

4-15-2018

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Recommended Citation

Nygaard, Anson (2018) "Chris Garry Died," *The Oval*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol11/iss1/21>

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CHRIS GARRY DIED

Anson Nygaard

I backpacked in from the east, gaining a ridge south of Skalkaho Pass at a wooded saddle. I pushed to high ground to glass till last light and bivvyed out where decade old deadfall from a burn and new bear grass knife up a boundary between life and death at 7800'. The Bitterroot Valley, to the west, sunk under smoke from current wildfires. It was the evening before archery season opened. I stood above it, except for the slightest haze. Five years prior, deployed, I ordered my recurve from a custom bowyer in Texas who my Sniper Team Leader had recommended. I was signed for six weapons ranging from my 9mm Baretta to a Barret .50 cal., but Pilgrim and I spoke of being in different mountains hunting different prey. Rifle hunting, he said, is really just shooting. Using a bow constitutes an actual hunt, and success with a traditional bow means you're good at it.

That evening on my ridge, a group of five strangers joined me with similar notions for opening day. We discussed how best we'd avoid each other. I said I'd stick to the ridge and travel north, and they'd hunt below and to the south. Before they left to head down to their camp, one of them, a handsome bearded man in new boots, sat down next to me. As the last orange daylight died, he told me Jesus died for my sins. He talked about his God, as a just god, and said his judgement would befall me when I die. He ticked off a couple commandments. Asked me if I'd ever lied or lusted or stolen. I waited for him to ask if I'd ever killed. He asserted that a just god would surely sentence my soul to damnation. I told him, kindly, I didn't believe in that sort of justice. I told him the fact that we all die, and therefore one should hedge one's bets, seemed like a great argument for having faith in his god, as well as all the other ones out there, too.

"Well," he said, "I just think it would be a cruel joke if this is all there was, if this is it."

I took a long look around me. "I don't see it that way," I said, and they left me to my high ground.

I ate ramen and slept lightly under a bright moon and a

warm ashy breeze. I only zipped up my down bag because there were spiders. When I woke up in the dark, I dressed and rolled camp into my pack after the moon set.

Ten minutes before legal light I let out a few cow elk calls. Seductive. Desperate, but soft enough. A large something cracked loudly a few hundred meters down the ridge. I waited for the sun.

Before I got moving I texted my girlfriend. I'd forgotten socks, and asked if she could please bring a couple pairs with her when she came up to meet me later at our low camp. When I turned the phone on I had one message. It was from Marsh in Seattle, to me and Silva in Santa Cruz. "Chris Garry died," it said. "How?" I wrote back, at 6:26 am. I texted my girlfriend and shut the phone off to save battery.

One day Garry shows up to work with a grocery bag full of pepper spray. He wants to train. He wants our section to go out into the Carolina pines, spray everyone in the face, and then we'd all fight. We didn't do it, but he was serious. I wonder if Garry killed himself. Was he even still in the Army? Drunk driving? Was he deployed? IED? Training accident? Firefight? Did his truck roll? Did he burn in on a jump? I knew he made Sergeant some time ago, but I haven't talked to the guy since I got out in 2012. Chris Garry died.

As soon as the sun came up I started slowly in the direction of the noise I'd heard until I caught movement. I was shaking before I had my binos up. A buck fed slowly away from me 300 meters down the ridge. He had a gut and thick dark antlers. No way I'd catch him on the move hopping deadfall with a carpet of sticks snapping underfoot. But if I watched him bed down I could put a slow stalk on him. He fed down and away from me, over a spur into the next little bowl.

We're fighting off an ambush and Garry has this Afghan Police guy next to him, lying flat on the ground, behind just a bump in the open desert, midday. Garry takes this guy's AK from him, acquires a target and goes cyclic. Dumps a mag. He reloads for the guy and hands it back to him, saying, "That's how you shoot this thing!" *Advise and Assist*. Mission accomplished.

I dropped below the ridge's silhouette, concealed on its backside, looping around towards the buck. I stepped over each fallen tree slowly with care to keep quiet, as fast as I could. When I popped up high again, to look down on where the buck should have been, he was gone. The bowl below was green and thick with young growth. The drainage marked the edge of the old burn. I scanned it, but nothing turned up. Resigned to *could be anywhere I guess*, I tried cow calling again. A bull yelled back at me from a hidden meadow

below. We talked it out for a half hour or so, but I decided there was no way I was going to pull him out of the woods so late in the morning, up to the open ridge in the heat. I decided to close the distance myself. Close with and destroy the enemy, I thought. That was a job I'd had once. I checked my phone one more time before losing service.

I had a text. "He was in Iraq with Triple Canopy. That's all I know." If anyone was going to go contract it'd be him, I guess. I don't remember Garry ever getting mail when we were deployed. He was always in it. It was his life. He used to limit his overnight kit to a bivy sack during winter, just because.

In his barracks room he pulls up Google Earth. He zooms in to his old house in Richmond, Bay Area, where he went to high school. He points out the dark rectangle in the backyard where he and a friend dug a fighting pit, to train, so they wouldn't get jumped or beaten up so much walking home. He talks about smoking weed and long boarding the gnarly shit in San Fran. Shows me an old picture of "hippie Garry" with long hair. He tells me about living in Alaska with an uncle for a while, and going on runs with a bolt action .30-06 slung on his back for bears.

I dropped off the ridge, and the bear grass, onto scree. There was still deadfall to work past at first, although less than on the ridge. Wind swirled, and I paused to look through my binos often. In the transitional flora at the edge of the burn, in young spruce, I heard a nasally blow. I hadn't thought about the buck since talking with the bull, but I looked up and the muley was 160 meters straight ahead, high tailing it out. He'd picked up a little brother, still big, both in velvet, and they were gone.

Chris Garry recruited me into our battalion's sniper section. When we got back from twelve months in Iraq, I was a team leader in a line company. I started PTing with the guys getting ready for Ranger School. Garry shows up one morning after a ruck march. He makes an announcement about Scout Platoon tryouts. He asks if anyone wants to be a sniper. No one raises their hand, so I do. Garry introduces me to the section and team leaders. We go to a range and shoot, and I make it through tryouts. After that, Garry and I ruck together on the weekends. Our first Saturday is an eighteen mile walk with 80lb ruck sacks from our barracks out to Sicily drop zone and back. The DZ is an off-post training area. He fails to mention we are not taking the gate to get there. He just leads out, and the dirt road we're on hits a ten-foot chain link fence with three strands of barb wire topping it, angled outward. We're getting ready to go to Afghanistan, to be sneaky deadly mother fuckers, he says. If we can't do this, here, how are we going to do that, there? He isn't

wrong. We climb the fence, our packs on one shoulder, drop them over, and follow behind. Being Airborne means we know how to hit the ground, how to eat shit, and move out.

Shit. My pack was too heavy, and that was a nice buck. I moved cautiously towards where I thought I last heard the bull, a woody meadow, flooded in spots by small streams cutting deep into mud. Fresh scat trailed off into timber everywhere. I mewed occasionally, gently, but I traveled through without response.

Toward the end of our Afghan deployment our battalion photographer takes an official platoon picture. Garry kneels front and center. He's our Lieutenant's radio guy. Black carbines at the low ready, and Garry has his white middle finger firmly on his magazine well. The photo stays up on the battalion's Facebook page for several days before it comes to someone-important's attention. The platoon leader loses it. Garry gets smoked. He's kicked out of the platoon and put on burn pit detail. The 82nd is nothing if not concerned about appearances, but Garry wants to be a shadow. Guys with bounties on their heads aren't appropriate social media material for Garry. So, they make him a shadow. At least he didn't live long enough to die from burn pit exposure, I guess.

I followed a draw with a stream in the woods down to the creek in the main drainage, to where my map claimed a trail followed that creek. There was no trail. Dead fall and understory here had been spared the burn. I was now in designated "Wilderness," and it was thick. I found my route steadily, stepping over downed trees every few feet. I imagined stepping over bodies for three miles. Garry's body, Sims' body, Metcalf's body, Walsh's. The bodies of the Kiowa pilots I watched get shot down, whose names I look up now and again but can never remember. When I did hit trail, I jogged. It seemed like something Garry would do. When I knew him, he was on our battalion's ten-mile team, and competitive in the division. Once, he bled through white socks on a division run, carrying our battalion colors. He only bitterly handed off the flag after being confronted by our Sergeant Major about his unacceptable uniform appearance. Now, I ran towards clean socks, recurve in hand, passing through meadows incised by clear water thick with brookies, bull trout and pyrite, and as I got closer to camp I dropped back into smoke, hurdling the occasional tree across my path like the people I've got to put behind me. Chris Garry Died. He was in Iraq with Triple Canopy. That's all I know.