

The Job

Todd Guggisberg

*And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
'Til touchdown brings me 'round again to find
I'm not the man they think I am at home
Oh no, no, no.
I'm a rocket man.*

Elton John, "Rocket Man"

It's 0530. Time to "ruck up," as the old-timers used to say. Breakfast had consisted of a few protein pods and the regular green-colored pills designed to improve hand-retina reaction times, washed down with a bag of electrolyte liquid. We cy-troops had named these "Kites and Lytes." It wasn't that the improvement was noticeable, except when you compared performance in the lab on our qualification tables every year. Seeing exactly how much better you were with meds than when qualifying analog made a believer out of everyone. The headaches and night terrors were just part of the job. There were some pills for that too.

On the walk up to the battle stations, Jafir, our medic, checked eyes for adequate dilation. The first sergeant, with his left sleeve sewn so short that his stripes didn't all fit, stood along the yellow safety line checking us for ... well, whatever it is that first sergeants check for. A tech met me at the door to my battle station and handed me the maintenance check report screen. When I asked him about the transponder coding relay that wasn't working very well yesterday, he first glanced at the implant on his wrist glowing 0538, sighed impatiently, and mumbled, "Yeah, it's a bit flaky, but the commander x'd it so you're good."

Stepping into the station was probably the worst part of the job. Just because the smell of your own old sweat is familiar, it doesn't make it any more pleasant and it's a reminder of what the next ten hours will bring.



Distinctive unit insignia of the 2nd Battalion, 59th Armored Infantry (Cyber)
(Composite graphic by author; original graphic by KasparLunt, Pixabay)

"Not a day for dragging ass, McCormick!" Top yells (more for himself to hear than anything).

"You've got some work to do with that 93.4 percent kill ratio you've had lately. You lose another one and I'll have your ass."

I respond with, "Got it, Top," and latch the door behind me.

The leaderboard in the break room listed all our stats, but the stats that really mattered to us were the kill ratio and the loss rate. Oh, and the number of missions completed.

As a kid, I always loved video games. My stepdad used to get after me for spending hours in my room with my Xbox 6. I'd meet up with my buddies in our digital team room and go off on one adventure or another. A few of those guys I even knew for real. My stepdad's point was moot though. The worst mistake he made—other than marrying my mom—was admitting that he had done the same thing growing up with that vintage game, *Fortnite*.

It's funny now how dumb I was. I didn't even realize that one of my best buddies in those online adventures was really an Army recruiter out of Toledo. He worked my file for almost two years and once I turned seventeen—bam!—I was ready to join the cyber-infantry.

All those old war stories make boot camp sound like some exhausting physical torture session that lasts for months. It wasn't for us. The Army figured that we had been training ourselves for years on exactly the things a good cy-troop had to be good at. Although, it took a while for the head implants to heal, there wasn't much physical about boot camp.

The Army Press created the Future Warfare Writing Program to generate ideas about possible complexities of future warfare, as presented in the *Army Operating Concept*. The views expressed belong to their authors, and do not necessarily represent the official view of the Army University Press or any other government institutions or agencies.

Nobody minded that some of us were fat. What they were really interested in though was our visio-motor response times. We spent hours doing hand-eye coordination exercises. Next, they had to teach us how to hook into and operate the battle station's equipment. Of course, they also had to make sure we weren't going to "blitz out" after our first gunfight. It was four weeks until they figured out who just didn't have the ability to "separate work from the rest of their lives."

“The whole idea of operating an infantry drone two continents away from the relative comfort of your battle station in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, seems exhilarating.”

We weren't told what happened to the guys who didn't make it. Probably recruiting in Toledo.

The whole idea of operating an infantry drone two continents away from the relative comfort of your battle station in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, seems exhilarating. It's the manifestation of all those video games I used to play when I was a kid. Okay, so my performance evaluation will take a hit if I do something stupid and get my drone killed or, God forbid, get it captured. That's one thing that will get you in deep. It's a court martial for the poor bastard who lets that happen, and everyone knows to self-destruct beforehand. The old, "never leave a fallen comrade" thing sure doesn't apply to drones. But blowing real stuff up in a 3D, augmented reality environment pumped like warm hydraulic fluid directly into your cortex is really cool. Or, at least, it was for a while.

The job works like this: ten hours on, two or three missions, a one-hour debrief, and thirteen hours off. Saturday to Thursday, six days a week. Fridays are days off because that's when the bad guys are home and we don't slush 'em too often when their kiddos are around—unless they really need slushing, I guess. Once a month, we meet with the head doctor who just nods, says "uh huh" a lot, and makes notes on her tablet.

Our business has changed a lot since I first joined Mauler Platoon. At first, a couple of us cy-troops would normally get linked up with human infantry and we would get to do the real exciting tasks: burst into a building, scope out a tunnel, lead them up a stairwell, blow up hardened targets, stuff like that. We were celebrities of sorts.

These days, though, we hardly ever see a friendly human out there. Even if you do, they almost always display as covert and we have to act like they're a local. Lately, we've been running into some of those infantry drones

being built by the bad guys. They're not very good and are pretty easy to slush, but they're getting better. One of the guys over in Bravo Company said the other day that he had heard they spotted a couple of them just down the road in Norfolk, but that's probably b.s.

On the positive side, we regularly get some new kit to test out. The laser-pulse set is a big hit among us cy-troops. Way more ammo without the weight. Cheaper than

missiles too, I suppose. Ranged Biometric Identification, or RBI, is another great addition that really helps to figure out who the bad guys are and who are just the poor sad sacks that lost the birth-lottery. It cuts down on a lot of the mess we used to make. The newest thing is they're adding recon drones that detach from our infantry drones and fly on their own to help figure out what's what. Drones for the drones. Who woulda thought?

My wife is curious about what I do in the Army, but she knows I can't talk about it. I can't do much about the yelling out in a bad dream once in a while, but to think that the devices in our apartment aren't listening is just naive. Once, under the heavy quilt in our bed, she asked in a whisper, "Have you ever shot someone?" I just whispered back, "No." Because I haven't ... well, technically I haven't.

Not really.

It's 1530. Time to unhook, grab my Gatorade piss bottle and empty sandwich bag, and head home. Not a bad day considering the mess that Sgt. Thompson led us into. Said his RBI malfunctioned. Yeah, whatever. That guy just likes his job too much. I wonder what my wife is cooking up for dinner and what we'll talk about. I wonder if the baby is feeling better. Maybe we'll pull up a holomovie tonight. Only sixty-two more missions until I can go on leave. ■

Lt. Col. Todd H. Guggisberg, U.S. Army, retired, is an assistant professor in the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He holds a BA from St. John's University, Minnesota, and an MA from Webster University. He served in the U.S. Army as an enlisted soldier and officer for twenty-five years including service in Kosovo and Afghanistan. This story was inspired by Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* and how a soldier may experience warfare given ubiquitous unmanned systems in the future.