

Veterans Haunted in Afghanistan

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On the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, we pause to pay tribute to those who have fought for the freedoms so many of us take for granted. Some are still among the living and some have long since passed. One thing we might not consider as we reflect on the sacrifices made by so many patriots is what is left of the land that is scarred by war.



Many soldiers return from battle with wounds and stories of courage and valor, but some return with stories of the unexplained sort. Afghanistan has a long history of violence and war. It is no surprise that a place scarred by terrifying ends to human life would have such moments imprinted into the environment. One particular place holds the mystery of the paranormal that has been experienced by many but only reported by a few.

Stories had been going around about a ghost that had been haunting a guard tower at Forward Operating Base Salerno in Afghanistan. This base has conducted numerous humanitarian projects including medical care for villagers, constructing wells and providing school supplies to children. Guard tower six overlooks a graveyard on the outskirts of camp and is rumored to be haunted by a child.

Two soldiers were skeptical about the rumors after not seeing or hearing anything during two weeks of duty in the tower. Then Spc. Drew Painter and Spc. Jeremiah Jackson heard a painful shrill over the radio. It was a sound that could only have been made by a little girl.

"No grown man in the Army could have made it," said Spc. Painter.

Painter and Jackson were paratroopers with the 2nd Battalion of the 504th Parachute

Infantry Regiment. They suspected their buddies were playing a practical joke and called other guard towers to see whether they had heard the same thing. But no one had heard it.

The experience made them recall a particular story they had heard about the haunted tower. The story was about how two Marines were in the tower one night when they saw an Afghan girl and her pet goat walking on the road. When they took off their night-vision goggles, she was gone. Yet, when they put their goggles back on, the girl was standing on the balcony of their tower. Both men ran down the stairs and refused to return to the guard tower even if it meant they would be punished for not returning to their post.



Guard tower on perimeter at Camp Salerno.

The night after hearing the laugh, Painter and Jackson were back in the tower and feeling nervous and a little jumpy. A few hours into their shift, the "ghost" was back.

Both paratroopers said they could feel something moving behind them, and once in a while it sounded like someone stepped on the trap door leading to the tower's middle level. They said that the temperature in the tower dropped a few degrees when they felt the presence as they huddled in the corner next to the radio. Then another tower called to say they detected a 3-foot-tall "form" walking around the bottom of the tower that Jackson and Painter were in. The other guards told them that it looked like it was waving.

Reluctantly, Jackson went to investigate. He said, "I walked around the whole balcony and didn't see anything."

Both paratroopers were anxious for their shift to end. With less than an hour to go, a call

came over the radio telling them their relief was going to be late, maybe by as much as two hours. The paratroopers cursed their luck and continued to scan the perimeter.

They claim that they could just feel something was there with them that night and there was no joking around. Eventually, their shift ended without any other experiences. Jackson didn't think the ghost was harmful.

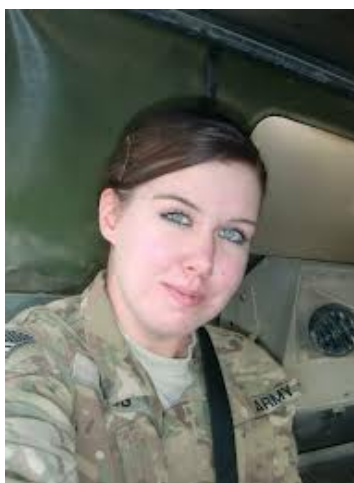
"I didn't feel threatened," said Jackson. "It was just having fun."

This story is a legend told around Salerno since at least 2005 and perhaps even sooner. Most paratroopers there know at least one version, especially the one where the Marines refuse to return to the tower.

Sadly, tragedy continued in and around the guard towers at Camp Solerno. Army Spc. Mikayla Bragg of Longview, WA, had a history of mental-health issues that was not communicated to her supervisors and had weaned herself off her prescribed anti-anxiety medication to satisfy requirements to deploy. Six months later, Spc. Bragg was serving alone in a guard tower on Camp Solerno. She shot and killed herself on December 21, 2011.

Army interviews with nearly two dozen fellow soldiers revealed that Mikayla showed no indications she was having trouble in Afghanistan. All of them said she was a good soldier, and she had been promoted twice to specialist while in Afghanistan. She even completed the Army's suicide-prevention training the month before her suicide — mandatory for all soldiers — and attended additional classes designed to help intervene in other soldiers' suicide attempts.

We may never know the events that happened up in that tower on that December night. Some would say she wasn't truly alone there up in that tower.



Army Spc. Mikayla Bragg of Longview, WA, killed herself in the guard tower at Camp Solerno on Dec. 21, 2011.