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## **Part Two: A future unknown**

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A black SUV is rumbling down the gravel path toward base a lot quicker than most vehicles do, but there's no reason to worry yet. The guards stand idly, guns held lazily in front of them, and the machine-gunners stand equally lax behind them.

It picks up speed and now everyone is on alert, guns up, machine gun following the SUV's engine as it races toward the gate.

"Halt!" a guard shouts, putting his hand up to signal the driver needs to stop.

Nothing changes.

Now the SUV is bearing down on them. Someone needs to make a decision. They could shoot but what if it's all a misunderstanding? Not likely—they're not slowing down. But what if we wait too long? Who shoots first? What do we do?

Too late. A man emerges through the sunroof of the vehicle, cocks his arm back and hurls a...snowball?

"How are you gonna react?" asks senior cadet John Ro of the cadet who was just assaulted by snow.

The cadet grabs his imaginary machine gun with both hands, turns it and starts ripping into the SUV with imaginary bullets.

"You're gonna kill him for throwing snowballs?" asks Master Sergeant Jones, a member of the cadre or ROTC teachers.

Everybody cracks up, but Ro has a point to make to the cadets standing around watching the demonstration.

“Do you see how little time you have to react?” he asks. “It’s a life and death situation.”

And it could be. Those snowballs, as Ro points out, could be guns, grenades or missiles. The vehicle, which was full of senior cadets having fun in their final year of college, could have been full of insurgents who had equipped the SUV with a bomb. Or it could simply plow into soldiers guarding a base somewhere in Afghanistan.

Everyone laughs now as cadets force their older classmates out of the SUV with fake guns so they can pretend to search the truck, and why not? The situation right now isn’t serious. And 99 out of 100 times overseas it won’t be serious either. Vehicles will slow down as they approach US military bases, get checked out by the guards and pass without incident.

But that one time something goes wrong could wipe out half of Radford University’s 100 cadets in an instant.

What they learn now, on a gravel path that serves as a makeshift base, squeezed between a muddied soccer field and the softball stadium, could save their lives in a country an ocean away.

What they don’t learn, between English and Geology, while thinking about boyfriends and girlfriends, while deciding whether Wendy’s for a fourth night in a row is a good idea, could kill them.

Today, it’s Ro’s job to make sure there’s nothing these cadets don’t learn.

He paces back and forth walking them through the process of stopping an oncoming vehicle.

Shout. Show. Shoot.

Yell at them to make sure they know you’re there. If they don’t slow down, show them your weapon so they know you mean business. And if they’re still coming just as fast, let them know you’re not bluffing.

Ro, like all ROTC seniors, is nearly a second lieutenant in the US Army, and he acts like one would expect—a combination of authority and college kid.

Looking at Ro, it would be hard not to mistake him for a second lieutenant. His Army Combat Uniform, which looks like pixelated camouflage, is pressed neatly, giving the impression he means business. His hat covers black Oakley sunglasses, which shield his eyes from a bright but cold day. His gloves of a matching color hold a ripped out piece of

notebook paper that he refers to sparingly while teaching his classmates.

Ro gestures to the small crowd as he walks from right to left and back again, breaking down material he has clearly mastered into bite size chunks the young ones will understand.

If someone was watching this on mute, Ro would seem to have completed the transition from cadet to Army officer. But his speech is sprinkled with 'you know' and 'OK?'; signs he is still getting used to instructing a crowd, to teaching a group of people who look up to him.

Cadets are rotating between three stations today, and by the third batch Ro has already eliminated the pauses from his speech. They practice tactics, he practices leadership. Fellow senior Troy Blankenstein told Ro he'd be an awesome ROTC instructor and although Ro balked at first, he's definitely thinking about it—Ro's all about giving back.

Of course, that'll have to be after he gets back from his deployment.

### **Certainly uncertain**

When cadets commission as second lieutenants upon graduation, they understand more about where their lives will take them than almost any other recent college graduate.

For starters, they have a job that pays around \$52,000 a year after factoring in the basic allowance for housing and basic allowance for food that the Army provides. Then within 18 months, when they're promoted to first lieutenants, they'll make about \$63,000. To top it off, new Army officers get 30 days of paid leave per year as well—try finding that anywhere else in America.

The Army also covers a boatload of other expenses, providing free health care and offering discount rates on things like family dental insurance, which is just \$9 per dependent per month.

They know this job, in one way or another, will take them through at least the next eight years of their life. It could stay with them until the end.

They know that if they do what is expected of them, they will rise through the ranks of the military, a career looked at as one of the most honorable in America. Or, if they choose to leave the Army, they know the skills they learned there will translate to leadership positions in the civilian world, leaving a million opportunities at their fingertips.

And yet what happens in their futures, despite the aura of stability, is anyone's guess.

They will live in many places, but where those places are is a mystery. They could be placed from Virginia to Alaska to Germany and will move around every three-four years, not knowing where they'll land next until the move is upon them. That's fine for a single guy, but when it's time to think about a family as some already have (Blankenstein is getting married in less than a month), it gets exponentially more complex. Spouses have to change jobs, kids have to change schools and sever friendships. The family's life revolves around the soldier, whose life revolves around what the Army tells him to do.

The only place a soldier will almost certainly live for a year or two of their career is in Afghanistan, Iraq or another combat zone. Right now, most units deploy at least once every three years for an average of a year each time.

Being deployed isn't the worst thing in the world. If nothing else, the money is good. Soldiers get to set up a savings deposit program while they're there with absurdly high interest rates only the Army can offer. If they don't have a family, they can shut down all your bills while they're away. Soldiers get hazardous duty pay, imminent danger pay and every month they're deployed past one year they get a \$1,000 bonus—and that's all tax free.

But when they have significant others, it can get rough.

Communication between the soldier and the family is limited, and that, combined with such a long time away from home, is believed to be a huge reason the Army divorce rate is higher than that of civilians.

Nothing like thinking about the likelihood of divorce before you're married.

Worse than that, they have to think about death before they've lived a full life, and the death of the soldiers they command.

When you sign up to be a soldier, you know what you're getting into, but younger officers are often in more peril than older ones because of the nature of their positions. They are less experienced, so they do more executing of missions than planning.

According to the "Faces of the Fallen" project conducted by The Washington Post, as of February 20 of this year, 3,680 Army soldiers have died during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (the mission title in Afghanistan). Of those 3,680, 569 are 22-year-olds and 446 are 23-year-olds, the age these cadets could very well be when they are first deployed to the Middle East. 22-year-olds and 23-year-olds have the second and third most deaths of any age, only behind the deaths of 691 21-year-olds.

Most of those deaths come from enlisted men, although 258 second lieutenants, first lieutenants and captains have perished during OIF and OEF, and all the cadets commissioning in less than a month will at least be captains by the time they are able to leave the Army.

The likelihood of one of them dying overseas isn't great, but who thinks it will happen to them until it does? It could happen, and that's something they must live with.

What's much more likely is that one of the soldiers under their command will die in combat. Enlisted soldiers have a much higher death rate than officers, and cadets know that if they draw up a plan that results in the death of their soldiers, in the words of senior cadet John Miller, "that's on you."

And surviving overseas is only part of the battle. According to [military.com](http://military.com), 30 percent of soldiers who've spent time in a war zone must deal with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, in this case caused by witnessing what transpires during war, upon their return home, and an additional 20-25 percent experience partial PTSD in their lifetime.

PTSD causes intense feelings of fear, horror and helplessness and gives those afflicted terrible flashbacks and nightmares, and puts them at risk for other psychological disorders such as depression. In fact, according to [military.com](http://military.com), 88 percent of men and 79 percent of women with PTSD met the criteria for another psychiatric disorder, the most common of which was alcohol abuse.

It's a lot to consider as a teenager before signing a contract that gives the Army control of some part of their lives for at least eight years after graduation.

These cadets, however, seem as ready as anyone can be for a future as uncertain as theirs. They know they can't control a lot of what will happen to them as an officer and they're not going to think about those variables—it would drive them crazy. All they can do is plan for what they can and not worry about what they can't. It takes a lot of foresight to realize that.

## **Trashcan fires and encyclopedias**

Ah yes, foresight.

When John Ro was 14, he was a bit of a troublemaker. He had recently moved from Hawaii, where he had spent the vast majority of his childhood, to Florida and then quickly to Virginia, leaving him thousands of miles from home in a part of the country completely environmentally and culturally different from what he was used to.

His parents had also gotten divorced during the family's month-long stint in Florida, and the combination of all these new circumstances took its toll.

Like many teenagers with problems outside the classroom, John did some outlandish things to get attention. Like, one day, lighting a bathroom trash can on fire.

The fire didn't do too much damage- it barely made it past the trash can to blacken some of the surrounding tiles -but it was enough to get John and his family an appointment with the superintendent of Fairfax County Public Schools.

John sat there in a conference room that looked like something you'd see on TV- long, sleek brown table, plenty of black chairs surrounding it - dressed in a black suit, his hair freshly cut. His mom and sister were with him, waiting for the meeting to begin.

The superintendent and his entourage walked in. He was a tall white man whose hair matched his skin color. He wore glasses without frames, a nicely cut navy blue blazer and walked in with his shoulders held high—the alpha male.

This wasn't a meeting so much as it was a preliminary hearing to decide what to do with John. The superintendent began by chatting with the 14-year-old, just getting to know him. Then the nice guy hat came off.

The alpha male started firing questions at John, who was already petrified just by being there. He attacked his morals and used language way above teenage comprehension.

"A lighter is to lighting a trash can as a baseball is to, fill in the blank," said the superintendent.

"Uh, I don't know, a home run?" replied John, nervous and confused.

"Oh, so you think lighting a trash can on fire is like hitting a home run?"

Ouch. Obviously that's not what Ro meant, but he was frightened, embarrassed and, after all, shouldn't he not have to worry about analogies until the SATs?

It all went downhill from there. At the conclusion, John got to see his usually feisty mom cry and plead with the superintendent to give him another chance. He couldn't bear watching what he had done to his mom and he was worried about his future.

John's immediate future was an alternative school, where he would stay for less than a year.

When he got back to Fairfax High School, he stayed out of trouble by picking up hobbies and continuing ones he already had. He plays guitar, enjoys fishing, likes tinkering with cars, skateboarding, basketball, football, boxing and combing through the encyclopedia, which is something he's done ever since he was a small child. Little John used to comb through the Army section, flipping then to all the war pages, then back to the air force or something else military related. He's always been fascinated by the life of a soldier.

His mom married a career Army man while John was still in high school, and his stepdad, whom he refers to as "dad," has been a huge positive influence in his life.

John wasn't even sure he was going to college and now, with a slight push from his parents, he's on the brink of becoming a field artillery officer in the US Army.

### **Oh, the places you'll go**

That's right, Ro got his top choice, field artillery. Blankenstein and Miller did well for themselves too—both got infantry, just as they'd hoped.

They are lucky in the sense that their branches are what they want to do. Not all cadets get their top choice, or even something remotely close to what they wanted. One cadet who wanted infantry wound up in the chemical core, where he'll never see the frontlines. But they worked hard to get where they are, hard enough that the Army put them where they wanted to be.

So with that out of the way, they'll soon be off to Basic Officer Leadership Course, which is held at forts across the nation and trains new officers in the specifics of their branch.

BOLC lasts around four months, at which point officers are shipped off to other, shorter schools where they can acquire more skills before being assigned a unit. The legendary ranger school, for example, is practically a requirement for all infantry officers.

Then, sometime between six months and two years after they commission, they're in the real Army.

Miller, whose five-year-old self jumped on a donkey, will lead without fear and by example.

If the way he leads now is any indication, Blankenstein will lead with a calm, determined focus.

Ro already leads with precision, easily breaking down the complex into understandable

chunks.

They've prepared for four years and now the foundation is set. It's time to be soldiers.