This is the first Iraqi army guy I killed, so I took his beret (ph). This was the second one. So I kept his...

BOWMAN: Wow.

D COSTELLO: I took his thing, too. And here's a flag. You can go in there if...

SMITH: Yeah, I'm just trying to figure out...

D COSTELLO: These are the documents you wanted. I'm sorry I didn't get them to you sooner. But...

SMITH: No.

D COSTELLO: ...I have three.

SMITH: He hands me a sheaf of papers. It's the JAGMAN. Looks a lot like what Elena gave us but much thinner.

D COSTELLO: I don't know if you've seen this.

SMITH: I've seen some of this.

D COSTELLO: I had no clue because a colonel came to my house - I think it was August 2007. And he was like, hush-hush about this. Don't talk about it. Yeah.

BOWMAN: It makes no sense.

D COSTELLO: Yeah. He said, don't talk about it. I mean, we went through all this stuff.

BOWMAN: Do you remember who it was or where he was from? Was he from, like, Quantico or...

D COSTELLO: He was from Camp Pendleton.

BOWMAN: Oh, Pendleton. OK.

D COSTELLO: He was a JAG officer, and...

P COSTELLO: Did he sign any papers?

D COSTELLO: I don't remember.

P COSTELLO: Oh, I didn't know.

D COSTELLO: You guys were here when...

P COSTELLO: Oh, yeah. I remember him...

D COSTELLO: I was arguing with him. I'm like, this didn't happen. You know, this didn't happen. That's not how it happened.

BOWMAN: You don't recall his name or...

D COSTELLO: No.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

D COSTELLO: No.

BOWMAN: That's weird.

D COSTELLO: It is weird. I can't find anyone else that he went to, and I don't know why they came to me.

SMITH: We can see at a glance that there is information in this version that was missing in Elena's - the map coordinates of the mortar request, some casualty reports. But there are also large sections blanked out on his that weren't blanked out on hers, all the stuff about punishments.

BOWMAN: David tells us he was frustrated having this officer, this lawyer, try to explain to him what had happened.

D COSTELLO: I was there. You know, I watched everybody die. You know what I mean? I saw it all - the explosion, everything. I got wounded. I watched John lose his leg, John Smith. I saw it all, you know? And also Jose Gutierrez. I saw that.

SMITH: He's talking about that first Marine who was killed by friendly fire just moments after the invasion started in '03. We can see David's got a big tattoo on his left forearm of an angel. The scroll rolling around it says R.I.P. Jose Gutierrez.

D COSTELLO: You guys can take a seat. I can move some of this stuff.

BOWMAN: Graham and I sit at the table with David. His parents and girlfriend are just a little farther away, sitting in straight-back chairs.

SMITH: Can you just talk to us a little bit, like, early on? Like, when did you join?

D COSTELLO: Oh, sure, sure.

GRAHAM SMITH AND TOM BOWMAN: Why did you join?

D COSTELLO: I'll tell you. In, like, the second grade, my mom was called into the school right down the road. And the teacher told her that I was an idiot, that I was stupid and that I would be a trash man if I was lucky. I'd never be able to read. So I was traumatized by that. I had no confidence in anything. I had no confidence.

BOWMAN: And why the Marines? Why the infantry?

D COSTELLO: I wanted to see if I could do it, if I was - you know, if I was strong enough to do it.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

D COSTELLO: I think I signed up in late August of 2001, and I was upstairs. My mom was yelling at me. And she's like, you got to see this. And I walked downstairs, and I just saw the second plane hit the towers. And I was like, oh, s***, you know, I'm going to war. You know what I mean?

BOWMAN: He found he was strong enough to do it. He thrived on the discipline and the camaraderie. He got through training, ended up at Camp Pendleton, assigned to Echo 2/1 and, a year later, was ordered into Iraq by President Bush, who was intent on overthrowing the government of Saddam Hussein. But Costello's first day of war - it wasn't what he was prepared for.

D COSTELLO: It was the first day of the Iraq War. And everybody's shooting at us and all this stuff. And there was a house in front of us, and there was a family. It was a daughter, a mom and two boys. And this guy starts running at me, and he's yelling all this stuff. I don't know what to do. And he got closer and closer, and he started reaching for something.

SMITH: Costello says his sergeant gave him an order.

D COSTELLO: Taped me on the shoulder and said, light him up, finally. Yeah. And I shot him. And when I went up to him, he had a - he was pulling for - he had a handkerchief, a white handkerchief. And he was pulling for it to say, that's my family - what I gathered from it. And then I looked at the family, and I can't forget their faces.

BOWMAN: Describe what you saw with the family.

D COSTELLO: The wife was looking at me just stone cold. And the kids' just faces were just - they didn't move. They, like, froze. And they were just - you know, they just looked petrified.

BOWMAN: What was running through your head when this was all going on?

D COSTELLO: I - honestly, there was nothing going through my head. Everything was, like, slowed down, kind of. And I was not thinking about anything but what was going on at the time.

BOWMAN: Did it seem real to you? Was it...

D COSTELLO: No.

BOWMAN: Or, like, I'm in my own war movie, and this isn't happening?

D COSTELLO: It did not seem real at all. Not at all.

SMITH: We get it. Hearing stories like this, an innocent man being killed in front of his family - it's hard. It was hard for us, hard to know what to make of it, too. We wanted to give him the space to tell his story. But, of course, journalistically, we'd have to check the story with others. And we did, ran David's account by Marines who were with him that day. They told us they didn't see him shoot this farmer, didn't remember hearing about it at the time. But they told us the Marines were jumpy that first day, and there was a lot of gunfire. Squads got spread out. It was messy. They could see something like this happening. Plus, well, it's hard to account for how memory works during a traumatic episode, trying to make sense of the jumble in the aftermath.

BOWMAN: To be clear, it wasn't just chaotic for the Marines. It was confusing, often deadly for Iraqi civilians caught in the path of the invasion and in the crossfire of the occupation. More than 200,000 would die in the course of the war. That's not the picture Americans were seeing on the TV as the troops crossed into Iraq. They saw the shock and awe of airstrikes, the orderly lines of tanks rolling up the highway towards Baghdad, not the chaos of invading a country.

D COSTELLO: And then we get into - I got into another firefight. And that's the second time I shot somebody. We came up to a fortified position. It was Iraqi soldiers. And a guy popped out, and I shot him. And that's what - actually, he was wearing that.

BOWMAN: Oh, the scarf here?

D COSTELLO: Yeah.

SMITH: Man, that's a lot of...

BOWMAN: Wow.

SMITH: That's a lot of heavy stuff to carry around.

D COSTELLO: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah. But I have to get it off my chest. I realized the other stuff I've talked about - I feel better than ever about stuff because I've just talked about it so much and with therapy and all that, you know? I mean, even when I was using heroin, when I was addicted to heroin, I was still going to therapy and stuff like that. And I still do. And that helped. That helped a lot. And - but I always felt alone because I would go into these groups, and this guy would be like, I got shot at once. And I'd say, oh, a rocket went over my head. And I'm like, we had rocket shadow over our head every single day, multiple times a day. You know, it was nothing to me. And I just felt like I didn't belong.

SMITH: It was like there was nobody else who could...

D COSTELLO: Yeah.

SMITH: ...Relate to your experience.

D COSTELLO: So I thought I was the only one. And I was so ashamed that I was using drugs that I could not - Carlos Gomez kept trying to reach me, and I just - I couldn't talk to him. I just couldn't.

BOWMAN: Listening to David Costello, I couldn't help but think there are echoes here. There's a book about World War II called "Goodbye, Darkness." It's a memoir by William Manchester, who was also a Marine. A quote from the preamble has always stayed with me about how he tried to cope with his combat experiences, the friends he lost and the shame and remorse over the lives he took. I have another drink, he writes. And then I learn for the hundredth time that you can't drown your troubles - not the real ones - because if they are real, they can swim.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: We'll be right back with TAKING COVER.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: We paused the interview for lunch. The Costellos laid out cold cuts and chips. David - he's funny, kind of self-effacing. He lights up when he sees his 11-year-old daughter just back from school.

P COSTELLO: Yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: And then you're done now.

SMITH: No, not quite. We're taking a quick break.

D COSTELLO: We're just taking a little break.

P COSTELLO: Just a break. Here's salami.

D COSTELLO: How was school?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: Good.

D COSTELLO: Good.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: It wasn't terrible.

D COSTELLO: I thought you said it was good.

P COSTELLO: Here's some mayonnaise.

D COSTELLO: Got me Swiss cheese.

P COSTELLO: There's this stuff I have.

SMITH: It's delicious. Thank you very much.

Eating sandwiches and macaroni salad together after hearing these stories - it was kind of surreal.

BOWMAN: When you've spent enough time around people who've been in combat, whether they're in your family or you get to know them covering war, you learn there are some questions you avoid. They're

almost too personal, too intimate. These guys already get the big one from the school kids who don't know better or the joker at a bar who doesn't care. So did you kill anyone?

P COSTELLO: I just opened...

SMITH: Oh.

P COSTELLO: I just bought that.

SMITH: Oh. It's this drink...

P COSTELLO: So it's...

BOWMAN: We never asked, but we could see it was important to David to tell these stories.

D COSTELLO: Amish cheese.

P COSTELLO: Yeah. Here we go.

BOWMAN: So you said it was one of the biggest Amish areas.

D COSTELLO: Yeah, the biggest Amish community in the world.

P COSTELLO: Thank you.

BOWMAN: We look at the clock. We have a flight to catch.

SMITH: If we want to be there at 5, we should leave here at 4. So we have another hour, which is good because I think we have a lot more to talk about.

BOWMAN: When we sit back down, we want to hear about David's second deployment, the one to Fallujah. He and his best friend had a bad feeling right from the start.

D COSTELLO: I knew that we were screwed. I just had this feeling we were screwed, and I never had anxiety before. And - but...

BOWMAN: Where did that feeling come from? Was it something you read in the paper? Was it something you heard? Was it just...

D COSTELLO: It wasn't anything like that. I just - I knew it was not going to be the same. And if - Brad Shuder - the same way we were talking. You know, some of us aren't coming back this time. I remember having that talk.

SMITH: So can you talk about, like, going into Fallujah?

BOWMAN: And was there a plan, or just - seep into the city?

D COSTELLO: We were trying to get to the center of the city and take it over. That was the - what I was told was the mission.

SMITH: He told us about early April, about getting ambushed on their first day pushing into the city. John Smith - remember; he was one of the Twin Towers and one of the guys who had never been informed that this was a friendly fire by the Marine Corps - he had told us about this patrol when they took their first casualties.

D COSTELLO: Now, this is the first patrol in the city we've done. We're finally in the city. Now we do a patrol. And shortly after that, you know, we're taking fire. Things are getting blown up.

SMITH: John had an interesting take on that. He said he always remembers there was, like, a little girl, he said, who was pointing sort of down...

D COSTELLO: Yeah.

SMITH: ...Around. And he's like, you know, I never know - and I'll never know, was she trying to warn us?

D COSTELLO: I've told him...

SMITH: Was she...

D COSTELLO: ...Multiple times.

SMITH: ...Like, indicating that we were there so that the bad guys could be ready for us?

D COSTELLO: Yeah. Yeah. She, unfortunately, is not alive anymore because I shot her. She was pointing at us and looking back and looking at us. And then a mortar or - not a mortar but a rocket comes right by - I mean, right by me - almost blew another guy up. And she's gone. And then I see her again. And that's when I shot because she was telling them where to shoot these rockets.

SMITH: John Smith - he never mentioned this girl being shot. We later called him and some other Marines who were on the patrol. None of the men were aware of the girl having been killed. But, again, they said the squad was spread out. And in the middle of the firefight, they couldn't always see what the others were doing.

BOWMAN: Costello says the platoon commander, Ben Wagner - remember, he's the one who had been watching for the mortar to drop and hit the tire barricade and was stunned when it landed in the school courtyard - he sometimes chewed the guys out for being too aggressive.

D COSTELLO: And he's ripping our ass, and we're explaining to him, you know, we're getting shot at. But then the staff sergeant was really cool, and he's like, I'm going to call you Diablo. He goes, I don't care if they have a f****** broom. He was like, you shoot them. And I listened to him. I did not listen to Lieutenant Wagner.

BOWMAN: This patrol came after the American contractors were killed by a mob, their bodies burned and strung up from a bridge, when the Marines have been ordered to go teach the insurgents a lesson. And then, after some Iraqi leaders balk at the violence, comes the cease-fire.

D COSTELLO: When I heard that, basically, they said there's a cease-fire. We can no longer engage, and we're staying at this school, and we're not moving.

BOWMAN: What did you think about that?

D COSTELLO: I thought it was absolute bulls***. Everybody thought it was bulls***.

BOWMAN: And what were they told?

D COSTELLO: We were told that it was election time, and that was the problem, that they didn't want a huge conflict blowing up when it was election time like that. That's what I was told...

SMITH: You're talking about the American...

D COSTELLO: Yeah. That's what I was told. I don't know if that's the truth or not. But that's the information I got.

BOWMAN: So it's April 12. They're hunkered down at that schoolhouse.

SMITH: I think I actually have, like, a satellite picture.

D COSTELLO: Oh, cool.

SMITH: Thanks. Isn't that crazy that you can, like...

D COSTELLO: Yeah. That is really crazy. I never thought I would see that again. Wow.

SMITH: And you can really see the sort of...

D COSTELLO: There's the hole in it. Oh, my God. Can you see this, Dad? Remember how I told you there was a hole in it, the ceiling?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: Oh, yeah.

SMITH: He remembers hanging out with his buddies in the courtyard, going to stand to.

D COSTELLO: See the hole in the building?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: Yeah.

D COSTELLO: It's like a square. And when they launched that mortar, it hit - boom. I mean, one out of a million shot. And I know they were trying to hit here. So when it hit, these three guys - this is why I have really bad survivor's guilt - they took the brunt of it, and I only got it on my left side. And - well, anyways, I fall. Everybody falls. I just - I saw Brad's chest - or his legs and his stomach just open up in my face. It just blew up in my face. I'm covered in his blood, his guts. I'm picking pieces of skull out of my mouth. I'm laying on the ground. I don't know whose it is. And I hear screaming. And I look over to my left, and that's when John was going apes***. He was going apes*** because he lost his legs, you know? And he's just screaming. And when he was screaming in the hospital and I was there, it haunts me. It still haunts me. I still hear it.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: I want to go just a little bit back in the day. Was there a picnic table?

D COSTELLO: There was, and I have a picture of me sitting in it right before it happened.

SMITH: I think John told me that he - like, one of the reasons that you carry around so much is that, like, you were telling those guys a joke.

D COSTELLO: I was telling them a joke. I told them a joke, and everybody was laughing, and then boom - the explosion went off. And all I can remember is them all smiling and laughing and having this great moment and then chaos a second later. Everybody's dead. And I definitely feel like if I wouldn't maybe have said that, you know, maybe that wouldn't have happened.

BOWMAN: What was the joke?

D COSTELLO: I don't remember. I don't remember (laughter). I wish I did. I don't remember. But what was kind of cool, I did see them all smile, everybody. It wasn't my last memory of them but maybe the last memory of them with at least Zurheide alive.

BOWMAN: We've heard how David and the others were loaded onto Humvees, taken to a field trauma hospital just outside Fallujah.

D COSTELLO: I know, somehow, when we got to the hospital 45 minutes later, I took this from him and the lighter. He was obsessed with the lighter. He wanted me to have a lighter. And I was holding his hand, and then the next thing I know, we're both on the operating table, and I'm holding his hand, and he just died. And then I went out.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

D COSTELLO: I didn't walk for - well, I was on wheelchair for a year and then crutches for a year. They were going to amputate my leg. I just fought with them for, like, six months. I was like, you're not going to take it. Oh, we're going to take it. I said, no, no. And they got sick of me after six months. And the whole time, they're just shooting me full of morphine and throwing more pills at me. And I didn't know I had PTSD because I was on these pain pills, and when I stopped - because it seemed like it cured everything. And when I was off them, all that s*** came and hit me.

SMITH: And now, at what moment - I don't know if you remember. But, like, when did you learn that it was friendly?

D COSTELLO: I think in the hospital. And I was very embarrassed about it, and then for a long time, I didn't tell anybody. I was so pissed. It just - that's not supposed to happen, and it did, and it was so screwed up. And I don't know. I know people make mistakes, but that's a mistake you can't make.

SMITH: He hadn't seen the JAGMAN report at this point, but he felt certain he knew the truth by the time he and a couple other Marines visited his friend Brad Shuder's family later that year.

D COSTELLO: When I went to the door, there was a black rose. I'll never forget that black rose. And their faces when they opened the door were just, you know - I can't even describe it. They were so depressed. And we told them what happened. And his mom was beating on my chest. Like, did he die in pain? Did he die in pain? And I just was like, yes. And it was - oh, it was horrible. That was probably the second worst thing that happened. I mean, besides the combat, that was really hard.

BOWMAN: And what happened after that when you told her?

D COSTELLO: She just broke down, you know? They were both just heaving and crying. And they didn't understand why they were lied to. And I didn't understand. I was, like, 22, you know? I just didn't get it.

SMITH: So I also want to hear - I mean, you've had, like, a hard time, right? I mean, as you were saying, like, you dealt with a lot of addiction and a lot of substance abuse.

D COSTELLO: Yeah.

SMITH: You had, like, some jail time or, like, what - can you talk about, like, what you've been going through? Like...

D COSTELLO: Yeah.

BOWMAN: And if you could start - you started with the OxyContin, as you said. In the military, they started giving you that stuff?

D COSTELLO: Yeah.

BOWMAN: Talk - start at the beginning, kind of talk about that.

D COSTELLO: Well, I remember they were just every - you know, I had the pump. And they were giving me OxyContin. And I didn't know what they were. And then when I got back to Balboa (ph), they weren't giving them to me. And I would be screaming in pain all the time. And then they started giving them to me. And I was in this room. I couldn't move. I couldn't get the wheelchair in the bathroom. I couldn't get out of the place. And my uncle came in. And he just saw pill bottles everywhere because I was just eating pills and peeing in bottles. And he came in. And he was like, what the hell, you know, I'm going to sue, and dragged me out of there. And they said, as long as you come every day - you know what I mean? - we'll allow you to be home.

BOWMAN: He says they sent him home with pills and a morphine injector. As time went by, as his pain persisted, the doctors increased his dosages. Costello realized he was becoming addicted. When he moved from San Diego back home to Ohio, he says the cycle continued. And things got worse.

And this is through the VA? Or who did they...

D COSTELLO: I was cheating the system by then. When I came home, I started snorting them. People were telling me, yeah, you can get high off of these things. I didn't know that. I did. And I started getting them through the VA and then an outside doctor at the same time, so I was getting double.

BOWMAN: And how long did this go on for?

D COSTELLO: Like, 10 years. And...

BOWMAN: And then heroin after that?

D COSTELLO: Yeah. I ran out. I started running out. And then, you know...

BOWMAN: Then they tightened up? They wouldn't give you them anymore?

D COSTELLO: They wouldn't give them to me. And then I was going through withdrawal for about nine days, didn't sleep, you know, just all messed up. And then I tried heroin. And then I would just sell my Oxys to get the heroin.

SMITH: Did somebody tell you, like, hey, man, heroin's super good and cheap.

D COSTELLO: Yeah.

SMITH: I mean, what, like...

D COSTELLO: Yeah, someone did tell me. I was hearing that for a long time, I just wouldn't do it.

BOWMAN: How'd you get it?

D COSTELLO: First time I ever did heroin was in the VA hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. I was in there trying to get help. And this guy you would - how they used to do it back then, they would just put you in a room and have you withdrawal and watch you, and give you ibuprofen and stuff. That's not helping, you know? I am hallucinating. I'm seeing stuff. This guy goes, come with me - took me in the bathroom. There was a guy acting like he was cleaning. He would act like he was cleaning the mirror all day long. And no matter who came in, he would sell them heroin. And then he gave me a syringe and two bags of heroin. And I went in the bathroom. And I shot it up. That was the first time I ever did it. And...

BOWMAN: How long did this go on for?

D COSTELLO: The heroin? Until about a year ago.

BOWMAN: OK. What David told us about the Cleveland VA, we checked it out, called the VA hospital there. And they said they never heard about this story. But every allegation, they take seriously. We also reached out to an advocate who's been working with veterans in Cleveland for years. He told us the story rings true, that it was well-known at the time that heroin was sold inside the facility, with packets of the drugs sometimes being hidden inside toilet paper dispensers.

SMITH: When we first made contact with David on the phone, he'd said how disorienting it had been going back home after being in combat.

It's funny what you said. You said they - I came home, and they just let me loose, like you were, like, an animal.

D COSTELLO: Oh, that's how I felt. It was an animal, yeah, like, just a wild man, you know? I mean, you come from shooting people and all this, and then you're just, one day, at home, you know? It took me years. I couldn't go into the stores. I would start puking. I thought everyone was against me. I locked myself in a closet, like, three days. I thought I was going to get ambushed. I constantly thought I was going to get ambushed.

BOWMAN: David's mom, Pam, looks pained as she's hearing all this.

SMITH: I mean, can you just talk a little bit about, like, watching your son suffer like this? And, like...

P COSTELLO: Well, it's really hard. It's heartbreaking, really. And I didn't know all the stories that he told today, so that was really emotional for me. But when he came home and he was so crazy - and we went to the VA, and they helped a little bit at first, but man, they really do not know what they're doing with their drug program in Cleveland anyway. They were not any help for him to try to get off of that.

SMITH: What was Dave like when he first came back? You said he was crazy - just...

P COSTELLO: When he first came back?

SMITH: ...In a different world, kind of.

BOWMAN: Was it the drugs and all, or what was it?

P COSTELLO: Yeah, it was the drugs. And when he finally - you know, I don't know. He was really not my kid, you know what I'm saying? He wasn't the same guy that went into the military. He was on the drugs, and he was stealing from me and all kinds of stuff like that. And, yeah, he doesn't even remember, I'm sure.

BOWMAN: Stealing money out of your wallet?

P COSTELLO: Oh, yeah. You don't remember that, every other day? No. We had, like, our 25th wedding anniversary. I came home - maybe it was our 35th - and people had put money in the envelopes, you know, with the cards. And so I went back the next day to, you know, see how - what was there. And here he had already taken the money out of the cards and stuff like that. And it's really hard to watch your kid go through drugs. And that's why I kept pushing him to get into different rehabs, you know? And yeah.

D COSTELLO: She pushed me, all right.

P COSTELLO: I pushed you. And he just wasn't ready, I guess. I don't know.

D COSTELLO: I would try - at some points, I would try to act like I was normal and mow my grass, and I would function, and then other times I would be broke, desperate, committing crimes - stuff I would never do. I was not raised like that. I just - I - all I could think about was drugs. And I just wanted - because when I would withdraw, all this stuff would come back, all these memories, and I wanted it to stop. I just wanted it to stop. I wanted the physical pain, I wanted the mental pain to stop. And I didn't know how to stop it.

BOWMAN: And what kind of crimes?

D COSTELLO: Theft and forgery and, you know, stealing copper or stealing this and, you know, going to Walmart and just walking in there. And I would be so desperate, I would just grab the s***. I'd just straight up, grab it and walk out. I was just that desperate.

And then a year ago, I was driving. Well, I went to Cleveland, and I just sniffed a little - it was fentanyl, just a little bit. I went like this. And I thought, you know, I hit a car on the highway. I was swerving all over the road, I guess. I don't remember. And all I remember is a cop. And he asked what I was doing, and I told him I was going to the mall, and I don't know why, but I hit a car on the highway, and then waking up in the hospital. I OD'd. I OD'd somehow. I've OD'd 13 times. I've been brought back to life. I didn't care. I didn't - I really - I just was waiting for somebody to either kill me or I was waiting just to die. You know, I didn't care. It did not matter anymore.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: After David's arrest on the highway, that last stint in rehab, he feels like he's had a real breakthrough, and he's reconnected with guys like Carlos and John Smith. It makes him feel more secure.

SMITH: I mean, I hesitate to ask this, but I mean, like, how can you be sure that you're going to, like, stick it out this time?

D COSTELLO: I just - I've done it before, like, nine months or maybe it was a year. And I - but when I did it then, I was, like, gritting my teeth the whole time. I just knew I was going to go back. Now I just know that I am done. It's over. It is a wrap. I like living like this so much better.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

D COSTELLO: I will never go back. I just know.

SMITH: You know, I got to say, I think, you know, talking to Carlos and John, those guys, like, they spent a lot of time really worried about you.

D COSTELLO: Yeah, they thought I was dead.

SMITH: You kind of dropped off the face of the planet for a while.

D COSTELLO: I did. I did. I thought I was done for, you know?

BOWMAN: What do these guys mean to you? I mean, they were really looking out for you. What does it tell you?

D COSTELLO: They're my family. My parents and them, they're my family. I call them brothers. They're not friends. They're brothers, you know? And if - when they pass away, Carlos is my family, you know?

SMITH: He said he kind of, like, tracked you down.

D COSTELLO: He hunted me down like the predator, I guess.

BOWMAN: After they reconnected, David and his friend started to hang out online. He says it's more helpful than the twice-a-week counseling he does.

D COSTELLO: It really makes me feel alive in a different way. I get to express myself. I can talk to my buddies. They get to tell their side of the thing. And I look forward to it every Sunday.

SMITH: But there's still a long way to go. And David's father says the last 20 years since David joined up - the deployments, the wounds, physical, mental and spiritual - it's taken a toll on all of them.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: The whole thing cost a great deal, cost a great deal, not - in money and other things because the thing wasn't handled right. I'm not going to go into any details, but it cost us a fortune.

SMITH: Yeah. And I'm sure emotional toll...

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: That's - yes, lost years. We lost decades.

SMITH: Yeah. Well, it's good that you guys have each other again.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: Yeah.

SMITH: I mean, it's incredible.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: Well, we never really gave up. That's the thing.

BOWMAN: That's the thing.

D COSTELLO: No, they didn't give up.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: We better start rolling.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: You want to - not a lot of - did you come 90? Is that the way you came?

BOWMAN: Before we left, we told David about our next move - going up the chain of command and trying to answer the central question, why was this investigation covered up?

SMITH: And I'm just curious if there's anything that you would want to put to these guys.

D COSTELLO: I mean, first thing that pops into my head is, why did they lie to the families? I mean, that's huge. I don't get that. And why are they still lying? Why isn't there still a definite answer? They know. Somebody knows what happens. Why don't we know, you know?

BOWMAN: David is clearly the most troubled Marine we've spoken to. We know he was in combat. His comrades saw him in the fight, saw him kill Iraqi soldiers. We know he was badly wounded at the schoolhouse. And as we said, some of the stories - the farmer with the handkerchief, the young girl on patrol - they're hard to corroborate. But clearly, his experience at war eats at him. Perhaps he did these things just as he said. Maybe they're stories he needs to tell to make sense of his years at war. As one of his friends told us, I don't blame anyone for how they cope. I just don't.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: But when it comes to this central event in his war story, this explosion at the schoolhouse, David Costello is still in search of answers. And remember, our tip said there was a deliberate effort to keep this quiet. Costello told us when the Marines visited, they gave him a copy of the report, and they told him to keep quiet about it. Why would they do that? When we take a closer look at David's copy of the JAGMAN investigation, compare it to what Elena gave us, what's really strange is what's missing from his. All of the witness statements, including the one given by Lieutenant Duncan Hunter, are missing. Everything about recommended punishments and General Mattis brushing them aside, the paragraphs he wrote about friction, fear, fatigue and urgency, the series of small errors - all that's blanked out.

BOWMAN: Now, when a document like this is released, the government can't just withhold anything it wants. There has to be a legal reason - national security or personal privacy. Why did the Marines withhold all of this information from this wounded Marine, David Costello?

Here's something else that was odd about how the Marines handled all this. Just recently, we were finally able to talk with a third Marine who was medically retired because of what happened in the schoolhouse, Doug Hyenga. He told us he got a phone call from a Marine JAG years ago who told him it was friendly fire, emailed him a copy of the investigative report and asked if he wanted an in-person explanation about what happened. He said yes, but the Marines never came through. He's still waiting.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: Next time on TAKING COVER from NPR, we need to talk with someone who was in the command center when the mortar mission was approved. The two junior officers won't talk with us. What about the battalion commander, the lieutenant colonel? He's now a three-star general working at the Pentagon.

GREGG OLSON: My heart sank. I knew exactly what happened, that that round had landed in a friendly position. And I said, OK, take pictures of everything that's up on the boards right now.

SMITH: And what about the calls for punishment and the decision to make this all go away?

JOHN TOOLAN: As much as you try to be honest and upfront, there's always something lurking. Somebody said something that makes the parents think, did you do everything possible to save my son? And I guess that's what haunts you, you know, when you come back from those battles - is, did I?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: TAKING COVER is created and reported by us, Tom Bowman and Graham Smith. Our producer is Chris Haxel. Robert Little is the editor, with help from Kamala Kelkar. To hear our next episode early, sign up for Embedded+ at plus.npr.org/embedded. Or find the Embedded channel in Apple. You'll be supporting our work, and you'll get to listen to the entire season sponsor-free, too. That's plus.npr.org/embedded. And thanks to everyone who's already signed up and listening early.

SMITH: We have production help from Nic Neves. Our music comes from the Humpmuscle Rolling Circus and members of The Pomeroys. Sound design by Josh Rogosin and me, with help from Nic. Our engineer is Josh Newell. Our researcher is Barbara Van Woerkem. We've had additional editorial input from Liana Simstrom, who is the Enterprise Storytelling Unit's supervising producer, also from the supervising editor of Embedded, Katie Simon, as well as Christopher Turpin and Andrew Sussman. We'd also like to thank our colleagues Adelina Lancianese and Allison Mollenkamp and Eric Westervelt, as well as a couple of former colleagues, Hannah Allam and Lulu Garcia-Navarro. Edith Chapin is the acting

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Episode 05 Up the Chain

APRIL 20, 202312:00 PM ET

TOM BOWMAN, HOST: Heads up - this podcast deals with war. You'll be hearing graphic descriptions in the aftermath of battle and strong language.

GRAHAM SMITH, HOST: Previously on TAKING COVER...

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: In the case of Lance Corporals Shuder and Zurheide, that incident in 12 April, that was not even in accordance with our regulation.

DAVID COSTELLO: Why did they lie to the families, and why are they still lying? They know - somebody knows what happened. Why don't we know?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MICK WAGONER: I agree with your suspicions. They were protecting Duncan Hunter, protecting the Marine Corps from potential bad blood with his dad at the time. They knew who he was.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BILL SKILES: So the assumption on my part was that we did the right f***ing thing at the higher levels. Who will ever take accountability to say it's my fault, I apologize?

SMITH: That last voice there - it's Bill Skiles, Retired Sergeant Major Bill Skiles. Remember, he helped evacuate casualties from the schoolhouse. And his questions about accountability - well, we know from the investigative report that in this case, nobody was held accountable. And here's something even worse - Brad's sister told us the Marines made a promise to her parents - that their son's death would make a difference, that they'd learn the lessons.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Skiles and others told us the Marine investigation wasn't shared with the men of Echo Company back in 2004, not even with the officer who called in the mission. So if they didn't see the investigation, did anyone learn the lessons? One general told us this should be taught at the officer training schools.

(SOUNDBITE OF FOOTSTEPS)

BOWMAN: We decided to find out if that's happening.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: This is Graham Smith.

COREY: How's it going? Corey (ph).

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: This is Tom Bowman.

BOWMAN: Tom Bowman.

MATT: Hey. Matt (ph). Nice to meet you, Graham.

BOWMAN: Tom.

MATT: Tom, nice to meet you.

BOWMAN: This is Range 7 - Marine Corps Base Quantico, just outside D.C. This is where every young officer comes to learn the basics of combat. Today, they're learning how to call in an 81-millimeter mortar - the same kind of round that hit the schoolhouse.

MATT: Who we're working with here today is the entry-level students for the basic officer course, right? What they've received up to this point is their platform instruction on the call for indirect fire.

SMITH: We were told to wear body armor and helmets.

(SOUNDBITE OF FOOTSTEPS)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: So we're f***ing ready.

MATT: Sick.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: They got all their stuff. Just tell us where to be when.

MATT: OK. What are you guys looking to capture?

BOWMAN: Just walk us through how you call for fires. How do you check, double-check?

SMITH: A couple of dozen Marines are stretched out along a line looking down into a barren valley. Some trainees are flat on their stomachs, looking through binoculars and giving orders to enlisted men who stand near crates of mortars, dropping them into tubes. They're trying to hit some banged-up targets about a half-mile away.

UNIDENTIFIED MARINE #1: Eighty-one. One gun. One round and adjust. Remainder in effect. Target number Alpha, Bravo, 1-0-0-3. How copy?

UNIDENTIFIED MARINE #2: We copy you.

UNIDENTIFIED MARINE #3: So how close are you OK with them getting to...

(SOUNDBITE OF GUNFIRE)

UNIDENTIFIED MARINE #3: OK.

(SOUNDBITE OF METAL CLANGING)

UNIDENTIFIED MARINE #3: Let's go on the far side so we're not in between the gun line and them.

(SOUNDBITE OF FOOTSTEPS)

BOWMAN: They talk with us about calling in mortar missions, when to specify danger close so you don't kill your own people. So did they learn about the mistake at the schoolhouse in Fallujah?

What about - I mean, now, Iraq and Afghanistan are sort of historical now. I mean, did you study mortar emplacement, mortar use in Iraq and Afghanistan? Any friendly fire incidents over there that you study as part of your course?

UNIDENTIFIED MARINE #3: Nothing in particular in Iraq, Afghanistan that we studied in the courses I've been to.

BOWMAN: None of these men - not the students, not the instructors - have ever heard about it. When this incident was buried, any possible lessons - they were buried, too. I'm Tom Bowman.

SMITH: And I'm Graham Smith. This is TAKING COVER from NPR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: In today's episode, the higher levels Bill Skiles talked about - it's called the chain of command - the officers who make the decisions, give the orders. For our investigation, for what we're trying to understand, they're the ones who should know what happened. They may even be the ones who buried it. We're going to talk to them - or at least try. Now, keep in mind, none of these men have any idea what we've already learned. They don't know we got a tip about a cover-up, that we have a copy of the report or that we know about Duncan Hunter's involvement.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Our search for answers about this deadly friendly fire in Fallujah started, in a way, at the Pentagon. And today, that's where Graham and I are.

GREGG OLSON: Tom, good to see you.

BOWMAN: Good to see you.

OLSON: All good?

BOWMAN: Yeah. Graham Smith.

SMITH: Graham Smith.

OLSON: Hi, Graham. I assume that all your recording stuff has been...

BOWMAN: Cleared? Oh, yeah.

OLSON: ...Cleared and all that?

BOWMAN: Yeah.

OLSON: OK.

BOWMAN: The first link in that chain? It's the officer who approved the tragic mortar mission nearly two decades ago. Gregg Olson was a lieutenant colonel then, commanding a battalion of more than 700 men in Fallujah, Iraq. He's now a three-star general, an aide to the Marines top officer - the commandant.

SMITH: We told him we wanted to talk about that spring in 2004.

OLSON: Yeah. So are we doing a voice piece for NPR, or are we doing a written piece for publication?

SMITH: This will be - this will ultimately end up, I think, probably part of a podcast.

BOWMAN: We tell him we're specifically interested in the friendly fire that killed two Marines from his battalion on April 12, and we hand him a copy of the investigative report Elena Zurheide gave us.

SMITH: It's obvious that he hasn't seen it for a long time.

BOWMAN: Talk us through that. How did that happen?

OLSON: You know, as I said, my recollection of this is a little fuzzy. You might get a better interview if you let me read this.

SMITH: Yeah. If you - again, I know there's a statement from you - like, there's a lot of redactions. But...

BOWMAN: Yeah. So...

SMITH: We managed to sort of...

OLSON: I thought we were going to talk about contractors and, you know, the events of 31 March to 1 May. If we're going to dive right into this, I need to do some refresh.

SMITH: Sure.

We settled into talking about the deployment for a while.

OLSON: We were on the streets of Fallujah as early as the 26, 27 of March.

SMITH: But since he wasn't ready to talk about the incident in detail, we didn't yet raise the name Duncan Hunter Jr. Remember; he's the congressman's son. And we've been told he's the reason this incident was covered up. Anyhow, the meeting wraps up pretty quick.

BOWMAN: All right. Again, thanks.

OLSON: OK, Tom.

BOWMAN: Appreciate it. OK.

OLSON: Graham, thanks.

SMITH: It was good to meet you.

OLSON: Yeah, I'll dig through this and refresh my memory.

BOWMAN: OK.

OLSON: This is probably the most valuable thing.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: We didn't know what to think. We weren't sure whether he'd really give us another interview. After all, his old boss, Colonel John Toolan, recommended discipline for Olson over the friendly fire incident. We need answers about exactly what happened. Could Olson tell us? Could Toolan? How about the officers above them at the time? Got to say, we were a little surprised when we got a message back from General Olson about a month later. He was ready to talk again, so - back to the building.

OLSON: Good to see you.

BOWMAN: Good to see you.

SMITH: Good to see you again.

OLSON: I had a chance to get out to Illinois and collect some contemporaneous notes.

SMITH: Wow.

OLSON: So...

BOWMAN: Oh, wow.

OLSON: So between that and the investigation, which I recall - after reading it, I recall seeing it when General Mattis handed it to me on a very hot day in August of 2004 and said, read this. And then he sat me down and talked to me. So...

BOWMAN: OK. So we have, like, a half hour, I guess, right?

OLSON: I've got to hard stop at 8:25 because...

BOWMAN: OK.

OLSON: ...I have to reset for another meeting.

BOWMAN: So I guess we'll just get right into it. You know, what happened here? How was there a friendly fire incident? What happened in the...

OLSON: Yeah, it was absolutely a mistake of fact. By the 12 of April, we'd been in contact pretty much continuously for about nine days. So what happened is we came out of our evening orders group. During that day, we had gotten a fragmentary order to conduct a cordon and knock.

SMITH: Basically, Olson - remember; he was lieutenant colonel back then - is telling us about a mission that day to arrest a high-value target, somebody they believed was an insurgent leader. Among the men he sent on this mission was an experienced officer who normally would have been in the fire support center handling things like mortar requests.

OLSON: I needed mature supervision on this mission because it was relatively sensitive. As is noted in the investigation, there was basically task saturation. And we made a mistake.

BOWMAN: Hey; what does that mean in layman's terms?

OLSON: You know, when there's a lot going on and attention to detail sometimes suffers. And that's, in fact, what happened here.

SMITH: With the senior fire support officers occupied elsewhere, Olson had two more junior officers filling in in the operations center. He checked in to see how it was going.

OLSON: Yeah, the mission was in progress when I came back in, and Echo Company was reporting in contact. We could hear the sound of Echo Company's engagement.

SMITH: Olson seems to have such clear memories. Even from the headquarters a half-mile from the schoolhouse, he remembers hearing the firefight set off by that insurgent tire barricade.

OLSON: I said, OK, what's - you know, what's the circumstances? He said, well, it's for Echo Company. It's - a structure is being built that's going to put their flank at hazard.

SMITH: A request for a mortar mission to destroy the barricade was received over the radio, written on a card by the radio operator and handed to one of the junior officers, who hung it on a rack next to another card.

BOWMAN: So exactly what happened? Was there a confusion with the cards? Is that what happened?

OLSON: Yes. So what happened was there were two cards hanging. There were two targets plotted. The assistant fire support coordinator and the artillery liaison officer misunderstood which target was being pointed at and which card was being referred to.

BOWMAN: And who pointed to it?

OLSON: My recollection is that the artillery liaison officer identified the target on the big photographic map that we use. We use two maps - a small-scale map and a large-scale map. The map that had the larger definition was where the target was pointed to, and that was 400 meters away from any friendlies.

BOWMAN: OK, hold on. This is new information - that this artillery liaison officer pointed to the wrong spot on the map. And we have a good idea about the name of the officer he's talking about. It must have been the congressman's son. Duncan Hunter's own statement said he plotted the target on a giant map and placed a yellow pin at the target location.

SMITH: And just so I'm - who are the actual people who - when you're talking about - so there was Ben Deda, who was the lieutenant who was the assistant...

OLSON: Yeah, assistant fire support coordinator.

SMITH: And then it was Duncan Hunter who was...

OLSON: He was the artillery liaison officer.

SMITH: Yeah.

OLSON: So first Lieutenant Hunter and first Lieutenant Deda.

SMITH: So, again, what Olson is telling us, having just reviewed his contemporaneous notes, is that this whole tragic mistake started with Duncan Hunter, the son of the House Armed Services Committee chairman, pointing to the wrong target on the map. Olson told the investigators something completely different back in 2004. His brief statement in the JAGMAN says the other lieutenant, not Duncan Hunter, told him about the mortar request. I'll read from it. He goes on - I asked him, how far from friendlies is the target? He answered, 400 meters. I then approved the fire mission.

BOWMAN: And what's weird is that this statement shows up in the report as a clarification given more than a month and a half after the incident. But a clarification to what? If Olson submitted some sort of earlier statement that needed to be clarified, it's not in the report.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: In any event, the mission he approved - in his mind, it was safe. The problem was the mortar tubes were trained on a different target, the one that was just over a hundred meters from the school.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: And when did you realize it was friendly fire?

OLSON: Almost immediately. I mean, it was a single round and adjust. Echo Company simultaneously reported taking incoming indirect fire. My heart sank. I knew exactly what happened, that that round had landed in a friendly position. And I said, OK, take pictures of everything that's up on the boards right now. Cease fire. We commenced our evacuations. And I immediately called General - then, at the time, Colonel Toolan. And I said, hey, Colonel Toolan, I've had an incident. I'm going to need an investigation. We just mortared ourselves.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: We asked him what a lot of the Marines wondered - how could it have hit in the courtyard so precisely, that one-in-a-million shot through the open roof?

OLSON: It's not unusual that the first round and adjust doesn't go exactly to the grid because it's an area-of-effect weapon.

SMITH: But it was, essentially, like, just, ultimately, bad luck?

OLSON: This was one of those things that happens on the battlefield that is - again, back to the chance, friction and uncertainty. The fundamental characteristics of war played themselves out in a school courtyard in Fallujah on the 12 of April.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Now, Olson was a battalion commander, had more than 700 Marines under him. He couldn't know every one of them by name, but he did know Robert Zurheide.

OLSON: I had a relationship with Zurheide. His wife worked in the PX. She was a big, bubbly personality. And he was a Marine who had had some challenges initially and was maturing rapidly. And I asked for some time to just go and say goodbye. It saddens me to this day that he was one of the 19 guys who didn't come home.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: We asked about the investigation and the recommendations for punishment, why, although he says Duncan Hunter pointed to the wrong target on the map, Hunter was never recommended for punishment like Lieutenant Deda. And, we might remind you, Deda told the investigator Hunter wasn't just training. He was doing the job of clearing fires. But that's not how Olson remembers it.

OLSON: Now, we were training Lieutenant Hunter to do the same job, but I had not yet said, Lieutenant Hunter, you are qualified to stand this post yourself.

BOWMAN: And Colonel Toolan recommended a reprimand for you and disciplinary action against the others. And then General Mattis reversed that. What are your thoughts about that?

OLSON: My thoughts are that there's a chain of command, and ultimately, the people at the top of the chain of command have to take their decisions.

BOWMAN: So what about this being kept from the families of the men who'd been killed, the Marines being called out at a hearing on Capitol Hill three years later? At that point in 2007, Olson himself was part of the Marine Corps team responsible for briefing Congress.

OLSON: I was on Capitol Hill when this happened, and I - frankly, I was very surprised that our families never got the official word. You know, the incident happened. The investigation began, and I was limited in my ability to communicate with the families. My condolence letter to the - to Elena and to Shuder's dad - or dad and mom - were relatively terse because I couldn't say a whole lot. I was told to continue combat operations...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

OLSON: ...To wait for the results of the investigation and that the investigation would be provided to the families.

BOWMAN: And, of course, that didn't happen - not for years. So with Olson, we finally have a firsthand account of what happened inside the fire control center. We've learned more about why people might have wanted to cover this up, how deeply it seems the congressman's son was involved.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: So we thought we were done with General Olson. But just as we were getting ready to publish this episode, we got an invitation back to the Pentagon again. See, when we published Episode 3, we also put out a written version on npr.org, which included what you just heard in that interview, that Olson told us Duncan Hunter had pointed to the wrong target on the big wall map, which led to the mission being approved. Well, we heard from Olson's office that he wanted to tell us a different story.

OLSON: When I asked about what target was being considered, I was told the target under consideration was 400 meters away.

BOWMAN: And who told you that?

OLSON: That was the fire support coordinator.

SMITH: So are you saying that your recollection, having looked at your contemporaneous notes of seeing Duncan Hunter point at the larger map out of the two maps, you don't actually remember...

OLSON: I have no contemporaneous notes. My recollection was based on memory, and upon multiple readings of this, I didn't have it right the first time I talked to you.

BOWMAN: So what was Duncan Hunter doing? What was he pointing to?

OLSON: I don't recall him pointing to anything. He was working a target card.

BOWMAN: This target card Hunter was working on was the one meant to hit the tire barricade near the school, the one that failed to include the key words, danger close.

OLSON: It should have been backstopped by the procedures in the fire support coordination center that - when it was plotted on the map, hey; that plots out within danger close of friendlies. Those procedures broke down.

SMITH: Again, the person who plotted it - Duncan Hunter.

BOWMAN: So if it said a hundred meters on the card, someone should have noticed...

SMITH: Yeah.

OLSON: ...That that should have said - Duncan Hunter should have said, this should be danger close. Right? Somebody should have caught that. Whether it was the mortar liaison NCO, whether it was, like, the artillery liaison officer, whether it was the assistant fire support coordinator, somebody should have caught that. So he and Deda were the last stop on this. Lieutenant - the assistant fire support coordinator is the last stop. So it was either Hunter or Deda that should have looked at that card. It says 100 meters. It should have said - this should say danger close, so we double-, triple-check this.

SMITH: Yeah.

OLSON: Our procedures called for that. We didn't follow them.

SMITH: So just to be clear, you say in your statement in the JAGMAN that you approved the mission. Is that accurate?

OLSON: The JAGMAN says that I approved the mission. Yeah. I mean, I don't want to get into nitpicking terms of art here, but I was always concerned that we were doing the right thing in the right way.

SMITH: But just to be clear, this is from not anything that the captain wrote. This is from your - what is called a clarification in your name where you say you approved the mission. And I should note it says it's a clarification, and there is no original statement from you included in this report to which this would be a clarification, which seems odd.

BOWMAN: Do you remember an original statement that would have to be clarified? I know it's almost 20 years ago, but you remember giving an initial statement and then clarifying that statement? Or...

OLSON: I don't recall doing anything in writing besides answering a question in clarification, which was who was doing what that night, because we have a standard operating procedure. And the investigating officer took a lot of time to dig into how we say we operate.

SMITH: He's holding a copy of the JAGMAN opened to the page with his clarification.

OLSON: And I got to push back a little bit. My clarification has nothing about I approved the mission. My clarification talks about who was doing what.

SMITH: What does the last line say?

OLSON: Oh, I'm sorry. Yeah. How far from friendlies is? He answered 400. I approved the fire. Yeah. So, OK.

SMITH: Also...

OLSON: I mean, I'll stand by that.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: And just to be clear, this is not something that was prepared by the captain. This is from you...

OLSON: Oh, yeah. Yeah, this is me.

SMITH: ...In the first person. This is your statement.

OLSON: I wrote this.

BOWMAN: So when we talked to Olson before, he seemed to have really clear memories of Hunter pointing to the wrong target, said he just looked over his contemporaneous notes. Now he's got no memory of that, doesn't have any relevant notes, and he doesn't even remember that he approved the mortar mission until we point out his own words sitting in front of him, black and white. It's hard to know what to make of all this. And frankly, it's odd that he wanted to call us in to change his story about Hunter and the map. It's not like he said Hunter did a great job in the fire support center. Anyhow, we still have more links to go on our journey up the chain of command.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: Olson commanded 2-1. It was just one of the three Marine battalions fighting in Fallujah that April. The man in charge of all of them, the regimental commander, was Colonel John Toolan. His friends call him Jocko. He was the one who wanted harsher punishments, a recommendation rejected by Generals Mattis and Conway. What might he know?

Check, one, two.

John Toolan retired in 2016 as a three-star.

BOWMAN: He lives in a big house just outside D.C. I parked my Jeep Wrangler right behind his.

SMITH: Hey. How you doing?

JOHN TOOLAN: Hey.

BOWMAN: Hey. How you doing?

TOOLAN: Good to see you.

BOWMAN: Good to see you.

TOOLAN: It's been a while (ph). I'm glad you guys - did you get my email?

BOWMAN: Today or...

TOOLAN: Yeah, today. No. OK. I gave you instructions to park behind my Jeep there.

SMITH: And we did, like twinsies (ph) - twin Jeeps.

BOWMAN: You notice I have a Jeep, too.

TOOLAN: Oh, you have a Jeep, too.

BOWMAN: A Wrangler. Yeah, yeah.

TOOLAN: Oh, OK.

SMITH: Should we take off our shoes?

TOOLAN: You can if you want. If you got holes in your socks, you can leave your shoes on.

(LAUGHTER)

SMITH: Thank you for the coffee.

BOWMAN: So do you want - what do you want?

SMITH: Yeah, If you guys could sit here, that would be the best.

Now, again, we had told General Toolan that we wanted to talk about this first battle of Fallujah. We hadn't gotten real specific about our interest in the friendly fire incident. Honestly, we weren't sure he'd be willing to talk about it.

BOWMAN: We sit down in his study - classic dark wood and shelves of books, pictures and memorabilia. There's a huge photographic map on the wall behind his desk.

SMITH: I would love to - if you had a minute to, like, look at the map with you.

TOOLAN: Absolutely.

BOWMAN: We can see right away that it's Fallujah. We can even pick out the schoolhouse with its open courtyard.

It's an amazing map.

TOOLAN: Yeah.

BOWMAN: So this was Fallujah one. This is the spring of 2004.

TOOLAN: Right. So you can see 1/5.

BOWMAN: We'd seen the same map up on Sergeant Major Skiles' wall when we visited his Marine room. Large arrows show the battle plan, 2/1 pushing down through the city.

SMITH: When you look at this map, I mean, what do you think of when you look at this?

TOOLAN: I wish I'd finished.

SMITH: It's interesting...

TOOLAN: Without hesitation, I mean, we should have finished, and we - very frustrating to know that we really could have cleared the city to the west within a couple more days, and then we stopped.

SMITH: It's so interesting to me that you had a really long and distinguished career, and the map that's sitting up over your desk is a map that's an unfinished symphony. I don't know what you call it, but I mean, like, why this?

TOOLAN: True philosopher here. There's a lot of truth to that. I mean, it was a situation where I would probably be frustrated by it for as long as I live, you know, 'cause as I said, I mean, we could have finished the job. And I think we probably would have saved some lives.

BOWMAN: Toolan tells us about that original plan. Pacify the area. Spend money on projects. Try to identify local leaders and find new ones.

TOOLAN: We're looking for George Washington. Where is he? Where is that guy that we can turn to and say, OK, here's what we want to do? And we weren't there more than about 20 minutes when all of a sudden the whole place lit up.

BOWMAN: This was at the handover ceremony, late March 2004, when the Marines took over from the Army.

TOOLAN: And wham, as soon as we were there - lit up, took casualties.

BOWMAN: Toolan never found George Washington.

TOOLAN: And it was very, extremely frustrating. And they held the upper hand 'cause we didn't know who was actually running the city. We had to figure it out. And it took time. While that's going on, we got a fight going on. We don't know who the heck we're fighting. We don't know they're coming after us.

SMITH: This is when the Marines are taking the fight to the insurgents. And already they have questions about whether they'll be allowed to finish the job. The fighting quickly intensifies, and America's Iraqi political allies feel blindsided. They demand an end to the assault.

TOOLAN: We were losing the information campaign, so now we're stuck with both hands behind our back. How do we overcome the image that U.S. forces are going in and just killing Iraqi citizens? And that's why I was very frustrated when I had to go around and tell people, hey, we're going to stop. It's like, boss, are you out of your mind? We're going to stop doing what? We can't just stop - very difficult time, very, very difficult to address that to the troops because they believed they were winning.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: He's brought us to the cease-fire, the moment when the friendly fire occurs. It's time to ask about it.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: TAKING COVER continues just ahead.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: We've been talking with General John Toolan about Fallujah and the cease-fire.

BOWMAN: And that gets us to this friendly fire incident which happened at this schoolhouse. And they were still sort of clustered in that one area. They weren't continuing to move, as originally planned.

TOOLAN: Right. They pretty much stayed static.

BOWMAN: Did that put your guys more in harm's way because mistakes could be made like this friendly fire incident that happened?

TOOLAN: Yes. I mean, there's no question. So that particular friendly fire incident, I mean, really did - between telling guys to stop, sit back, hold your positions, don't let any Iraqi insurgents penetrate your defenses, if you see them kill them. And, I mean, the day after the event, I went to that site, and it ripped the heart out of a lot of people.

BOWMAN: And do you remember what they talked about when you showed up?

TOOLAN: Echo Company was angry. They were angry. I mean, I sensed it. I knew it. And so, you know, obviously you need to investigate it as quickly as possible because you can only rip a guy's heart out so many times. You know, stop fighting - you just lost your best friend. It was strong indications to me that the company believed the battalion failed to coordinate the right information and that the battalion should not have authorized the mortars to go into that target area.

SMITH: When he says battalion, what he's referring to is Lieutenant Colonel Olson, who we just talked with at the Pentagon, the battalion commander. Toolan tells us he also visited the combat operations center where the mission was approved.

TOOLAN: And I went, and I sat down with their fire support coordination team and said, OK, show me how this worked. Why were these mortars ordered into this place? What was the target? So I can't remember exactly what the guidance was that I gave them after that, but I didn't have a good warm and fuzzy that the battle damage assessment was being done to the level and detail that you needed to make sure we avoid friendly casualties, as well as civilian casualties.

SMITH: He hears about the task saturation, the more junior officer filling multiple roles, Lieutenant Colonel Olson coming in to ask about the mortar request from Echo Company and then personally approving the mission.

BOWMAN: So in this situation, if the boss walks in and says, what's going on? We have this. OK, just do it - what should have happened in that situation, would you say?

TOOLAN: Boss should go outside the room with the operations officer or the fire support coordinator and let him explain to the CO what's - you know, what's going on. The commander needs to have the art form down to know where he's supposed to be at the right time and right place. Critical moment where you're actually firing a fire mission, and it's danger close. It's not the time for the commander to jump in and say, you know, fire it or give any guidance 'cause that can usurp any protocols or processes that are time-tested and true. You cause a problem, and you're wrong. You stay out of it. I mean, you're not in the process. There's a reason why there's a process. The power of the presence of the commander is pretty intense, especially for a young lieutenant or sergeant or whatever. Yeah, God...

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Any time there's a friendly fire, there's supposed to be an investigation. And Colonel Toolan orders a captain from his headquarters to handle it. We've told you about that JAGMAN, including Toolan's recommendation that the battalion Commander Olson receive a letter of caution.

TOOLAN: In another time and another place, maybe it would have been harsher as far as what the battalion commander responsibility was. But when you weigh the confusion of the battlefield and all that's going on, a letter of caution at that time was probably more appropriate than, you know, relieving him for cause.

SMITH: But ultimately, your recommendations to harshen up the sanctions were overridden by Mattis.

TOOLAN: It's absolutely true. I mean, he believed wholeheartedly that combat requires different assessment about, you know, where mistakes were made out of neglect or because they deliberately did something wrong. You know, your interpretation, General Mattis's interpretation of what goes on in combat is not the same as the parents of the people who were killed. I mean, it's just not. It's very difficult, as you all know, to sit in a living room with somebody and say, let me tell you what happened - because as much as you try to be honest and upfront, there's always something lurking. Somebody said something that makes the parents think, did you do everything possible to save my son? And I guess that's what haunts you, you know, when you come back from those battles - is, did I? And probably, the answer to that question is, as much as I think I did, there's probably more I could have done.

BOWMAN: But in this case, the battalion commander was responsible for firing that round that killed them. So it would have been difficult for him to go to the families, you think?

TOOLAN: I mean, I think you answered the question. Yes. I mean, certainly, it would be difficult. But still, somebody from the organization should make that visit.

SMITH: And I don't know if you've been sort of kept tracking this, but it took - the families were told that their people were killed by hostile fire, essentially, and were never told that there was a JAGMAN investigation that was going on and ultimately were never informed by the military that it was friendly fire until three years later.

TOOLAN: Yeah. Well, to be honest, I mean, I think I lost sight of this incident. Now, why didn't I ask the question? Hey, XO, did Zurheide's family get notified? Did the family get notified? I mean, I can see how it happens, but should it happen that way? No. I mean, your instincts, I think, are correct. And those

questions should be answered. But the worst thing in the world to happen is to break that bond of trust between us and the public, the mothers and fathers who send their sons to war.

BOWMAN: And what about learning from the disaster, making sure it doesn't happen again?

TOOLAN: I would hope that, you know, these investigations are studied by the schools and making sure you don't make those same mistakes. I mean, that's the value of it. So for me, making sure everybody studied exactly what went wrong was most important and to get it out as quickly as possible.

BOWMAN: Well, we know that didn't happen. But why?

You know, one thing we did hear - that one of the people involved at battalion level was Duncan Hunter. And some people are looking and saying maybe they buried this report because Duncan Hunter was involved in this. I guess he was a lieutenant. And his dad, of course, was, you know, chairman of the Armed Services Committee. What - do you recall Hunter being there? Or was he just another lieutenant? Or what are your thoughts about people who say maybe they buried it because of Duncan Hunter?

TOOLAN: I lost complete faith in Duncan Hunter, but Duncan Hunter Jr. was a pain in the a** when he was a second lieutenant. He was a - let's put this way. I mean, most second lieutenants in artillery units don't get their butts chewed out by the regimental commander.

SMITH: Toolan describes a reckless young officer with a disregard for basic safety protocols - for instance, not wearing his body armor or helmet when he should've.

TOOLAN: Very cocky, didn't really - he wasn't the kind of guy that you would want your son to be led by.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: We told him about an appearance Duncan Hunter Jr. made on a podcast that deals with military issues. This was back when he was serving in Congress before he had to resign.

(SOUNDBITE OF PODCAST, "ZERO BLOG THIRTY")

MATTHEW COTHRON: All right, now on "Zero Blog Thirty," we are pleased to have Representative Duncan Hunter. Duncan is a former Marine. Well, we're not going to say former. Marine - you're a Marine, right? You still go...

DUNCAN HUNTER JR: Yeah. Once was enough, though, man.

COTHRON: Yeah.

KATE MANNION: One and done.

BOWMAN: We've tried repeatedly to talk with Duncan Hunter, but he has yet to respond. Anyhow, he was happy to share war stories with "Zero Blog Thirty."

(SOUNDBITE OF PODCAST, "ZERO BLOG THIRTY")

COTHRON: And you were in one of the more bloody battles of the Iraq War, right?

DUNCAN HUNTER JR: Yeah. We had the only artillery battery in Fallujah for the first Fallujah. It was - I mean, we were it.

BOWMAN: And Hunter brags about how bada** it was.

(SOUNDBITE OF PODCAST, "ZERO BLOG THIRTY")

COTHRON: What was the day-to-day life as a - of an artillery officer in something like the Battle of Fallujah?

DUNCAN HUNTER JR: Well, I got to do a lot of recon with the 2-1 lead elements, got to plot all of the targets in the city with a bunch of special forces dudes and other government guys. And we got to - I got to go shoot artillery. And it was a wide-open area, too. I mean, you had a free-fire area in parts of Fallujah for a month or two.

SMITH: We asked General Toolan what he thought of that.

TOOLAN: That is just an idiotic perspective. You know, I mean, that's somebody who doesn't know what the hell he's talking about. It's not a free-fire zone, particularly when your forces are in there. You want to make sure that every round is accounted for. Yeah, that would've gotten Duncan Hunter fired if he said that to me.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: On the other side of the room, General Toolan shows us a basket full of cards with the names of Marines, dates of birth, dates of death, a couple of lines of Scripture. They're memorial cards.

TOOLAN: This is all my guys that got killed.

SMITH: Oh, my gosh.

BOWMAN: Among them, Robert Zurheide and Brad Shuder.

TOOLAN: I think I got Zurheide's picture in...

BOWMAN: But how many do you have there?

TOOLAN: Too many.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: So we learned a lot from Generals Olson and Toolan about Duncan Hunter, his involvement - not a lot about why and how the information about the incident was buried. But remember - neither of them was a general back in 2004. At that time, the first general in the chain of command - James Mattis.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: We've told you about Mattis, the famous quotes, his nicknames and how he comes into this story. He was Toolan's boss, running the fight in western Iraq. And he was the officer who decided to drop the recommended punishments in the friendly fire case we were investigating.

BOWMAN: Now, I've known Mattis for 20 years. I first met him in Afghanistan at Kandahar Airfield. And I kept in touch over the years, even took him on a tour of NPR. And I covered him when he was secretary of defense. But when I reached out to him with a list of questions about this incident at Fallujah, he refused to give us an interview, writing, quote, "I prefer not to engage with you on your story. The questions you're asking are either answered in my endorsement of the JAG Manual investigation, or I don't know the answers," unquote. And this - it kind of struck me as odd because of all the generals I've known, Mattis is one who loves the spotlight. Not on this subject.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: So what about his boss? We'll be right back with TAKING COVER.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: General James Conway was in charge of all the Marines in Iraq in 2004, the top officer in country to sign off on the investigation. As we've heard, Conway was running the entire Corps as commandant by 2007, when the Marine Corps reluctantly acknowledged the tragedy on Capitol Hill. His second-in-command had apologized on behalf of Conway to members of the subcommittee. He should know exactly how and why it was handled the way it was. Would he talk?

BOWMAN: Now, Conway retired in 2010, but just like Mattis, I've gotten a chance to know him over the years. I had all his contact information. Well, for weeks, I emailed him. Then I left phone messages on his cell and home numbers telling him we wanted to talk about Fallujah. I even talked to his wife at one point, who said he was off fishing, but he'd call me as soon as he got back. Well, he never did. And I started to wonder, was Conway dodging us? Maybe he got wind we were talking to these other generals about that friendly fire incident, asking about a cover-up, asking about Duncan Hunter.

Anyhow, months went by. Finally, I said, hey, Graham, time for a road trip. We wrote out a list of questions, exactly what we were looking into. We printed it on NPR letterhead and jumped into the Wrangler, bound for Annapolis. A lot of admirals and high-ranking Marines end up retiring there. We figure we'd just leave it at his door, maybe even get lucky, get a chance to talk with him. His house was hard to miss - huge Marine Corps flag.

SMITH: That's recording. This is recording.

BOWMAN: OK, sounds good. Here we are at General Conway's house in Annapolis, Md. Let's see if he's home. We got the letter. And hope for the best.

SMITH: Yeah.

As we're approaching the door - haven't even knocked - it swings open.

BOWMAN: Hey, General.

JAMES CONWAY: Hi. How are you doing?

BOWMAN: Hey. Tom Bowman with NPR.

CONWAY: Yeah, sure. How you been?

BOWMAN: I've been trying to get a hold of you. How are you doing?

CONWAY: Yeah. Not too bad. Long time no see.

BOWMAN: This is my colleague Graham Smith.

SMITH: Nice to meet you.

CONWAY: Graham? Hi. Jim Conway. How are you doing?

BOWMAN: Good to see you.

CONWAY: Yeah.

BOWMAN: I knew it's been a while.

CONWAY: What are you doing in the neighborhood?

BOWMAN: So we're putting together a story on Fallujah, first battle of Fallujah, and specifically, a friendly fire incident that happened there. And we've been talking to Gregg Olson and a few other people.

SMITH: This was 12 of April 2004.

CONWAY: Twelfth of April 2004? OK. So Gregg was what? First battalion...

SMITH: We really hadn't expected to find him at home. And given our experience with Mattis and how Conway had been avoiding Tom, we figured this was our only chance. We went right at it.

BOWMAN: If you have time to sit down and talk about it...

CONWAY: I don't right now.

BOWMAN: OK. So here's kind of what we're...

CONWAY: OK.

BOWMAN: ...Looking at. We weren't sure if you were going to be here.

CONWAY: Yeah, OK. And I'll tell you guys, I don't - you know, I was kind of at a level above that. I mean...

BOWMAN: Oh, sure.

CONWAY: ...Those things happen, but I don't know if I can give you any kind of detail.

BOWMAN: OK.

CONWAY: You know, probably tell you what rolled through the headquarters, but...

BOWMAN: Yeah. I mean, what was - this was one that kind of got lost in the system, too, which I - probably if you went back through, the families weren't essentially notified about what had happened until three years after it happened.

CONWAY: OK.

SMITH: We let him know we'd found the 2007 congressional testimony with his apology and read the 2004 investigative report with his signature on it.

So we'd love to sit down with you and...

CONWAY: Guys, I'm telling you, I'd be happy to sit down, but I...

BOWMAN: OK.

CONWAY: ...Don't have any direct knowledge. And I'll be honest, I don't remember it even as the commandant.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

CONWAY: So, you know, shame on me, I guess, for not, you know, retaining that level of detail of information. But if it crossed my desk and I put somebody on it, you know, there was another investigation or two going on at that point.

BOWMAN: Didn't remember it even as commandant? What - that deadly friendly fire where the son of the House Armed Services Committee chairman was involved? The worst Marine-on-Marine friendly fire in decades? Shame on me? That doesn't make sense. He told us he needed to talk with the other officers before he'd talk with us again.

CONWAY: But I would have to do all that research before I have anything meaningful for you, you know...

BOWMAN: OK. Well, you know...

CONWAY: ...In the discussion.

BOWMAN: ...We laid it out in the letter...

CONWAY: OK.

BOWMAN: ...'Cause we weren't sure you were going to be around.

CONWAY: OK. Yeah.

BOWMAN: And our numbers are there.

CONWAY: All right.

SMITH: We're so close. We could pop back anytime.

CONWAY: Yeah.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

CONWAY: OK. All right. I got to run, guys.

BOWMAN: OK.

CONWAY: Great seeing you. Nice to meet you.

SMITH: Nice to meet you.

CONWAY: All right. OK. Good luck, guys.

BOWMAN: Keep in touch. Take care.

What are the chances? What are the chances?

SMITH: Yeah.

(SOUNDBITE OF CAR BEEPING)

BOWMAN: Well, we've done all we could.

SMITH: Yeah. Yeah, well, he said - I think he told us he would talk about it. And he would run the trip, so - well, we'll see. I guess he's going to talk to General Mattis, and he's going to talk to General Toolan, and he's going to talk to General Olson. And then hopefully, he'll talk with us.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

SMITH: Yeah. Well, wishful thinking. For months, we sent reminders, waited to hear back. Nothing, except Tom got an earful after General Conway called the Pentagon to complain we had ambushed him. We later learned he was looking into things, just not the way we thought. We ended up talking with Bill Skiles, that retired sergeant major who had a big Fallujah map on his wall, just like General Toolan, the one you heard at the beginning of this episode saying he assumed the right thing had been done at the higher levels. Skiles told us over the phone that during this period, while we were waiting, he got a call from Gen. Conway.

SKILES: No, he just - he, you know - hey, Sergeant Major. How are you? You know, and - General Conway here. I said, no kidding. I could tell by your voice, sir. (Laughter) You got - he's got that big, big, commanding, robust voice.

BOWMAN: Conway heard through the grapevine that we shared a copy of the JAGMAN with Skiles.

SKILES: And he goes, yeah, just talking about - there's an incident back in '04, and the documents that you had that you were reviewing - could I get a copy of that? I mean, I said, I have no problem giving you a copy of that, sir. And so he goes, oh, my goodness. I mean, how long ago was it, you know, when I was talking to him? Seventeen years ago at the time? So anyway, I sent it to him, the attachment PDF you sent me, and never heard from him again.

BOWMAN: Why on earth would the former commandant of the Marine Corps go to a retired enlisted man to get a copy of an investigation instead of going through official channels? He's comfortable enough to call the Pentagon and complain about us. Why wouldn't he just call and ask for his own, unredacted copy of the JAGMAN? Maybe he wanted to see what we had. Maybe he knew it didn't exist anymore in the official records. Who knows?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: We want to take a minute to tell you about one other conversation that we had around this time, not with a general but with one of the first guys we'd talked with who'd been in the schoolhouse. See, General Conway wasn't the only one who'd heard we'd given a copy of the JAGMAN to Bill Skiles.

BOWMAN: Jason Duty, Doc Duty, is still on active duty - a master chief petty officer. He's not quite 40 years old. He told us he was just a kid during that Fallujah deployment when he and Skiles helped evacuate the wounded. They're still close.

JASON DUTY: I didn't know this existed until Bill told me at dinner the other night, when I asked you if I could have a copy of it. I didn't know there was - I didn't know this was even a thing. And to find out it's dated August of 2004 and is - basically closes the book on the whole incident anyway...

BOWMAN: Anyway, we sent him a PDF of the JAGMAN immediately, while they were still at the restaurant. We got a chance to sit down and talk about it later that week. Jason is a burly guy, spends a lot of time in the gym. He's covered with tattoos. And he doesn't buy the idea that this incident could've just fallen through the cracks.

DUTY: No, absolutely not. I mean, we've been having friendly-fire incidents in every war since 1775. And they're - I mean, for better or for worse, we all know that they happen, right? You know, I don't

believe that for a - now, that's Jason Duty's personal opinion. I'm not speaking on behalf of the Department of the Navy. I don't believe that. I don't believe that's true. They probably - I'd rather not speculate on the record.

BOWMAN: The incident was horrible. But keeping it from the families?

DUTY: I'm actually a little bit in shock that they knew this s***, and they didn't tell anybody. And we got a black eye during this - the Marine Corps and the United States military as a whole got a black eye during this operation anyway because we go in. We killed a lot of people, and then we got stopped. Whatever. And I think that finding - you know, the American people finding out that not only did our military get a black eye by a bunch of insurgent terrorists in a Wild West city in Fallujah, but also, we're killing our own guys? I think that would've - that was what they were trying to avoid with this.

SMITH: We've spent most of this episode talking with men who knew exactly what happened but somehow didn't make sure that the public and the people closest to the tragedy found out the truth - the men who were wounded, the men who struggled to save them, the men who still don't know the truth about the worst day of their lives. It turns out that getting hard information instead of rumors, getting closer to the truth, changes things. It matters. For Jason Duty, actually getting the investigation - it hits different.

Again...

DUTY: Reading that was kind of rough Wednesday night...

SMITH: Yeah.

DUTY: ...Tuesday night, whatever it was, just since I already had quite a load on by the time I started reading that. And Bill had already taken off. So I was just sitting at the bar kind of by myself. But yeah, I think that was the first time, I think, in my entire life I've ever had what they call a real flashback. I was really there for a few seconds. I could smell the blood and the meat 'cause it smells like a butcher shop in there. I could smell that. I could smell the smoke. I could smell the dust. I could remember sneezing 'cause I got so much f***ing dust in my nose. I can remember Shuder screaming and screaming and screaming, and in my head - and this feels awful to say it out loud. I've never said this out loud - I was like, will you please just shut the f*** up and let me work? I remember thinking that. I never said that, but I remember thinking that 'cause he was just screaming and screaming and screaming, even after I gave him the morphine, though he'd calmed down pretty soon after that.

SMITH: That flashback must have been...

DUTY: It was pretty f***ing intense. Yeah. That was 17 years later on a Tuesday night at The Globe and Laurel in Stafford, Va. It was - that was my first flashback. And I've thought about those nights. I've thought about that night. Did I do the right thing? Did I do the right thing at the right time? Did I do something wrong? F***. What - did I think of this? Did I think about doing that? I think about that s*** all the time. If I'd have paid more attention to Smitty, could I have saved his leg? Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I think about that s*** all the time. Not all the time, but I do think about that. But I don't know why. That was the - I was there for a few seconds. And a few seconds felt like a lifetime, but I was there. I was actually there. I remember I could feel the f***ing sweat running down my face and the back of my neck. I could feel my itchy, unwashed a** as I'm trying to f***ing load Shuder into the truck. And I can see Zurheide's dead eyes that nobody closed during the drive over, and his eyes just covered with - his open eyes just covered with a film of dust. It was gross. It was - not unholy. It was, like, blasphemous, yeah. Blasphemous. Sacrilegious. It was - somebody close his f***ing eyes and close his mouth. But yeah, that was - thank you for sharing that with me electronically, but let's just say I hope that's an experience that I don't ever have again. So yeah.

SMITH: I'll just tell you...

DUTY: Excuse me a second. I need to use the restroom.

(SOUNDBITE OF FOOTSTEPS)

BOWMAN: So you might be wondering, what about General Conway? We know he got a copy of the Marine investigation from Skiles, the same one Jason Duty struggled to read at the bar. What did he think?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: Well, months later, we finally heard back. Conway wouldn't be sitting down with us after all. He sent a brief email saying he stands by his decision to back Mattis and drop all punishments. His statement reads, quote, "The regrettable incident in the heat of combat was made worse by the failure of higher command to properly notify family members that their Marines had died from friendly fire, a failure that was corrected by the assistant commandant of the Marine Corps as soon as it was discovered."

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: As soon as it was discovered. It was strange to read that because Conway knows this wasn't something that was discovered by the Marine Corps. It was dragged out of them on Capitol Hill and largely because of the efforts of one woman. Next time on TAKING COVER, a grieving mother. Not Brad Shuder or Rob Zurheide's - this is Pat Tillman's mother, Dannie.

DANNIE TILLMAN: And so to me, they just lie on a regular basis. And I don't know why they do that because it's very damaging. They don't understand that families will accept the truth. But when you lie to them, you're basically gaslighting them.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: The life and death of the most famous soldier in the U.S. Army. The NFL star turned Army Ranger was accidentally killed in eastern Afghanistan by fellow Americans just 10 days after that Marine mortar landed in the schoolhouse. Tillman's friendly fire was covered up at the highest levels. What happened at the schoolhouse might never have come to light if not for the death of Pat Tillman.

DUNCAN HUNTER SR: I don't disagree with you that the Army screwed that thing up. But yeah - and obviously, they covered it up.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: And that interpreter we've been wondering about? We finally get a name.

DUANE JOLLY: So I was a staff sergeant at the time. And I had, you know, my two soldiers. And then my interpreter was Shihab.

SMITH: And Shihab...

JOLLY: Yeah.

SMITH: ...Was he - he was an Iraqi national?

JOLLY: He was, yeah. Yeah, he was.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: TAKING COVER is created and reported by us - Graham Smith and Tom Bowman. Our producer is Chris Haxel. Robert Little is the editor with help from Kamala Kelkar. We want to take a moment to say we appreciate the feedback we've been getting, and we invite you to review the show. Give us a rating. And to hear our next episode early, sign up for Embedded+ at plus.npr.org/embedded. Or find the Embedded channel in Apple. You'll be supporting our work, and you'll get to listen to the entire season sponsor-free. That's plus.npr.org/embedded. And if you want to get a hold of us directly, I'm gsmith@npr.org and on Twitter at @GPublic.

BOWMAN: And I'm tbowman@npr.org and on Twitter at @TBowmanNPR. We had production help from Nic Neves. Our music comes from Rob Braswell (ph), Peter Duchesne, Brad Honeyman (ph), the Humpmuscle Rolling Circus and the Pomeroys (ph). Sound designed by Josh Rogosin and Graham, with help from Nic. This episode was engineered by Josh Newell and Maggie Luthar. Our really good researcher is Barbara Van Woerkom. We'd like to thank Lisa Gray and Josie Lenora plus Robert Covill (ph) and Maurice Roper (ph). We've had additional editorial input from Liana Simstrom, who is the Enterprise Storytelling Unit's supervising producer, also from the supervising editor for Embedded, Katie Simon, as well as Christopher Turpin and Andrew Sussman.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

Episode 06 Cover-Up

APRIL 27, 20236:00 AM ET

GRAHAM SMITH, HOST: Before we start, we'd like to thank you for listening and ask you to do us a favor. Go ahead and give the show a rating. Write a review. And word of mouth is the most important way of spreading the news about this investigation. Tell your friends to listen. Also, you should know that this podcast deals with war and the consequences of war. You will hear descriptions of violence and explicit language.

TOM BOWMAN, HOST: Previously on TAKING COVER...

JOHN TOOLAN: Echo Company was angry. They were angry. I mean, I sensed it. And so you need to investigate as quickly as possible because, you know, you can only rip a guy's heart out so many times.

GREGG OLSON: My thoughts are there's a chain of command. And ultimately, the people at the top of the chain of command have to take their decisions.

(SOUNDBITE OF PODCAST, "ZERO BLOG THIRTY")

MATTHEW COTHRON: And you were in one of the more bloody battles of the Iraq War, right?

DUNCAN HUNTER JR: Yeah. We had the only artillery battery in Fallujah. We were it.

JASON DUTY: And I think that the American people finding out that not only did our military get a black eye by a bunch of insurgent terrorists in a wild west city in Fallujah but also we're killing our own guys - I think that was what they were trying to avoid with this.

JAMES CONWAY: Guys, I'm telling you. I just - I'd be happy to sit down. But I don't have any direct knowledge. And I'll be honest. I don't remember it even as the commandant. So, you know, shame on me, I guess.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Now, any time you start talking about friendly fire, there's one name that always comes up - Pat Tillman. We've mentioned him, the NFL star who gave it all up to join the Army and was accidentally killed by his fellow soldiers in Afghanistan. And Tillman's case parallels our own - the same year, the same month, the same lies. But it's more than that because Pat's fame and his family's fight for the truth - that's why we know about what happened at the schoolhouse.

SMITH: There's often a military presence at big sporting events. It could be a flyover by fighter jets, the color guard carrying flags. Super Bowl LVII this year in Arizona hit a more somber note.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

KEVIN COSTNER: Pat Tillman knew he could do more. He gave up his NFL career to join the U.S. Army Rangers and ultimately lost his life in the line of duty.

SMITH: What Kevin Costner's script leaves out is that Tillman's death was a horrible accident. Now, the Super Bowl isn't a place for hard truths. It's a spectacle of patriotism. And 20 years later, they're still using Pat Tillman.

BOWMAN: Some things about Tillman's story are well-known. He was a star player and aggressive safety for the Arizona Cardinals.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED SPORTSCASTER #1: He has no place to go. And Tillman throws him down at the 27-yard line.

UNIDENTIFIED SPORTSCASTER #2: And it's all a result of Pat Tillman staying at home.

SMITH: He had a love of country and talked about his family history of military service.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PAT TILLMAN: You know, my great-grandfather was at Pearl Harbor. And a lot of my family is - you know, has gone and fought and wars, and I really haven't done a damn thing.

BOWMAN: So shortly after the 9/11 attacks, he gave up millions of dollars to go to war.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: Pat and his brother Kevin joined the elite Army Rangers, a move that stunned his football coach as well as their family.

Like the 2/1 Marines, the Tillman brothers took part in the initial invasion of Iraq, then, in 2004, Afghanistan. In mid-April, the convoy Pat was in heard gunfire and explosions as it exited a narrow canyon. Pat and the others left their vehicles and climbed up a ridge. He took cover with another ranger and an Afghan militia fighter behind some rocks to keep watch over a following convoy of troops from his unit, including his brother.

BOWMAN: But when this group emerged from the canyon, they mistook Tillman and the others for Taliban. They killed his Afghan comrade and kept shooting even as he hollered, I'm Pat Tillman. I'm Pat Tillman. Three of their bullets struck him in the head. The other ranger lying nearby screamed for help. Within a day, the Army hierarchy, officials at the Pentagon and the White House knew the truth. Men in Pat's unit who saw what happened were told not to say anything about it, that there was an investigation underway. Nobody told Pat's brother Kevin what really happened.

SMITH: Back in California, Pat's wife and mother got those knocks on the door - Army officers with bad news. They were told Pat was killed in a Taliban ambush. And that story, the story that the most famous soldier in the U.S. Army had been killed by hostile fire, quickly makes the news.

ROBERT SIEGEL, BYLINE: This is All Things Considered from NPR News. I'm Robert Siegel.

MELISSA BLOCK, BYLINE: And I'm Melissa Block. A former professional football player who left the NFL to join the Army has been killed in action in Afghanistan. Two years ago, Pat Tillman walked away from...

TOM GOLDMAN, BYLINE: According to Pentagon sources, 27-year-old Army Ranger Pat Tillman was killed last night when his patrol was ambushed in southeastern Afghanistan near the border with Pakistan.

SMITH: But, of course, just like with the Shuders and the Zurheides, the story the Tillmans were told, the story we all were told - it wasn't true. I'm Graham Smith.

BOWMAN: I'm Tom Bowman. This is TAKING COVER from NPR. There are a lot of reasons the military and the administration would have wanted to keep this news from the public. April 2004 may have been the worst month of the entire war. President Bush's press conference in mid-April started with a list of the many crises - the growing insurgency in the battle raging in Fallujah, rising violence in Iraq's south. The first question raised an ugly parallel.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

TERRENCE HUNT: Thank you. Mr. President, April is turning into the deadliest month in Iraq since the fall of Baghdad, and some people are comparing Iraq to Vietnam and talking about a quagmire. Polls show that support for your policy is declining and that fewer than half Americans now support it. What does that say to you, and how do you answer the Vietnam comparison?

GEORGE W BUSH: Yeah, I think the analogy is false. I also happen to think that analogy is - sends the wrong message to our troops and sends the wrong message to the enemy.

SMITH: And then by month's end, it gets even worse. This story breaks on "60 Minutes" - Abu Ghraib.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "60 MINUTES")

DAN RATHER: Americans did this to an Iraqi prisoner. According to the U.S. Army, the man was told to stand on a box with his head covered, with wires attached to his hands. He was told that if he fell off the box, he would be electrocuted.

SMITH: The humiliation, the sexualized torture of Iraqi men by American soldiers, both female and male, led to widespread anger among Iraqis. The country is coming apart. In the midst of this, there's a power vacuum that's leading to the rise of Al-Qaeda there, an organization that long had a safe haven in Afghanistan but whose presence was never known in Iraq during the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. Increasingly, the two wars are becoming one, what the Bush administration calls the global war on terrorism.

BOWMAN: For weeks after Pat's death, his family had no reason to doubt the Army's story. Pat was killed by Taliban fighters as he hopped out of his vehicle in that canyon in Afghanistan.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

RENEE MONTAGNE, BYLINE: In San Jose, Calif., yesterday, several thousand people turned out to honor Pat Tillman.

BOWMAN: The memorial was a patriotic spectacle that seemed more about burnishing support for the war than comforting the family. ESPN carried it live. California's first lady, Maria Shriver, spoke.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MARIA SHRIVER: Forty-three years ago, in his inaugural address, my uncle, President John F. Kennedy, who was speaking for his generation, made a suggestion to all generations to come. Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country. By your deeds, by the choices you made, Pat, you and so many other young Americans have lived those words.

BOWMAN: And the Army made up an entire story about Pat fighting off the Taliban so his fellow rangers could get to safety, a fiction at the heart of the Silver Star citation a friend unwittingly read to the crowd. We'd read all about this in Jon Krakauer's biography of Tillman, "Where Men Win Glory." But the thing is Pat was so famous, and so many guys in his unit knew the real story - an explosive story - it all started to fall apart after just a few weeks.

JOHN HENDREN, BYLINE: The Army initially said he was killed while leading troops in battle. Months later, Army officials acknowledge what they suspected within hours of his death - that he was killed by the so-called friendly fire of his fellow rangers. Regulations require...

BOWMAN: Pat's mom, Dannie, talked to NPR about her frustration.

DANNIE TILLMAN: They could have said that we don't know. We're doing an investigation. But what they did is they made up a story. That's not a misstep, and that's not an error. They made up a story. It was presented on national television. And we believe they did that to promote the war.

SMITH: The more we talked with people involved in the Marine friendly fire, the more people kept bringing up Pat Tillman, the more frustrated we became at the stonewalling from the military, the more we felt like we had to talk with Pat's mom, Dannie. In part, it was because her success in uncovering the lies told by the Army led directly to our story and the Marines. But also, she became an expert in this kind of cover-up. Maybe she could help us understand what was going on.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: We'll be right back.

What did I do? Are you Dannie?

D TILLMAN: I am.

SMITH: Hi.

D TILLMAN: Oh, hi. You're Graham. I just...

SMITH: It's so nice to meet you.

D TILLMAN: ...Texted you. Hi.

BOWMAN: Hi. Tom Bowman.

SMITH: This is Tom.

D TILLMAN: Hi, Tom.

BOWMAN: Very nice to meet you.

D TILLMAN: Nice to meet you. I parked, like, a mile away.

SMITH: Oh, no.

BOWMAN: Oh, that's too bad.

SMITH: We met Dannie at a hotel cafe near where Pat grew up in San Jose. She remembered back to that big memorial service. The whole family was still in shock, still believing the Army's initial story about how Pat died.

D TILLMAN: So we pictured him literally being shot right at the vehicle. I mean, we thought he'd got out and he got shot. That's how we pictured it for weeks. And then we didn't hear the made-up story that they gave until we went to the memorial. And I don't - I had nothing to do with that memorial. I don't know how it came about.

BOWMAN: But soon after, Dannie got a call from a local newspaper reporter.

D TILLMAN: He asked me what I thought about what - the latest news on Pat or something like that. And I said, well, I don't know what you're talking about. And he said, well, that Pat was killed by friendly fire. And I just said, well, I don't have anything to say about it, and I hung up.

BOWMAN: Dannie talked to her son Kevin, who served with Pat. He told her they'd been lied to. The Army had just broken the news to Kevin that Pat was killed by soldiers in his own platoon. Soon, Dannie received a visit.

What was your reaction?

D TILLMAN: Well...

BOWMAN: What was on your mind?

D TILLMAN: Just the incompetence. You know, just the leadership was just so poor.

BOWMAN: But did you think it was intentional as opposed to...

D TILLMAN: I didn't at first. I don't think anybody did. But later on, me more than anyone thought it was intentional.

BOWMAN: But why?

D TILLMAN: Propaganda, just simply propaganda.

SMITH: Just like in the case we're investigating, the families weren't told the truth. Rob Zurheide's widow, his parents, Brad Shuder's parents - nobody told them there was an investigation, not for three years. But in the case of Pat Tillman, killed just 10 days after the two Marines, the Pentagon's story quickly fell apart.

D TILLMAN: I think they thought that people are going to remember this, and then the rest is just going to fade. No one will really care. And they just didn't think that we'd pursue it because I think they thought that by us doing that, it would diminish Pat. But nothing could diminish Pat to us. And so who cares what other people think? So I don't think that occurred to them at all.

SMITH: Working with lawmakers and staff on Capitol Hill, the family forced new investigations and hearings for years, including hearings into whether the military was hiding other friendly fire deaths. And it's because of their stubborn demands that all the branches appear before members of the House Armed Services Committee three years later, in June of 2007, to explain family notification policies.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

JOHN MCHUGH: How long does that normally take?

MIKE DOWNS: Well, it took...

MCHUGH: And I'm not talking about that one case.

DOWNS: Sir...

MCHUGH: Normally.

DOWNS: We only have two cases to reference.

MCHUGH: Well...

DOWNS: And the most recent one in 2005 took one month and four days, sir.

MCHUGH: Which is beyond the legal standard. My point is we don't really have a consistent policy. And I understand...

SMITH: That's Marine Corps Brigadier General Mike Downs being grilled by Representative John McHugh.

BOWMAN: The members were right to be skeptical. Here's something you should know. Three officers who were in Fallujah and had direct knowledge of the friendly fire at the schoolhouse were in key positions three years later in Washington, when this hearing took place. One was General James Conway, now the commandant. Remember; he's the one who agreed with Mattis that no one would be punished. Another, Brigadier General John Kelly, who'd been a top aide to Mattis, was head of legislative affairs, which helps prepare Marine officers for exactly this kind of testimony. And working for Kelly, the battalion commander who would approve the mortar mission, Gregg Olson. Olson told us he was working on the Senate side, so he didn't know much about the House hearing. Generals Conway and Kelly - they wouldn't talk with us. All of them were well-informed about the friendly fire that killed Brad Shuder and Rob Zurheide. But in his first hearing, Downs never mentions it, even when pressed by the subcommittee chair, Congressman Vic Snyder.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

VIC SNYDER: Yeah. But does the fact that there have been only two confirmed incidents of friendly fire - does that make - cause you to step back and say, or anyone senior to you, that perhaps our system is not turning up every incident, given the great involvement of the Marine Corps in some very difficult fighting from the early days of the war, and you only have two confirmed incidents of friendly fire?

DOWNS: Well, I would - in order to respond to that, I would have to question the performance of duty of individuals that knew something to occur or suspected something to occur that didn't follow the mandate. And I'm not prepared to do that. I haven't been over there, and I just wouldn't idly question the integrity or performance of...

SNYDER: I mean, you heard - you're very much aware that the Army went back and found incidents in which they have had to adjust those conclusions based on the facts that have come out about other cases.

DOWNS: I guess also, Mr. Chairman, I've found that if somebody is suppressing bad news, they don't get to do it forever. There are too many individuals involved. And it sometimes takes time, but bad news surfaces.

SMITH: Bad news surfaces. Well, it doesn't happen all on its own. In this case, the members of the committee pressed. Staffers had already learned that there were more cases that the Marines weren't admitting to. The members demanded the Marines go back, check their records and return. A month and a half later, they're back for another hearing.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

DOWNS: On behalf of the commandant of Marine Corps, I apologize for our errors. We thank the subcommittee for this opportunity to correct the record.

BOWMAN: You've heard this tape before, this belated admission of the friendly fire in Fallujah, this promise the wounded would get the truth. It only came about because of the efforts of the Tillman family, grieving and angry over the loss of Pat and the cover-up.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

DOWNS: I spoke to Lieutenant General Mattis, the commander of Marine...

BOWMAN: As for the Tillmans, they finally got an apology, indirectly, from a general who was in Pat's chain of command, Lieutenant General Stan McChrystal. That came in 2009, five years after Pat died, when McChrystal was testifying before the Senate seeking a promotion to be the top officer in Afghanistan and getting grilled about the Tillman case.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

STAN MCCHRYSTAL: We failed the family. And I was a part of that, and I apologize for it. And I would say that there is nothing we can do to automatically restore the trust which was the second casualty of 22 April. The first was the loss of a great American. The second was a loss of trust with a family and wider than that with some additional people. I will say that...

SMITH: McChrystal says it was all a mistake - pointed to the heavy fighting in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Pat's mother doesn't buy that. She says it was deliberate. It was propaganda trying to sell the war. After that hearing, McChrystal asked to meet with her. She declined.

BOWMAN: So what - which - what do you think, all these years later, about all of this?

D TILLMAN: Well, I think it's a culture of - there's several cultures of - political culture, the military culture - of covering up, of lying, of being afraid to admit to a mistake. And that's pervasive.

BOWMAN: But in your case, you were able to push people to get to the bottom of it. You were able to have hearings. In the case we're working on, these people aren't famous.

D TILLMAN: Right. Course, we got a lot of attention because Pat's name allowed that. And they couldn't get any answers. You know, it's like, we were fortunate. So I also felt like we had an obligation in a way, you know, to bring this to the forefront.

SMITH: Dannie also doesn't accept the explanation that commanders are looking out for the families when they tell them that their loved ones died in battle fighting the enemy, weaving heroic narratives that just aren't true.

D TILLMAN: To me, they just lie on a regular basis, and I don't know why they do that because it's very damaging. They don't understand that families will accept the truth. But when you lie to them, you're basically gaslighting them. I mean, it's really traumatizing. And you trust them. You want to trust them. And we felt most comforted by the military after he died, then come to find that they were sort of our enemy because they were, you know, lying and using Pat and using us, and yeah. So they really need to stop doing that. I don't know why they think it helps. It doesn't. It doesn't help anything.

BOWMAN: Vic Snyder was a congressman you heard grilling General Downs in 2007. He's now retired, and he's proud of the committee's oversight work.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: The hearings had forced the Marines to tell the truth about the deaths of Zurheide and Shuder.

SNYDER: Perhaps the inaccuracy would have persisted for all time for those families but for those hearings. The problem is if, literally, a process kind of jacks them around for months and years in a way that it doesn't get resolved or leads them down a wrong path, and then more information comes out that takes them in a different direction, that is - that's not good for that family. But that kind of thing is not good for us as a country.

SMITH: We told the congressman about the initial tip, the notion that this whole thing was covered up because Duncan Hunter was chairman of Armed Services at the time of the incident.

BOWMAN: What do you think about that?

SNYDER: Well, two things - maybe it now is making sense to me why you're digging around on this after 15 years or more. But I - this is the first I've heard of anything like that. I don't have any comment to make.

BOWMAN: Well, there were at least two other people who might be able to shed some light on our tip - the Duncan Hunters, father and son. And you know what? We finally tracked down both of them. That's ahead on TAKING COVER from NPR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Duncan Hunter Sr. left Congress to run for president in 2008 - a brief run. He also wrote a book, "Victory In Iraq." There's a lot of detail about that first battle of Fallujah. We told him we wanted to talk about the war and that period in specific...

SMITH: Check, check, check, check.

BOWMAN: ...Set up a time to talk at his hotel when he was in D.C. for meetings.

You know, everything - we're focusing on 2/1...

SMITH: We sat in the hotel's empty restaurant - started talking about that key moment in Fallujah back in 2004 when the Marines were ordered to halt their offensive.

BOWMAN: And that's when they were told to stop.

DUNCAN HUNTER SR: Yeah.

BOWMAN: And then you said your son...

HUNTER: They were moving them back. Yeah.

BOWMAN: And you said your son called...

HUNTER: Yeah.

BOWMAN: ...On the SAT phone.

HUNTER: Yeah.

BOWMAN: Tell us about that.

HUNTER: Yeah. Well, yeah, well, I was - I got a call from him while we were - while I was chairing the Armed Services Committee. And they said - I said, well, hey, we'll take this later, and said (laughter) it's

from Fallujah. So when we got on the phone, he was - you know, he's very straightforward. He was cussing all politicians in general and said...

BOWMAN: Including you?

HUNTER: ...We'd just been ordered to stop the attack. What the hell's going on? And - yeah.

BOWMAN: What did you say to him?

HUNTER: I said, that can't be. I said - and I said, call me back in a couple hours.

SMITH: Well, his son was right. The offensive stopped.

HUNTER: At that point, the Arab press pivoted from, we're being brutalized by the Marines, to, we just beat the - we're beating the Marines. Right? So they - so you ended up with every al-Qaida in the world wanting an I was in Fallujah T-shirt.

BOWMAN: Right. So we talked to a lot of folks, a lot of the Marines from 2/1. They're hunkered down.

HUNTER: Yeah.

BOWMAN: And then there was that incident on the 12 of April.

HUNTER: Well, now, which one are you talking about?

BOWMAN: There was a mortar that fell into the schoolyard.

HUNTER: You're going to have to take a look at the book and refresh me on that.

SMITH: No, it's not actually in the book. Well, this was...

HUNTER: There was a lot of mortars falling. What - you had civilian casualties?

SMITH: No. No. Actually, this is one of the stories, as we've been talking with the guys from...

HUNTER: OK.

SMITH: ...2/1...

HUNTER: Yeah.

SMITH: ...Who - you know, it's not mentioned in your book, and it's not mentioned in Bing West's book or really anywhere. It's sort of a lost story. But as it turned out, it was a friendly fire.

HUNTER: Don't know about it. Yeah. Yeah.

BOWMAN: And your son - because he was with 2/1 - did he ever mention it?

HUNTER: No. I mean, my memory of Fallujah is the one that I just described to you. Yeah. Yeah.

BOWMAN: And somebody told me about this several years ago. We started looking into it. You know, they said, you know, Tom, you've been to Iraq a lot. Did you ever hear about this friendly fire incident? I said, well, no. I spent a lot of time there and never heard about this. So we were told it was an investigative report. So we asked the Marines.

HUNTER: Yeah.

BOWMAN: You know, we filed a FOIA. We said, you know, do you have this report? And they couldn't find it. So then we were like, well, maybe there's nothing there. And then we find the relatives of those killed. And, you know, one of them had the report, gave it to us. So we started reading the report.

HUNTER: Yeah.

BOWMAN: And I assumed you would kind of know about it because your son is mentioned because he was in the operation center, and he wrote a statement for the report.

HUNTER: Oh.

BOWMAN: So I assumed he would have told you about that.

HUNTER: May have. But, I mean, that's...

BOWMAN: OK.

HUNTER: When you're taking these buildings and you got bullets going every which way...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

SMITH: And so one person had said that they wouldn't be surprised if they buried it because they didn't want to piss you off.

BOWMAN: Do you buy that? Does that make sense to you that they would have...

HUNTER: You know, I don't buy being sucked into an incident that I know nothing about. Yeah.

SMITH: So he didn't shut us down, but he maintained he really just didn't know anything about it. He did, however, have thoughts about friendly fires in general.

HUNTER: And, you know, I don't think that makes the heroism of the people who were in the fight any the less heroic. The friendly fire was a little - has always been a little bothersome because I think, to some degree, I'm thinking - and I'm thinking of the Arizona football player who was killed...

BOWMAN: Pat Tillman.

HUNTER: ...With friendly fire. Yeah, it - to some degree, it's used to stigmatize the person who was killed by it. Right? His death was turned into a review of the system that kept this hidden for so long. It was - and so that's a call by the press. It's sensationalism. It sells Coca-Cola. But - no, but I thought that subordinating his heroism to the here's-how-we-screwed-up story was disserved.

BOWMAN: But I think - and I was covering the Pentagon at the time. I remember that very well.

HUNTER: Yeah.

BOWMAN: And I remember shaking my head, talking to people at the Pentagon at that time saying, why don't you guys just come out at a briefing at the Pentagon? You have the chairman of the Joint Chiefs come out, call a press conference and said...

HUNTER: Yeah.

BOWMAN: ...We had a double tragedy today.

HUNTER: Yeah.

BOWMAN: Pat Tillman, who - you're right - gave away everything to serve his country, was killed by his own troops. It was horrific, and I'm going to tell you the story about what happened that day. He went back to help his comrades, and he was killed. It's a tragedy. They messed it up by - you see?

HUNTER: See; I don't disagree with you that the Army screwed that thing up. And obviously, they covered it up. My point is that's true, but the real tragedy is - at least from my perspective, is that that story became the overwhelming story, and the bravery of Pat Tillman was subordinated to it.

SMITH: We thanked him for his time and asked if he would pass word to his son that we wanted to talk.

HUNTER: He hadn't talked to the news media for a long time.

SMITH: We were talking to...

HUNTER: Just remember...

SMITH: What we didn't know during this interview but learned soon after - Chairman Duncan Hunter visited Iraq early summer of 2004, visited Fallujah, where he had a meeting with General James Conway just two days before Conway signed off on the Mattis decision to drop punishments - makes it a little harder to swallow that he never got wind of this thing. But anyway, we gave him our business cards.

BOWMAN: Pass those on to your son.

HUNTER: And I've got your stuff here.

SMITH: Yeah.

HUNTER: OK.

SMITH: Yeah. Thanks again.

BOWMAN: Hey. Thanks again. Have a good meeting here, too.

SMITH: Well, what do you think of that?

BOWMAN: Interesting.

SMITH: Hard to figure. No idea - never heard anything about it. Duncan never mentioned it.

BOWMAN: No way the kid's going to call us.

SMITH: No.

BOWMAN: Good call. The cards, the request to talk, even the letter we had hand-delivered to Duncan Hunter Jr. by a mutual friend, a reporter who had covered the Fallujah deployment - nothing worked. Several times, we even dropped by the father's house in the San Diego foothills. That's where Hunter Jr. lives these days.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: All right. So, Tom, where are we at, man?

BOWMAN: Well, we're finally going to knock on Duncan Hunter's door and see what we get.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: How can I help you?

SMITH: Oh, howdy. Is Duncan around?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: No.

SMITH: He's not here today?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: I'm not his keeper, dude. I have no idea where he's at or what he's doing.

(SOUNDBITE OF DOG BARKING)

SMITH: OK. OK. Sorry.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: He stays up there.

(SOUNDBITE OF BELLS CHIMING)

SMITH: S***. I stepped in dog s***.

BOWMAN: See if second time's the charm.

Hey, how are you doing?

SMITH: Hey, how you doing?

BOWMAN: Congressman?

JOHN HUNTER: Pardon? No, I'm just - I'm his brother.

SMITH: Oh, hey. You look very similar.

BOWMAN: Tom Bowman with NPR.

SMITH: Graham Smith. Good to meet you.

BOWMAN: We're actually looking for Duncan Jr. Is he around?

J HUNTER: No, they're up - they're in Texas. They're driving back now. Sorry to disappoint you with the lower Hunter.

(LAUGHTER)

SMITH: Do you have a good number for him, if we could give him a call?

J HUNTER: I don't have his number, but I'll just have him call you.

SMITH: OK.

J HUNTER: OK?

BOWMAN: Awesome. We appreciate it.

J HUNTER: OK. Thanks.

BOWMAN: Have a good one.

J HUNTER: Talk to you guys later. Bye-bye.

SMITH: He seemed nice. Don't have his number, but I'll talk to him - tell him you called on the number that I don't have.

(SOUNDBITE OF DOG BARKING)

BOWMAN: Third time here. Third time's the charm.

SMITH: Hopefully.

(SOUNDBITE OF DOG BARKING)

SMITH: We really wanted to give him a chance to respond to the things we'd learned from the report and been told along the way.

Maybe we should bail soon anyhow. All right. Going to turn this off for now.

So we decided we had to go one more step. He had a court date coming up - child support adjustment. We asked our colleague Steve Walsh to go there. He waited at the courthouse door - got Hunter's attention as he went through security.

(SOUNDBITE OF FOOTSTEPS)

STEVE WALSH, BYLINE: Mr. Hunter, I'm with National Public Radio.

DUNCAN HUNTER JR: Yeah.

WALSH: I'd like to ask you about your involvement in the 2004 friendly fire.

DUNCAN HUNTER JR: Hey, it's nice of you to be here - came all the way to El Cajon Court.

WALSH: Can you tell me how you're involved - about your involvement that day?

DUNCAN HUNTER JR: The Marine Corps's handled this. They've looked into it. I was a lieutenant.

WALSH: Can you describe what you did that day? You were in the fire control room.

DUNCAN HUNTER JR: There was no fire control room. It was an apartment complex in Fallujah.

WALSH: And so what did you do that day?

DUNCAN HUNTER JR: I did artillery.

SMITH: He did artillery. Well, our colleague was told he couldn't record inside the courthouse, so that was the end of that. Hunter wouldn't talk about his role plotting the mortar mission that ended up killing people at the schoolhouse. He wouldn't talk about how the families were so badly treated and whether it might have had to do with his father's position.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: When James Mattis overturned the punishments for this friendly fire, he blamed the fog of war. But when you look at the whole scope of this disaster beyond the battlefield, it seems the haze obscuring all of it smells more like smog than fog - man-made.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: So three years into this investigation, what do we know? We know the officers realized immediately this was friendly fire, but everyone was told not to talk about it until investigation was completed. The families of Robert Zurheide and Brad Shuder were told the men died from hostile fire. We know the investigation wrapped up just four months later, and General Mattis handed a copy of the investigative report to the battalion commander who approved the mortar mission - told him to read it. But neither Mattis nor any other senior officer made sure the families got a copy.

We also know that, just as that source told me in a D.C. whiskey bar, the son of a powerful U.S. politician was involved in the deadly screw-up. Duncan Hunter Jr., son of the House Armed Services Committee chairman, was in Fallujah, was there in the room at the fire control center that night - one of three men handling the mortar mission.

SMITH: We know the battalion commander, another of those three men, somehow revised the story given to the JAGMAN investigator, but we don't know why. He initially told us that the mishap started when Hunter pointed to the wrong target on a map. He later revised that story saying that upon reflection, he realized he got it wrong. Regardless, we know Hunter Jr. was never cited for his role in the deadly mistake. The battalion commander and Hunter said he was still in training - bird-dogging. Although another officer disputed that, saying Hunter was, in fact, doing the job.

And we know that after the explosion on June 28, 2004, Congressman Duncan Hunter visited Fallujah and met with General Conway. Two days later, on June 30, Conway signed off on General Mattis' decision to overturn the punishments, effectively closing the book on the whole incident.

BOWMAN: We know even the leaders of Echo Company were not told when the investigation was completed as called for in the report, and it appears no lessons were learned from it. We know April of 2004 was a terrible month for the U.S. war effort, and nobody wanted another bad news story. Even three years later, the Marine Corps initially failed to disclose this incident to Congress. We know when they were dragged back to Capitol Hill a second time, they promised to share the results of the investigation with all of the men who were seriously wounded in the explosion. They broke that promise.

SMITH: We know the Marines, at first, told us they couldn't find a copy of that JAGMAN investigation. It took years of litigation and a federal judge forcing them to look again, and in more places, before the Marines finally coughed up a copy. And when they did turn over the JAGMAN, it was highly redacted, withholding all of the information about punishments being overturned.

BOWMAN: We know General Conway, who became commandant, said he couldn't even remember this case - a tragedy other generals told us was the worst Marine-on-Marine friendly fire in decades. And then he refused to sit down for an interview, just like James Mattis.

SMITH: And we know that nobody was punished for the failure to notify the families and the wounded.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: We don't know if the Marine Corps will ever make this right. We asked General David Berger, the current commandant of the Marine Corps, whether the Marines would investigate this situation, whether anyone would reach out to the families of the dead to apologize and whether the wounded men would receive full copies of the investigative report so they could at least put it in their medical files. Maybe those things will happen.

SMITH: And with all of that in mind, consider the case of Pat Tillman, the case everyone knows was covered up. Duncan Hunter Sr. himself said as much in our interview. Even there, there's no smoking gun. There was no punishment. Nobody ever took the blame or really - as Pat's mom, Dannie, told us - ever accepted responsibility for lying to the families and to the American public.

BOWMAN: Yeah, but no one ever told you why it was covered up.

D TILLMAN: No. Or who...

BOWMAN: Or who did...

D TILLMAN: ...Or where it originated. Nobody - we don't know where it originated. No, we don't.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: And if the mother of the most famous soldier in the country can't get that, maybe it was always too much to expect the military to do the right thing for the families of Robert Zurheide and Brad Shuder.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: But we're not finished because remember - there was a third man killed in the explosion at the schoolhouse - an interpreter. He's not mentioned anywhere in the investigation, but as much as the official accounts may want to erase the very existence of that interpreter, we can't. We can't ignore him because the guys - they remember him. They insisted he not be forgotten.

BOWMAN: We weren't sure if he was a U.S. citizen, whether he was working for a contractor or the U.S. military directly. We didn't know if his family had ever been contacted, although even if they were, it's doubtful they got the straight story. For years, we wondered if we might find this guy's family, explain things.

SMITH: We'd figured out that this interpreter was in the schoolhouse that day not working for the Marines but for a U.S. Army PsyOp team. That's psychological operations. Basically, their job was stuff like dropping leaflets, urging locals to clear the city or taunting the insurgents over loudspeakers into exposing their positions so that snipers could take them out. Breaking enemy morale. PsyOp is part of special operations, so not super easy to find. But after yet another late-night search, I discovered a Facebook page with shoulder patches used by different units. And from comments on the page, I deduced who was in Fallujah at that time. This patch had a gorilla shouting into a megaphone. One call led to another, and that's how I ended up on the phone with one of the PsyOps soldiers who was actually in the school with the Marines, one of the guys who'd been with the interpreter, a recently retired sergeant major named Duane Jolly. He was out in Hawaii.

DUANE JOLLY: Hello.

SMITH: Hey. Is that Duane?

JOLLY: Yeah.

SMITH: It's Graham.

JOLLY: Oh, hey. Hey. OK.

SMITH: Thank you so much for talking with me - for agreeing to talk with me.

JOLLY: Yeah.

SMITH: So let me tell you a little bit about me and...

JOLLY: Yes, please.

SMITH: ...What I'm trying to do because you don't know me from Adam, but...

JOLLY: Right.

SMITH: ...I'm a producer at National Public Radio, and...

JOLLY: Yep.

SMITH: ...I've been working for, actually, a couple of years to try to understand really what went down.

It was strange. We'd basically come to accept that we'd never crack the mystery of this third man. But here we are, finally talking with someone who knew him. Duane was a staff sergeant then, the PsyOp team leader.

JOLLY: And I had my two soldiers, and then my interpreter was Shihab.

SMITH: And Shihab...

JOLLY: Yeah.

SMITH: ...Was he - he was an Iraqi national?

JOLLY: He was, yeah. Yeah, he was.

SMITH: Can you tell me about him? Did you know his family?

JOLLY: Oh, yeah. I know that his - I don't know exactly where his family lived but somewhere in Baghdad. I know they were a Shia family. He was quite devout. In fact, there were some PsyOp messages that he just wouldn't do because he didn't want to curse in it, you know?

SMITH: Yeah.

JOLLY: Like they - the Marines are going to f*** you in the a** or something like that, you know, just something s***ty just to - and he was like, no, no, no, I can't say that. He just - you know, he was like, look. I want to help you in every way I can, but I'm not going to lower myself, you know, in the eyes of my God, basically...

SMITH: Yeah.

JOLLY: ...Was kind of his thought, you know?

SMITH: Right.

JOLLY: And, you know, liked his chow, loved his family and just, you know, pretty gentle, devout dude. He had a - in fact, I still have it. I still have his prayer stone at my house. He had a prayer stone that, you know, the Shias - they use this - whenever they are praying, they use a stone, and they put their head on that when they bow down. His dad was killed in the Iran-Iraq war, so he was the breadwinner for the family. And I think he had one brother and maybe two sisters.

BOWMAN: Jolly and his team had been in Fallujah for months by the time the Marines arrived, but they moved around a lot between units. Late afternoon, April 12, they linked up with Echo Company.

JOLLY: And the Marines brought us back to that school after everyone else had gotten there.

SMITH: Right.

JOLLY: Yeah. We - I mean, we literally had, like, dumped our gear. And the two other guys are smokers, so they decided to go have a cigarette.

SMITH: And did Shihab go with them, or was he with you?

JOLLY: So Shihab - he was always hungry. So Shihab went - there was a pile of MREs on the - it would have been the eastern side of that courtyard. So that's - Shihab was over there digging through the MRE box. He was a pretty devout guy, so I'm sure he was looking for one that didn't have any pork in it.

SMITH: Right.

JOLLY: But that's when the mortar hit.

SMITH: Did you know - I mean...

JOLLY: No.

SMITH: ...You couldn't have known it was a mortar at the time, right? Just something blew up?

JOLLY: Yeah. Well, I mean, I didn't know - I picked myself up against the wall because it threw me against the wall. And, you know, everything was, you know, like, dirt. You know, I couldn't see anything, and my ears were ringing, and I wasn't sure what had just happened. I just knew that I was against the wall, and I was trying to breathe and thought, oh, well, that's not good. And then I kind of went forward towards the courtyard because I want - you know, I mean, I knew my guys were there a little bit ago. So I'm trying to find my guys. And I had found - I walked forward and I could hear people yelling to my left.

SMITH: His whole team was down. Shihab took a ton of damage to his legs, his back, his head. The two others, like so many of the Marines, had been cut down. They were evacuated through the firefight. Dwayne rode to the field hospital with Shihab, who was incoherent, he'd lost so much blood.

You must have felt like you were on Mars. I mean, you show up, and within 20 minutes, you're the last man standing out of your team.

JOLLY: Yeah.

SMITH: What...

JOLLY: Well, what really sucked was not only - all right, so the worst - and this is the part, you know, really f***s me in PTSD. And the worst part about this whole thing for me is that when we were hiring Shihab, you know, I went to Baghdad to pick a new interpreter. And I don't remember why, what happened to the old one, but I needed a new interpreter. And Shihab didn't want to go to Fallujah because he knew that Fallujah is a bad place. And plus, Shihab was a Shia.

SMITH: Yeah.

JOLLY: And Fallujah is full of Sunnis. And he didn't want to go, but I told him - I said, you know, don't worry, buddy. You know, if people start shooting at us, you just get behind me. I guarantee you I'll take care of you. And that's the part, you know, in therapy that I really have had a hard time with and still do. I'm powering through it now, but I'm trying not to think about it too much - is the fact that I told him he'd be fine, and then he gets killed. And that really f***s me up pretty bad.

SMITH: Yeah.

JOLLY: Well, of course, nobody can catch a mortar. I mean, it's not like I could jump in front of that. But still, I felt like, you know, he trusted me. And, you know, he was a great guy, and he's still dead.

Yeah. They medevaced him to Baghdad. And so it was a couple of days later, after this particular - once I dropped him off at the hospital, I went and found my - it's not his fault. But, you know, I went and found my detachment sergeant. And when he opened that door, I, like, threw - I had someone's bloody boot, and I, like, threw it at him. I'm like, everybody's in the f***ing hospital. So, you know, when you're that much emotion, you know, just venting on somebody. So anyway, I went and found him. And I was like, give me some f***ing cigarettes - because I had stopped smoking after Kosovo. I was at Kosovo in '99. And - but I needed smokes that day.

SMITH: You know, I - my hope has always been to find out about the interpreter who was with the PsyOp team and see if I could find his family and find out, like, if they had ever learned what happened and maybe to get to Baghdad at some point.

JOLLY: Man, if you do, you have to tell me. I would be so happy just to, you know, tell them, you know, what he meant to me and how awful, you know, I guess, or how - I don't know - just how much his memory still lives within me every single day. Every single day.

SMITH: I can hear it, man.

JOLLY: Yeah. So, in fact, at one point 10 years ago or so, probably - you know, I was not nearly as composed as I am now, so - and I was drinking a ton, and I was an absolute mess. I used to - I would drink till I'm blackout drunk, and then when I wake up in the morning, I'd see where I'd looked up his name to see if I could, you know, find his family or whatever. I'd see his name, like, you know, in my history, search history on the computer.

SMITH: Yeah.

JOLLY: But I don't remember doing it. You know, I just saw it. And, like, ugh. And then that makes it worse, and then I'd drink some more. And that - you know, I'll always carry that guy. You know, real quick, when I was really having a hard time, my mom - she's married to a Vietnam vet. And I had called him. And, you know, I was crying, and I was like, bro, you know, is this s*** ever going to go away? He was like, nope. And 17 years later, he was not wrong. Doesn't go away.

BOWMAN: I'm not surprised at all by Duane's obvious pain, his love for Shihab because interpreters become like brothers in a combat zone. They don't just help you navigate the language or the culture, avoid taboos. They also can save your life. There are times when interpreters are heroes. I know. Our interpreter and fellow journalist in Afghanistan, Zabi Tammana, would tell us what roads to avoid, what villages. Too dangerous, he would say, after getting off the phone with his contacts. That all ended on a stretch of highway in western Afghanistan nearly seven years ago outside the city of Marjah. We were ambushed, and Zabi desperately tried to save our friend, NPR photographer David Gilkey. Both of them lost their lives.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: Having finally found his identity, knowing Shihab was from Baghdad, we knew we'd have to find his family, go visit them. Duane shared Shihab's full name, but we don't want to disclose that here, for reasons you'll come to understand in our next, final episode. We reached out to NPR's Iraqi reporter there, Awadh al-Taei, sent him a picture Duane shared with us. Awadh worked for months, searching databases, visiting neighborhoods to ask around, going to the morgue, to hospitals, looking for records. And we can't overstate how much he worked it.

BOWMAN: He was pretty sure he'd identified the neighborhood where they lived. He asked around in shops, did anyone know Shihab, his family? Finally, at a small food store, the manager says he might know one of Shihab's brothers. He makes a call. Soon, a nervous young man approaches. Awadh told us about it over the phone.

AWADH AL-TAEI, BYLINE: I told him, hi, I am a journalist, and I am looking for someone, his name, and this is his picture. He told me, yes, this is my brother picture. And, you know, his tears start. And he tells, from where you get this picture? I told him, from a journalist based in U.S., and we need information about you and your brother we might met or something like this.

BOWMAN: This young man and his siblings - they had no idea exactly how Shihab had died. They'd been told by a U.S. officer that their brother was killed by terrorists.

SMITH: Next time, in the final episode of TAKING COVER, Tom and I head to Baghdad. There's one more lie we want to set straight, one more family that's been left in the dark for too long.

ARKAN: I don't care. So why he didn't tell us? I don't f***ing care about any f***ing thing. Why he lied to us? That I want to know.

BOWMAN: And we go to Fallujah, the city where all of this started, to visit the schoolhouse and meet some of the people on the other side of the American occupation.

UNIDENTIFIED SHEIKH: (Through interpreter) The Americans occupied that school. People start thinking and make meetings, how to make the resistance groups to fight the Americans because people - and start to educate people and recruiting them to join the resistance because you think people - these resistance group are saying the Americans came by force. We will force them by force to leave.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: TAKING COVER is created and reported by us, Tom Bowman and Graham Smith. And we should note we work at NPR. We are not commercial media. We are not state-sponsored media. We work for you, the listeners. And the single most important thing you can do to support our work is to give to your local public radio station, become a member, get involved.

Among the other people putting their shoulders to the TAKING COVER wheel - our producer Chris Haxel, also our editor Robert Little, along with Kamala Kelkar.

SMITH: We have production help from Nic Neves. Our music comes from the Humpmuscle Rolling Circus and The Pomeroys. Sound design by Josh Rogosin and me, with help from Nic. Our engineers are Josh Newell and Maggie Luthar. Our fact-checker is Barbara Van Woerkom. Special thanks to CSPAN this week for archival tape and to Lulu Garcia-Navarro and Eric Westervelt, as well as Didi Schanche, Larry Kaplow and Caroline Drees. If you'd like to share your thoughts with us directly, I'm gsmith@npr.org, and Tom is tbowman@npr.org. That's T-B-O-W-M-A-N. We had additional editorial input from Liana Simstrom, who is the Enterprise Storytelling Unit's supervising producer, also from the supervising editor for Embedded, Katie Simon, as well as Christopher Turpin and Andrew Sussman.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

Episode 07 The Gulf School

MAY 4, 20236:00 AM ET

TOM BOWMAN, HOST: A note before we start - this program deals with war. You'll hear descriptions of violence and strong language.

GRAHAM SMITH, HOST: Previously on TAKING COVER...

(SOUNDBITE OF MONTAGE)

DANNIE TILLMAN: There are several cultures - political culture, the military culture - of covering up, of lying, of being afraid to admit to a mistake.

DUNCAN HUNTER SR: Having just returned from Iraq last week and visited the areas of Mosel, Balad, Tikrit, Ramadi, Fallujah and Baghdad, I can report that there are many more good things going on in that country to restore freedom and provide a modicum of democracy to the Iraqi people.

ELENA ZURHEIDE: And then the two that were killed.

SMITH: Three killed.

ZURHEIDE: There were two. I was told...

SMITH: Two Marines. There was an Army interpreter.

ZURHEIDE: Really? That's...

SMITH: Yeah.

ZURHEIDE: ...News to me.

SMITH: My hope has always been to see if I could find his family and maybe to get to Baghdad.

DUANE JOLLY: Man, if you do, you have to tell me. I would be so happy just to tell them - I don't know - just how much his memory still lives within me every single day.

(SOUNDBITE OF ENGINE SPUTTERING)

BOWMAN: In the middle of Baghdad, there's a warren of narrow walkways with stalls and little shops. The air has a sweet scent. There's food and ice cream and bags of spices and nuts.

SMITH: Skateboards and soccer balls and T-shirts.

AWADH AL TAIE, BYLINE: Yeah. It's mostly secondhand. Yeah.

BOWMAN: Clusters of older men sip tea and chat, haggling over antiques. They call it the thieves' market.

SMITH: I could use a pair of sneakers, to tell you the truth.

BOWMAN: Oh, go with those gold ones.

SMITH: Yeah.

BOWMAN: Back in 2007, when Graham and I were last in Baghdad together, we could never walk around here among the locals or, really, anywhere else - too dangerous. Kidnappings, shootings, even truck bombs - they happened all the time. We're clearly not locals, so we got some curious glances, even a couple of smiles, but no hard looks.

AL TAIE: So a shortcut.

SMITH: OK.

BOWMAN: We're here with Awadh al Taie from our Baghdad office and NPR photographer Claire Harbage to finally talk with the family of Shihab, the third man killed in that friendly fire, the one left out of the investigative report. This was his hometown. After we got his name from one of the soldiers, Awadh found his family. We'll meet one of his brothers tonight.

AL TAIE: We may finish our tour inside the market.

SMITH: We emerge into Baghdad's Tahrir Square, Liberation Square.

AL TAIE: Up there, there is the T walls. We call it the borders between protesters and the security forces.

SMITH: There's a heavy police presence. It's always been a hub for demonstrations, most recently protests over poverty and government corruption. A couple dozen cops in black body armor watch over the traffic, sweating in the sun.

AL TAIE: So many protesters being killed and wounded, in this place especially.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: This country - it's kind of a dysfunctional democracy these days. Factions bicker over the creation of a new government. They fight about oil revenues and representation. There aren't running gun battles in the streets anymore, but Iranian-backed militias do occasionally fire a rocket towards the fortified Green Zone, government buildings and foreign embassies.

BOWMAN: We're walking across a bridge now over the Tigris River. And back when we were here, our life was in a one-block street. And at each end, there were these huge, concrete blast walls with a guard at either end with an AK-47. It's just so weird to walk around Baghdad openly through the thieves' market and down the street around Tahrir Square.

SMITH: And we'd hear bombs all the time. I mean...

BOWMAN: Not only bombs. You'd hear small weapons fire, like, a block away. I remember once there was a fight between one former government official and the current government official's militia. And we called and asked about it. They said, oh, yeah, these guys are just fighting - no big deal. Watch out for the bike - another lane.

SMITH: What Americans call the Iraq War may be over, but not what it unleashed - bitter sectarian tensions, broken families and cities still struggling to rebuild. And don't forget there are still more than 2,000 American troops in Iraq. Some partner almost every day with Iraqi forces to go after the remnants of ISIS. So that war on terror - it lives on, no end in sight. I'm Graham Smith.

BOWMAN: And I'm Tom Bowman. This is TAKING COVER from NPR. We told you from the beginning that we're working to learn about the lives lost and why the families and the wounded still don't

know the truth about what happened to them on the worst day of their lives. But there's still one more family, an Iraqi family that never even heard a rumor about the friendly fire. They want to know what happened. We're here to tell them the truth.

SMITH: OK - check one, two.

Awadh has arranged for Shihab's youngest brother, Arkan, to come to our hotel. It's kind of an audition. He wants to meet us. We hope that he'll help set up a meeting with the whole family so we could hear about Shihab - get a sense of who he was and tell them what we'd learned about his death.

Over here would be better, I think.

BOWMAN: All right.

SMITH: It'll be a little quieter.

CLAIRE HARBAGE, BYLINE: Hi, I'm Claire.

SMITH: Claire, yeah.

HARBAGE: Nice to meet you.

SMITH: So you speak English?

ARKAN: Yeah. It's not too good.

SMITH: I don't speak any Arabic, so...

ARKAN: OK.

SMITH: Can we go over in the corner here, and we'll chat?

ARKAN: Yeah.

BOWMAN: We tell Arkan we heard a little bit about Shihab from the guys who were at the schoolhouse.

SMITH: And we also want to be able to share with you what we've learned about the incident because I'm sure that you never really got...

ARKAN: No.

SMITH: ...Much information.

ARKAN: Yeah. No. They didn't tell me anything about that accident.

BOWMAN: As Arkan listens, even in this upscale hotel, he's edgy, glancing around the lobby to see if he's being watched. And he's clearly worried about neighbors seeing Westerners visit the family home.

SMITH: So when you get the phone call saying that Awadh was looking for Shihab's brother, what did you think?

ARKAN: Scared too much.

BOWMAN: You didn't think it would be good news.

ARKAN: Yeah. That scare me. Just till now, I'm scared. I'm terrified.

SMITH: Even right now, talking to us?

ARKAN: Even right now.

SMITH: I understand. Yeah.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

SMITH: Well, I'll tell you, we don't bite (laughter).

ARKAN: No. It's not about that. No. I'm scared about the situation.

SMITH: Yeah.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: Arkan says his family has had to move more than a dozen times since Shihab was killed, fearful of those neighbors and of rumors. In so many of America's conflicts, interpreters are essential. But like journalists, they operate in a liminal space, a sometimes uncomfortable existence on both sides of cultural boundaries. Military interpreters in Iraq, Afghanistan, back in Vietnam - they might save soldiers' lives. They've doubtless saved many local lives, too. Yet for all of the friction they can ease, they're often seen as sellouts or traitors by their fellow countrymen. That's why we're not using Shihab's surnames. Even today, his family is in danger because of his work with the Americans. As a teen, Arkan was badly beaten by militia members because of it.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: He won't commit to the visit, says he'll need to talk with his older sister. Maybe the interview isn't going to happen. He tells us they live in an apartment behind a mechanic's garage. If we're going to come by, it will have to be after dark, after the workers are gone. We'll have to keep a low profile.

SMITH: The next morning - good news. Awadh tells us they've worked it out. We're back on track. The family will meet us that evening - Arkan, his older sister, who's the matriarch of sorts, and a younger sister, Aliaa.

BOWMAN: The neighborhood we're headed to - early in the war, it was pretty much a no-go zone, a mixed neighborhood of Sunni and Shia that descended into sectarian clashes. Even in late afternoon, the sun is beating down. Awadh takes us to a little shop for sodas, here in what used to be a launching area for rockets fired toward that Green Zone.

SMITH: I got to say, your Coca-Cola's pretty good.

AL TAIE: Yeah. It's called Baghdad...

BOWMAN: With the end of the day, it should be safe for us to go to their home. We get word the workers have left.

HARBAGE: So we're going in as low-key as possible. I put my camera away.

ARKAN: Not yet. Just keep the camera down.

HARBAGE: No, no. Yeah. I put it in my bag.

ARKAN: Yeah. Yeah. No problem.

(SOUNDBITE OF PARKING BRAKE)

SMITH: Good to go?

AL TAIE: Yeah.

BOWMAN: We slip into the auto repair shop. Arkan is there smiling, and he leads us between a tool bench and a white car with its hood up, out a back door and along a dimly lit walkway. We come to another building in the back of the garage. He invites us into a bright sitting room - whitewashed walls with high ceilings, couches set along three sides.

Hi, Tom. Very nice to meet you.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Nice to meet you too, boss.

SMITH: We ask Arkan to shut off the noisy air conditioner - it's a radio thing - even in the Baghdad heat.

But it can wait for a minute if you want.

And as we're settling in and they're beginning to bring in cups of tea and trays of baklava, the older sister, Nidhal, is talking with Awadh. He's explaining why we're here, and they're becoming more and more animated.

AL TAIE: (Speaking Arabic).

SMITH: Nidhal wants Awadh to ask us a question.

AL TAIE: Does he killed by American shelling?

SMITH: That's kind of at the part of the story here.

AL TAIE: Yes.

BOWMAN: It was a mistake. It was an accident.

SMITH: We want to tell them all about this.

AL TAIE: I tell them by a friendly fire.

BOWMAN: Yes. Yes.

AL TAIE: Yeah?

SMITH: Yeah. But this is part of what we want to actually talk about with them.

AL TAIE: (Speaking Arabic).

BOWMAN: Nidhal is shocked.

NIDHAL: (Speaking Arabic).

BOWMAN: She says Shihab's death caused them incredible hardship. She had to work as a housekeeper, take care of sick people to make ends meet.

AL TAIE: (Speaking Arabic). She's very angry because she said, I suffer a lot after Shihab's death.

BOWMAN: We told her we would share everything we'd learned.

Is it OK?

AL TAIE: They will listen from us...

BOWMAN: And we're OK?

AL TAIE: And then they will tell us about Shihab.

BOWMAN: OK, good.

AL TAIE: If they have any questions, they should ask us about it.

BOWMAN: OK.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: We tell them about the Marines who were killed, about the friendly fire, about our visit with Elena Zurheide, that she shared the report with us, and about our journey up the chain of command.

SMITH: We tell them about how for years, we couldn't get a name for Shihab until we found the PSYOP team, and about how the men who bound Shihab's wounds remember him talking about them - his family.

You know, before he went unconscious, he was talking about his sister and how proud he was of his sister and how much he cared about his family and how much he loved them. And I also wanted to say that...

NIDHAL: (Sniffling).

SMITH: Even though the report didn't say anything about the Iraqi interpreter, it was very important to these Marines and to the medics who were there that everybody remember there was a third man killed. They wanted to make sure nobody forgot him, but we didn't know anything about him.

BOWMAN: They hand us a small stack of photographs.

ARKAN: So he has the same photos that - they have the same photos that Duane sent.

BOWMAN: Right. That's a great picture.

Nidhal says their mother died when the kids were little. Their father was an intelligence officer. But eventually, he became disillusioned with Saddam's regime and came under suspicion. She says he was assassinated by Iraqi agents in Dubai. That left the children - four boys, two girls - on their own. In this family of orphans, the two eldest became like mom and dad. Nidhal worked to help Shihab finished college. Then he became the main breadwinner. After the invasion, he signed up as an interpreter for the Americans.

NIDHAL: (Through interpreter) When the Americans first arrived, we all loved them. Shihab loved them. He used to bring us all to the train station to see the U.S. soldiers. So that was part of it. But also, we desperately needed money.

SMITH: Tell me a couple of stories about things you remember that you love about him. He raised you.

ARKAN: Yeah. He's like a father, not like a brother. He's a, like, friend. (Speaking Arabic).

SMITH: Arkan says Shihab taught him taekwondo and chess. He remembers Shihab used to win even after taking most of his pieces off the board. He also showed them woodworking, made them little toys, and he taught them all how to swim. He'd take the whole family down to the river.

ALIAA: (Speaking Arabic).

BOWMAN: The youngest, Aliaa, jumps in.

ALIAA: (Through interpreter) He told us we had to study. He had a small library. He would help with homework, and if we finished a book, he would let us watch cartoons on his computer or from a DVD.

SMITH: And then they tell us something surprising, sort of tragic. It has to do with one of the other brothers, Ammar. After Shihab was killed, Ammar went to work for the Americans.

ARKAN: (Speaking Arabic).

SMITH: He says 90% of the reason why Ammar became an interpreter was because of the grudge he held against the insurgents.

BOWMAN: So he joined the army to avenge...

AL TAIE: To avenge from the insurgents, from the terrorists.

BOWMAN: Because he assumed his brother was killed by insurgents.

AL TAIE: Yes. Yeah.

BOWMAN: They say Ammar moved to the States more than a decade ago. They think he's still working with the American military, but they haven't heard from him for two years.

SMITH: I also wanted to say, just to all of you, I mean, it's very awkward to tell you the things we've learned because it's not good news. It's - but we feel like you deserve to know the truth.

NIDHAL: (Through interpreter) Shihab was making good money. He said he would buy us a house one day, but I remember the last time I saw him in early April. We stayed up so late talking, but then when he told me he was going to Fallujah, how the situation there was escalating, an ominous feeling rose up.

BOWMAN: What's the last thing you said to him? Did you say be careful? Did you say, I'm worried about you? Do you remember what you said to him?

NIDHAL: (Through interpreter) I told him this might be our last farewell. Three days after he went away, I had a dream. Shihab was there, and he told me, they are sending me to Arizona. And I asked him, why Arizona? And he told me because it's very beautiful over there. Well, he went away to Fallujah and a few days later, neighbors told us American soldiers arrived in armored vehicles knocking on doors. They were looking for Shihab's family. Nobody would tell them where we lived. Then a friend of his, Fadi, came to say Shihab was killed.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

NIDHAL: (Through interpreter) He said we should go get his body from the morgue.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Nidhal says shortly after the family buried Shihab in the holy city of Najaf, she and the oldest brother were asked to go to the Green Zone to meet an American general. She doesn't remember his name.

NIDHAL: (Through interpreter) The general was very heartbroken for Shihab. He cried when he first saw me. He offered his condolences, and he gave me this certificate.

BOWMAN: They hand the document to us. It recognizes Shihab's service to the Marine Corps. The last line - Major General Mattis would like to thank you for your sacrifice and devotion in helping the great nation of Iraq.

NIDHAL: (Through interpreter) Yes. And he gave me $9,000 and handed me his clothes and belongings.

SMITH: At that time, families of U.S. service members received a death gratuity of $100,000, and most got a quarter-of-a-million-dollar insurance payout. Shihab's family tells us they got $9,000 cash and a certificate of appreciation. What they didn't get was the truth.

BOWMAN: And again, I just want to be doubly sure - the general definitely said it was a terrorist, an enemy rocket.

ARKAN: (Non-English language spoken).

AL TAIE: So he said the terrorist launched a rocket and caused the death of Shihab.

BOWMAN: But nothing about what happened and how it happened.

AL TAIE: Never. No - any details about when and why.

ARKAN: Just to say he killed by terrorist, not friendly fire.

SMITH: We hand them a copy of the investigative report. Arkan can read English, but we've had the summary translated to Arabic.

So I know this is a lot to read. And you didn't even get a chance to read that part. Do you want to take a second to read it?

We explained the essence of the findings in the report.

Nobody ever said that it was done on purpose. Nobody was trying to hurt their Marines. What they said was it was just a mistake, and it landed in the wrong place. But there's no doubt whatsoever that it was definitely an American mortar.

ARKAN: Why he didn't tell the truth?

SMITH: Well, that's the question.

BOWMAN: Well, here's the thing. We should start it...

ARKAN: I don't want anything.

BOWMAN: Well, we should...

ARKAN: Why he didn't tell the truth? I don't care. So why he didn't tell us? I don't f***ing care about any f***ing thing. Why he a liar to us? That's I want to know - why he's a liar to us.

BOWMAN: Well, that's what I was going to say. You guys were lied to. The American families were lied to, told the same story, that it was hostile fire. It was enemy fire. It was terrorism.

SMITH: But your question, Arkan, is exactly the question we've been asking. Why did they lie to the families?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: Remember, the Zurheides and the Shuders - they'd heard rumors almost immediately, and the Marines eventually told them it was friendly fire. Shihab's family - they've been living with this lie for nearly 20 years.

NIDHAL: (Through interpreter) I always liked the Americans. For me, the American soldiers were above everything, especially the Marines. When Shihab first worked with the Marines, you could never imagine how much I loved them. If an Iraqi spoke badly about an American, I would hate the Iraqi and love the American. Ever since they got rid of Saddam, I had this deep faith that those soldiers were more honorable than Saddam and Iraqi politicians because the Americans rid us of agony and of untold suffering. I felt that way up until this moment. But now it turns out that I was such a fool. I was so wrong.

ARKAN: Is that country of freedom?

SMITH: It's a screw-up. I mean, this is part of why we're here. I mean, I don't think there's any difference between Iraqis and Americans. And you deserve to look at the report and know what happened. They should have told you the truth.

BOWMAN: We talk for a while longer, answer what we can, tell them how Duane Jolly said he wonders whether one day he could visit them, return Shihab's prayer stone.

ARKAN: He's welcome.

BOWMAN: They also ask if we have any advice how they might approach the American government for help. Living in poverty in Baghdad - it's not easy.

ALIAA: (Through interpreter) When we lost Shihab, we lost both spiritually and financially. So what can the American side offer now to compensate us? We are not asking too much. Maybe if they can just find a job for me or for Arkan.

SMITH: We have to tell them we're not really sure. It seems like that would be a question for the U.S. embassy. And we're surprised when, despite all the anger and disappointment, Arkan tells us he still wishes he could move to the United States someday.

It's very special to be here with you and with your family. And we appreciate you having us into your home.

ARKAN: (Speaking Arabic).

SMITH: And thank you for the delicious tea and for the sweets.

ARKAN: (Speaking Arabic).

SMITH: Excellent.

ARKAN: (Speaking Arabic).

SMITH: Thank you.

NIDHAL: (Speaking Arabic).

ARKAN: (Speaking Arabic).

NIDHAL: (Speaking Arabic).

ARKAN: (Speaking Arabic).

NIDHAL: (Speaking Arabic).

AL TAIE: We would like you to stay here with us. And we will make dinner.

BOWMAN: We thank them again, but we've intruded enough, and we still have work to do sorting out the logistics for our next stop - Fallujah.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: The drive from central Baghdad to Fallujah is just over 30 miles.

See these crossed swords up ahead?

SMITH: Yes.

The highway cuts through a flat expanse, a patchwork of fields and long stretches of desert.

It's pretty - it doesn't - there's not, like, a dust storm, really, today. But everything looks a little dusty.

AL TAIE: Yeah.

SMITH: Yeah.

BOWMAN: And I just saw the highway sign said, Abu Ghraib, this way.

SMITH: You saw that just now?

BOWMAN: Yeah.

SMITH: We have to stop at a couple of checkpoints. There's a long line of cars and trucks on the side of the road. Soldiers look over our papers, pop the trunk.

BOWMAN: Reporters need to get government permission to enter Fallujah. There are still traces of ISIS, and it's on the route Iranian militias take to get to Syria. But we really want to visit the schoolhouse, see for ourselves this place that's become so important, almost mythical, in this story. And we wanted to talk with people who are on the other side of the conflict - the occupied.

SMITH: Awadh arranged a meeting with a couple of sheikhs, local tribal leaders from the Jolan neighborhood where the schoolhouse is. They also taught at the school back in the day. We'd heard so much from the Marines about the violence, the insurgents at the tire barricade. What was it like for the Iraqis who lived there?

BOWMAN: What does that sign say there in front of us?

AL TAIE: Welcome in Anbar province, the city of reconstruction and peace.

BOWMAN: Yeah, it looks a lot different.

SMITH: Yeah, it looks a lot different.

AL TAIE: This is a new thing.

BOWMAN: Buildings going up.

AL TAIE: This is the new municipality building for Fallujah.

BOWMAN: A lot of construction here.

AL TAIE: Yes.

SMITH: Fallujah's nickname is the city of mosques, and the minarets rise high above the buildings. Some are bright with white and blue tiles laced with gold script, but some are still heavily damaged from tank and artillery rounds.

AL TAIE: So this building and this building - their owners refuse to renovate it.

HARBAGE: And this one, too, up to the right?

AL TAIE: Yes, yes, yes.

SMITH: And did they leave them kind of partially still damaged so people remember?

AL TAIE: Yeah.

BOWMAN: Look at this minaret up here.

SMITH: The pockmarked and broken towers loom over the city.

AL TAIE: We are very close to the school.

SMITH: So we're in the Jolan neighborhood.

AL TAIE: We are in Jolan neighborhood.

BOWMAN: You got people walking around, a little girl with a backpack heading to school, it looks like.

AL TAIE: This is the school.

SMITH: This is the school.

AL TAIE: Yeah.

BOWMAN: Right here on the left.

AL TAIE: Yes.

BOWMAN: Wow - a nice, pale pink wall.

SMITH: This is the school.

BOWMAN: Look at the little girl in the picture on the side there. Yeah.

SMITH: Wow.

BOWMAN: It's hard to believe that Marines were doing block-to-block battles right around here.

SMITH: Yeah.

BOWMAN: It's so peaceful - looks like any normal kind of town. You would get no sense there was any war here.

SMITH: And this is safe. We can get out of the car and...

AL TAIE: Yes, yes.

SMITH: ...Walk around.

AL TAIE: Let me talk to the manager.

BOWMAN: Awadh heads over to the school to talk with the headmaster, see if he can help us get in.

SMITH: I guess it's OK to just get out. I mean, I feel - it's like I feel like I shouldn't. And then I'm like, well, here we are. What are we doing? But I don't want to draw attention. I don't know.

BOWMAN: Right in front of the school, we're walking down the street where the Marines said the insurgents were setting up a stack of tires. They were going to set them on fire and use the smoke as cover to move around. It's probably 200 yards or more from the school.

SMITH: No, I'd say much less. I mean, if you look at the map and you look at the grid, it's - when we're talking about just this road right here, it's...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

SMITH: ...Maybe not quite a football field.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #1: (Non-English language spoken).

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD #2: (Non-English language spoken).

BOWMAN: Awadh calls us back over. He's by the gate with the headmaster. He says we can come in but just for a quick tour.

SMITH: Hello. Hi.

AL TAIE: (Speaking Arabic).

SMITH: Nice to meet you.

BOWMAN: Nice to meet you, sir.

UNIDENTIFIED HEADMASTER: Nice to meet you.

(CROSSTALK)

BOWMAN: Oh, here we are. Ah. This is the old...

AL TAIE: (Speaking Arabic).

BOWMAN: In the courtyard here, we see benches. And...

SMITH: Did this used to be open?

AL TAIE: This is the new design. It was - this one used to be open.

BOWMAN: So this all was open.

UNIDENTIFIED HEADMASTER: Yes. (Speaking Arabic).

BOWMAN: We have little backpacks that are painted on the wall and balloons with numbers on them and...

UNIDENTIFIED HEADMASTER: (Speaking Arabic).

BOWMAN: So this is where there was so much death and destruction. Now we see little girls with...

SMITH: Yeah.

BOWMAN: ...In their school uniforms. They're kind of curious about who we are.

AL TAIE: (Speaking Arabic).

BOWMAN: It's amazing, isn't it?

SMITH: It's amazing.

AL TAIE: (Speaking Arabic).

SMITH: Such a beautiful school. It's really so sweet.

BOWMAN: What does does this say?

AL TAIE: Respect the teacher.

BOWMAN: That's what it says on the wall?

AL TAIE: I respect my teacher.

BOWMAN: We look out a window at the back of the school over a sprawling cemetery - a jumble of headstones and a dusty hill rising up to a mosque.

SMITH: So that minaret was one of the places that gave these guys so much trouble.

BOWMAN: Oh, they had fighters up in the minaret?

SMITH: Yeah.

We've heard about this cemetery, the terror of running across it through a firefight. It's hard to imagine.

BOWMAN: Oh, there's a funeral going on now. You can see them carrying the coffin, a group of people off in the distance.

SMITH: Anyhow, they don't let us stay for long. And we have to get to that meeting with the sheikhs. One of their houses is just down the street, a couple hundred yards past where the tire barricade was.

Wow. What a beautiful room. This is so nice. Thank you.

BOWMAN: This is the home of Sheikh Sheikh Awwad Muhammad Abdullah Al Ma'adheedi.

AWWAD MUHAMMAD ABDULLAH AL MA'ADHEEDI: You are welcome. This is your house.

SMITH: Thank you so much.

MA'ADHEEDI: And feel free. And you are not a guest. You are the owner of this house now.

BOWMAN: Another sheikh, a little younger, sits nearby. He was the guy who led us into the school, Sheikh Nawwaf Jabbar Hussein Ali. Sheikh Ma'adheedi reclines on a sofa. He has a trim white beard and is dressed in traditional robe with a headscarf. He's retired. Back in 2004, he was headmaster of what we've always just called the schoolhouse. We learned its real name, The Gulf School.

SMITH: We're wondering if you can talk to us a little bit about what it was like when things changed here, when the Americans started coming for the people of this neighborhood, Jolan.

MA'ADHEEDI: (Through interpreter) When the Americans came, it was a huge problem. From the beginning, nobody here could accept foreigners seizing Fallujah. Despite the horrors of Saddam, the people needed security and peace, not killing and destruction. No Arab would tolerate humiliation and injustice.

BOWMAN: You said when the Americans came, it was a problem. What was the problem when the Americans came?

MA'ADHEEDI: (Through interpreter) Well, for example, a cousin of mine who was supportive of Americans got stopped with his family at a checkpoint. He couldn't understand the U.S. soldiers, and they couldn't understand him. He decided to drive away. And the soldiers opened fire, hitting the car, and killing his eldest son, just like that. They shattered the life of a once secure and peaceful family. And then, just five years ago, my cousin himself was killed by ISIS.

SMITH: He remembers his sons being arrested for talking back at a checkpoint, neighbors' houses being raided at night, his brother giving a neighbor's daughter a ride to the hospital and then coming under fire. The girl was hit, and she's been paralyzed ever since.

BOWMAN: He says other relatives were shot at from helicopters, tossed into the American prison at Camp Bucca, hundreds of miles away.

SMITH: The other sheikh, who was the assistant headmaster back then, nods in agreement.

NAWWAF JABBAR HUSSEIN ALI: (Through interpreter) We used to hear that the Americans were educated and civilized people, but it turned out they were barbaric. At first, we hoped they would bring us prosperity. But instead, they did nothing but occupy schools and government buildings. And the attitude became ubiquitous among the people that unless you fight against the Americans, the Americans will never leave the city.

BOWMAN: Did you know any of these people who were part of the resistance? Did you think it was a good idea? Did you support the resistance?

ALI: (Through interpreter) We didn't have a choice. The resistance rose up from the people of Fallujah themselves. Even I was part of the resistance at first. But eventually, infiltrators joined the ranks. Me and my neighbors decided to retreat because al-Qaida was taken over, and the picture became really fuzzy. The real resistance fighters had to withdraw.

BOWMAN: So things got much worse after they hung the contractors. The Marines came rushing in. Did you stay here, or did you did you leave?

ALI: (Through interpreter) So each of these options was too bitter to swallow. Had we chosen to stay, it would have been a tragedy to live at the mercy of mortars and missiles. And had we chosen to flee, then we would have lost a place we called home. And we would have been doomed to the unknown.

BOWMAN: In the end, the sheikh and his family did flee the city - stayed with relatives in a rural area hours away.

SMITH: How did you feel when you heard that your school where you had spent so much time teaching children had become, like, a military...

MA'ADHEEDI: (Through interpreter) It was painful because it meant life there had come to a standstill, that there would be no more education. All aspects of life had stopped. So there was only killing, displacement, injustice and persecution. When I returned to the school at the end of the year, there were shell fragments, broken doors and shattered glass.

SMITH: One of the things that we've learned, Sheikh, was that the Americans at one point made a mistake and they dropped a mortar on their own Marines inside the school, and they killed three of their own men.

MA'ADHEEDI: (Speaking Arabic).

ALI: (Speaking Arabic).

AL TAIE: (Speaking Arabic).

BOWMAN: One last thing. So two Americans were killed when the mortar went into the courtyard and exploded. Two Americans were killed - also an Iraqi interpreter. And we met with the family of the Iraqi interpreter. They were all lied to by the Americans. The American families were lied to about what happened. They were told it was insurgents. The Iraqi interpreter's family were told it was terrorists that killed them.

MA'ADHEEDI: (Through interpreter) The Americans should have faced the truth with courage and honor. It would be understandable if you lied to your enemy, but how could you deceive and lie to your own people, to your friends? This is totally unacceptable.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: We're doing a story on the American Marines who were here at this school in fighting. But what do you think about the American politicians that decided to invade Iraq? Did they ruin the country?

ALI: (Through interpreter) Yes. They ruined and destroyed our country. We had to flee the city because of what they did. And beyond that, they brought al-Qaida here. Al-Qaida was based in Afghanistan when they attacked the great towers in New York, but the Americans brought them to our city. And they did the same with ISIS. Had there been earnest and good intentions toward us, the Americans would have apologized for what they did and try to offer something for the people to compensate for all the harm they inflicted. They could have built public parks, schools or even repair the power grid to restore electricity.

MA'ADHEEDI: (Speaking Arabic).

SMITH: Thank you.

MA'ADHEEDI: (Speaking Arabic). (Laughter).

SMITH: They, too, ask us to stay and eat, but, again, we don't want to impose.

Ask not for whom the bell beeps. It beeps for us. They want us to put our seatbelts on. Yes. Beep, beep, beep, beep.

(SOUNDBITE OF SEATBELTS CLICKING)

BOWMAN: Our final chapter, just ahead on TAKING COVER from NPR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

JASON DUTY: Well over half way. No, no, no. Well over halfway. I mean, really...

SMITH: This journey ends where it began - Horno Ridge, the hill near San Diego, where 2-1 Marines remember their dead.

DUTY: A rutted mess. It's going to take us a little while to get up there...

SMITH: Only this time, we're not hearing about it. We're hiking it.

DUTY: Right? I mean, you can see the crosses. You can almost throw a football over a mountain.

SMITH: And it's rugged - loose dirt and stones, so steep at times you have to use your hands.

Tom, this is stiffer than I thought it would be.

BOWMAN: Yeah. You and me, both, man.

Horno is on Camp Pendleton, so you need a security pass and an escort. Jason Duty agreed to bring us up. He's still on active duty, a master chief.

DUTY: How are you doing, Tom?

BOWMAN: All good.

DUTY: Heck yeah.

BOWMAN: We can hear a huge training exercise in the distance. Hundreds of Marines firing machine guns and artillery. This is Jason's fourth time climbing the hill. He tells us about bringing up some junior corpsmen who worked for him just a few years ago. There were eager to deploy with the Marines. He wanted to give them a taste of how tough it would be.

DUTY: It's easy to be gung-ho in your apartment in San Diego or in your work center doing medical sick call, when you get to go home at the end of the day or go down to the Gaslamp and party it up or whatever. It's different when you go into a job knowing that you're going to bury some of your friends.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: After almost two hours, we come out on top. The clearing is maybe 60 yards wide. What began as one cross on a lonely hilltop has grown into a small forest of memorials as the Pendleton Marines deployed and redeployed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We've walked past dozens of crosses and other memorials. There's a star of David for one fallen Marine, a Buddhist shrine for another. Each of them is surrounded by mementos, dog tags, ammo cans, empty beer bottles, labels bleached in the sun.

BOWMAN: What runs through your mind when you come up here?

DUTY: What's that?

BOWMAN: What runs through your mind when you come up here?

DUTY: Most of the time, how bad that f***ing hill sucks. I miss some of these guys. I was friends with some of these guys. I lived with some of these guys. You know, I drank beers with a lot of these - when I did. I quit drinking some months ago completely, but I was one of the ones who'd come up here and bring some beer with me and drink with them. Even though they're not physically here, I'd pour one out for the homies, you know?

BOWMAN: At the far side of the field, we come to the spot where Jason and his comrades, Rob Zurheide, the chaplain, raised their monument nearly 20 years ago. This cross towers over the others, and we see around the base what Marines and sailors carried in their rucksacks over the years.

SMITH: You know, one of the things Radetski talked to us about was that a lot of the guys will kind of bring up, like, a heavy rock or some kind of a thing...

DUTY: Yep.

SMITH: ...To sort of, I guess...

DUTY: Yeah.

SMITH: ...Share in the suffering to some extent.

DUTY: That's what all those are. Yeah. Tons of sandbags with names painted or markered on them, rocks, pictures. And I think this is a good central place - when guys die overseas, they're buried all over the world, all over the country, all over, you know, different states, home cemeteries back in Montana or Ohio or wherever. But this is a place where you know you can always come visit your brother. They're here.

BOWMAN: So it's been 20 years of war.

DUTY: Yeah.

BOWMAN: I mean, it's for the most part done now.

DUTY: For us, anyway. Not for them.

BOWMAN: Right.

DUTY: But yeah, for us.

BOWMAN: When you look back in the 20 years - all you've been through, all these guys have been through - I mean, what did it achieve when you...

DUTY: Nothing. Not a f***ing thing. Because you don't go to war on an ideal. You don't go to war - and that's why we - and we never declared war on anybody. We went in there to be the world's police. And, again, I'm speaking from my own personal opinion here. We went in there without a clear objective in mind. And I think the intentions were good. But, again, the road to hell is paved with good ones.

SMITH: Can I ask you a question? Like...

DUTY: No.

SMITH: When I was listening back...

DUTY: Yeah. Yeah.

SMITH: I don't know whether this is true, but it seems like sometimes, when you were talking about the fight, you kind of hesitate for a second before you say, like, the bad guys or the enemies - like, that's a little too simplistic of a way to think about whoever was on the other side of the thing, OK? I just wonder - like, we - so we went, and we met his family, and we ended up going to Fallujah. We went to the schoolhouse, which is still a schoolhouse. It was full of little girls...

DUTY: Yeah.

SMITH: ...Learning English.

DUTY: Good. And that's one of the things that these guys died for, so the little girls in Iraq could learn at school - to go to school.

SMITH: Yeah. Yeah.

DUTY: And I think that's a noble cause.

SMITH: And we talked with a couple of the people who had been teachers at the school, were sheiks, and they were kind of - they weren't hardcore fighters or anything, but they had maybe even considered themselves to be part of the resistance at a time. And...

DUTY: Yeah.

SMITH: ...They were more like, you know, our neighbors are getting harassed and these things. When you get...

DUTY: When you talk to any of the Vietnamese people from the Vietnam conflict - they were, you know, Viet Cong - VC - the non-uniformed, irregular fighters - they didn't think they were the bad guys.

BOWMAN: As Graham and I walk among the memorials, Jason goes off by himself for a bit. Then, after a while, he calls us from across the clearing to where there's a row of more than a dozen crosses, almost identical.

DUTY: I did just notice that that cross right there by itself is dedicated to that one corpsman, Matthew Soviak, who was killed in - at the airport in Afghanistan. And I think most of these are smaller ones, too, or individual crosses for some of those Marines and sailors - well, sailor - and Marines, too.

SMITH: Jason's talking about the chaotic scene in the late summer of 2021 as the U.S. abruptly withdrew from Afghanistan. Huge crowds pressed around the perimeter gates of the airport in Kabul, people trying desperately to get out of the country. At one gate, August 26, a suicide bomber detonated his vest, killing an estimated 170 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members, including 11 Marines from 2/1. One of the first Americans killed the very first day of the Iraq war and some of the last Americans to die in Afghanistan - they're all here, all part of 2/1.

BOWMAN: We spent some time, look out on the Pacific, finally start the descent. As we hike down, Jason calls us over.

DUTY: So you were asking me earlier about the pause and then the choice of phrasing I use to describe our adversaries over there. You know, 20 years ago, a younger me might have even - might have used some more derogatory terms, maybe even some what we call epithets. Terrorists is always a good word - buzzword to use. But I don't really feel like those guys were terrorists. I don't think the right definition of terrorist works for who we were fighting in Fallujah - the civilian clothed guys. Terrorists attack civilian targets in order to induce panic, fear and terror.

SMITH: Right. It's like a political...

DUTY: Yeah, exactly. Those guys weren't attacking civilian targets. We were in their country, for Christ's sake. The guys who flew the aircraft into the World Trade Center on September 11, those were terrorists. The guys we were fighting in Fallujah, they weren't terrorists. They were - they weren't even insurgents because we'd never pacified them in the first place. They were, in their mind - and I feel that even though I don't like it, it's the appropriate term - they were resistance fighters.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BOWMAN: When we started this investigation, it was all about a tip. But over the years, our journey became more than proving this tragedy was covered up for political reasons. Spending time with the corpsman, the Marines and soldiers, the families and the sheiks helped us see the damage, the heartbreak they all share when politicians in general set off for war.

SMITH: We've been a little anxious that this digging, airing all of this out, might cause yet more trauma to the people who were wronged. But the guys have been listening, and they tell us that hearing one another's raw memories, they realize how much they all needed to tell this story. We've also heard from Brad Shuder's folks who'd been too heartbroken to talk before. They've been listening, too. Glenn and Rosemary wrote to say that hearing all of this helps them fill in some painful blanks.

BOWMAN: They remember the wounded men from Brad's unit, including Carlos and Costello, visiting months after the explosion, raising questions and then three years later, the group of Marines including a general arriving to deliver the official notification - so many officers they couldn't fit at the dining room table. Glenn, he can't forget how the general told them that once he left their home, he had another appointment nearby. He was headed off to play a round of golf.

SMITH: Rosemary wishes she'd told those officers she had more respect for the Marines from Brad's platoon who came, broken as they were, than that general and his entourage.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SMITH: TAKING COVER is created and reported by us, Graham Smith and Tom Bowman. Our producer is Chris Haxel. Robert Little is the editor with help from Kamala Kelkar. We got production help from Nic Neves. We want to take a moment and say we appreciate the feedback we've been getting, and we encourage you to give the show a rating, write a review and tell your friends about it in person, on social media, whatever works.

BOWMAN: We had a lot of help on this episode from Awadh al Taie, Ahmed Qusay, and our colleagues on the international desk, Larry Kaplow and Didi Schanche. Greg Dixon worked the logistics, and Caroline Drees advised on security. We had voiceover help from Mousa Mohammed, Akram Saleem, Rafah Abdulhadi and Israa Al-Rubei'i who also helped translate our recordings from Iraq.

SMITH: Our music comes from Rob Braswell, Pete Duchesne, Brad Honeyman, The Humpmuscle Rolling Circus - hey, Dean Clegg - and the Pomeroys - Pete, Ted Ehlers and Jim Rioux. Sound design by

Josh Rogosin and me, with help from Nic. This episode was engineered by Josh Newell. Our fact-checker is Barbara Van Woerkom.

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SMITH: And finally, thanks to everyone who contributes to NPR stations across the country. Your generosity makes this work possible. If you aren't currently a supporter, please get involved. Cut us a check. And there's another way to help. If you want to support in-depth investigations like TAKING COVER, sign up for Embedded+. It supports NPR's journalism. Plus, you'll get access to future Embedded podcast series sponsor-free, including the new series "Buffalo Extreme," coming in just a couple weeks. Subscribe by going to plus.npr.org/embedded. And thanks if you already have.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)