

War Stories Part 1

The street was empty, the afternoon sunlight edging the old, wood windowsills and dented gutters of the tall buildings. A warm wind stirred the street grit and swirled it around the sneakers of the tall man walking around the corner.

He carried a sports bag over one shoulder, a battered hockey stick poking out of the top. He hitched the bag up and stuffed both hands into the pockets of his jacket, glancing into the mouth of an alley as he passed.

He didn't see a darker shadow detach itself from the alley gloom.

He didn't hear the man step up behind him.

When the rough bag dropped over his head, he dropped the sports gear and struggled violently, kicking out, using feet and elbows and knees. But the man from the alley pulled him backwards, stealing his balance and wrapping a choke hold around his neck. He tightened the hold, easing his prey down to the ground and crouching behind him. He waited while the struggles grew weaker, leaning in close to his prey.

"You know the drill, MacGyver. Tap, snap or nap." He waited a moment longer and the struggles stopped as MacGyver slid into unconsciousness.

"Nap. Good choice." His voice was calm, conversational. He rolled MacGyver over and zip tied his hands. Then he stood, gripped MacGyver under the arms and dragged him into the alley.

The wind blew the street grit around the sports bag, and a discarded playbill fluttered where it had been trapped by the fallen hockey stick.

Further down the alley, a door slammed.

And the street was empty again.

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There was a moment when the world swam back into focus. MacGyver was aware of moving, his sneakers scraping backwards up a step. He tried to get his feet under him, blinking in the darkness as his head cleared. Somewhere nearby, he heard a door slam. He wobbled to his feet, heard one soft footstep and a blow to his temple put the lights out again.

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The hood smelled of dust. MacGyver took a deep breath as consciousness returned. He blinked, his eyelashes fluttering against rough fabric.

What happened?

He blinked again, shook his head to clear it and tried to move, fear flooding cold through him as he discovered he was bound. He was sitting in a chair, his wrists fastened tightly to the cold metal frame. He breathed in, smelled dust, and felt the coarse fabric of the hood press against his face. Light filtered through the cloth, dimming briefly as someone crossed in front of him. MacGyver heard the scrape of another chair, and the light returned as his captor sat down. His heart thudded loud in his ears. Who would do this? Who had he upset recently? Could it be Mariotte? He was in serious trouble if so...

"What do you want?" MacGyver's voice came out croaky and he coughed.

"Not 'where am I?'" His captor sounded amused. "I believe starting with 'where am I' is traditional, soldier."

Inside the hood MacGyver frowned, trying to place the voice. Not Mariotte, at least...

"What do you want?" MacGyver flexed his wrists against the chair, feeling narrow bonds biting into the skin. Cable ties, perhaps.

"Still not playing the game, Corporal." The voice was less amused now. "Thanks to you, I lost everything I ever wanted, so I'm having to settle for you instead." MacGyver jumped as his captor kicked the chair leg. "Imagine my delight."

The voice was familiar, even muffled by the hood. MacGyver concentrated, replaying the conversation in his head, trying to remember how he'd got here.

'Tap, snap or nap'. The phrase echoed up out of his hazy memory. The man had called him 'soldier' and 'Corporal'. Someone from the DXS?

No. Further back.

Someone from Vietnam.

'Tap, snap or nap'. The memory of a sweaty arm around his neck and a tanned face grinning down at him as oblivion darkened the edges of his vision.

"Sergeant Cooper?"

"Very good." A hand seized the hood and pulled it off, leaving MacGyver squinting in the light.

"Why?" MacGyver shook his hair out of his eyes. "What do you want with me?"

"What indeed..." Sergeant Cooper studied the man in front of him. "I received some unexpected mail this week. Seems like a lot of dirty secrets are coming to light now that Tricky Dicky's no longer with us." He paused, watching MacGyver's expression.

"OK..." MacGyver frowned, confused.

"I received a report. A blast from our shared past in South East Asia, from a colleague with an unnecessarily guilty conscience. He had some information he felt I needed to know." Cooper bent down, removed a file from a bag beside him and threw it onto the table between them. As he turned, MacGyver could see the gun on his hip. Cooper saw him looking at the gun and smiled, faint and thin. The file slid towards MacGyver, who glanced down and then spread his hands, wagging his fingers.

"If you want me to look at it..." MacGyver trailed off as Cooper took a knife from his pocket and flicked open a blade. Cooper stared at the blade for a moment, then took two swift steps behind MacGyver and pulled his head back, laying the blade against his throat.

"How could you!" Cooper leaned in close, his voice a savage whisper, "They were civilians. They were innocents and you killed them!" His knuckles whitened on the knife and MacGyver tried to lean away. Cooper's grip tightened in MacGyver's hair and he felt the steel cold against his skin.

"She was two years old, you bastard." Abruptly, Cooper let MacGyver go, spinning around to pace across the room. MacGyver released the breath he'd been holding.

"Sergeant Cooper, I have no idea what you're talking about. You gotta believe me." MacGyver flinched as Cooper stepped in front of him again, the knife catching the light.

"Liar!" Spit landed on the table and Cooper wiped his mouth with a shaking hand. "You killed them. I knew it wasn't some tin-pot, home brewed bomb, not that amount of destruction. It was you. You ordered an mortar

strike against a village full of civilians. They had no idea. No warning. No chance to get out.” He paused, breathing heavily. “When you ordered that strike, Corporal MacGyver, you killed my wife and my daughter. I swore then that I’d find the son of a bitch responsible for it if it took me the rest of my life, and now I’ve found you.” MacGyver jumped as Cooper trailed the knife up his neck, the point pricking under his ear. “You stood in my office and you told me you were sorry for my loss. And I believed you.” MacGyver felt the knife press against his skin, cold and sharp.

“Sergeant Cooper, listen. I never ordered a mortar strike! I certainly never ordered one against civilians! You know me, you know how much I hate violence. I would never...” he broke off as Cooper slid the knife onto his cheek, staring into his eyes.

“Read it.” Cooper cut one of the cable ties, freeing MacGyver’s left hand. He stepped around the table and sat down, with his hand on the gun, his eyes fever-bright in his pale face. “Read it all.”

MacGyver reached out and opened the file, scanning quickly through the pages. He lifted one out, reading it again.

“This is wrong.” He glanced across, finding Cooper staring at him. “It didn’t happen like that.”

“It’s an official report, soldier!” MacGyver flinched as Cooper leapt up, yelling into his face. The point of the knife stabbed down into the pages before them. “An official report! Handed in by the artillery officer who actioned the strike you ordered! Who approved the strike because he thought he was taking out a nest of the VC and doing his goddamn patriotic duty!” Cooper paused, breathing hard. MacGyver could smell him, the scent strong and bitter. “You ordered it. Right there.” He pulled the knife out of the table top and stabbed down again, piercing the ‘M’ of a familiar, typed name.

“That’s not what happened.” MacGyver might as well have not spoken. Cooper leant forwards. His face inches from MacGyver’s. He yanked his knife free.

“You killed them, you son of a bitch. You killed them and now you’re going to die for your crimes.”

War Stories Part 2

“That’s not what happened.” MacGyver might as well have not spoken. Cooper leant forwards. His face inches from MacGyver’s. He yanked his knife free.

“You killed them, you son of a bitch. You killed them and now you’re going to die for your crimes.”

MacGyver gazed into Sergeant Cooper’s eyes, seeing fury and vengeance and an absolute belief in the rightness of his actions, but no spark of reason. The man Sergeant Cooper had been twenty years ago was gone. MacGyver took a deep breath and launched himself forwards, headbutting Cooper as hard as he could. Using his free hand, he flipped the table, sending Cooper sprawling with blood pouring from his nose. Cooper struggled up with a roar and MacGyver gripped his chair’s arms, swinging the metal framed chair in a low arc that ended with a crashing blow to Cooper’s head as he scrambled to his feet. Cooper’s eyes rolled up and he collapsed to the floor, his knife skidding away into the corner.

“Cooper?” MacGyver watched the fallen man as he fished his Swiss Army Knife out of his jeans pocket and cut the zip tie on his other wrist. He folded the knife and rubbed his wrists. “Sergeant Cooper?”

Sergeant Cooper was breathing steadily but he showed no signs of waking up. The nosebleed had slowed to a trickle and a bump was forming on his head. MacGyver felt for the pulse in Cooper’s neck, found it thudding strong under his fingers, and heaved a sigh of relief. Stooping, he rolled Cooper over. Then he reached into his back pocket, pulling out a flattened roll of duct tape. He picked up the table and placed it carefully over Cooper, before taping his wrists and ankles to the table legs.

“Stick around, Sergeant – I’m gonna go set the record straight.” MacGyver looked down at Cooper’s still form. “Cause that’s not what happened at all.”

MacGyver left the building, letting the door slam shut behind him and squinting into the last of the sunlight. He swung his sports bag onto his shoulder and headed out.

Vietnam, 1973

Corporal MacGyver left the building, letting the door slam shut behind him and squinting into the last of the sunlight. He swung his kit bag onto his shoulder, checked his new orders were safe in his pocket and headed out. He signed a Jeep out of the motor pool and bumped down the track, alert for potholes and the freshly turned soil that might indicate a buried mine. The last of the daylight was soon swallowed by the jungle and MacGyver switched on the Jeep’s weak headlights. Driving out here at night was risky, but he had to reach his new posting and the squad he’d be supporting by morning.

He slowed the Jeep and crept across a rickety bridge, glad of the darkness that hid the heart-stopping drop to the river below. Safely across, he accelerated up the hill. He checked his map with a flashlight, hiding the light as much as he could. He spun the wheel, guiding the Jeep over the rough track towards the outpost.

The camp was in complete darkness when he arrived, the sentries surly at having to patrol in one of Vietnam’s regular downpours. MacGyver parked his Jeep and ran across the clearing, his boots splashing red mud up his legs. Shaking the worst of the wet off his coat and trying not to drip on the outpost commander’s desk, he saluted and stood to attention.

“Corporal MacGyver, Sir. EOD. Sergeant Cooper sent me.”

“Yes, he did.” The commander looked tired, MacGyver thought. He watched him finish the report he was reading, sign it and screw the cap on his fountain pen before looking up. “Welcome to our little corner of hell, Corporal. Briefing at 07:00.” He moved his papers away from MacGyver’s dripping form. “Dry off and get some sleep, soldier. Dismissed.”

MacGyver saluted again and left the office. The rain had stopped as suddenly as it had started and the jungle was filled with the night noise of unseen barbets and geckos.

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By the morning, the weather had changed again. Artillery Sergeant Alfred Hawkins glanced out at the steamy mist beyond his window and loosened his collar. The heat bothered him at the best of times, making him short tempered even when he didn’t have uppity locals to sort out. He scratched his armpit and shifted in his chair. Things had been going so well too, his black market wheeling and dealing lining his pockets very nicely and providing a welcome addition to the pay packets of the squad who were working with him. Now he had to deal with a Headman who’d decided to up his prices and who hadn’t been swayed by Hawkins’ usual bully-boy tactics. If he didn’t nip this in the bud, other suppliers might think they could do the same, and Hawkins’ little empire would come crashing down around his ears. No, he needed to make a proper example of the greedy Gook. He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a form. Winding it into his typewriter, he typed fast, putting together an order for a mortar strike to take his grabby contact and his scruffy village out completely. Then he could send his boys to collect whatever remained at his leisure. He paused with his fictitious order almost complete. He just needed a name, someone who wouldn’t be able to trace it back to him. Someone who could take the fall if it ever got investigated. Someone unfamiliar...

Sergeant Hawkins reached out and picked up the postings list for his pet squad. He ran his finger down the list

and nodded, then turned back to the report and began to type.

Mist filled the air, making the jungle silent and mysterious. MacGyver spent the morning analysing the twisted scrap that was all that was left of a 'mine magnet' armoured personnel carrier, blown up by a powerful land mine only a mile from the outpost. Returning in the fog, he watched the shadows alongside the road for movement but saw nothing. In the distance he heard the rolling boom of artillery and the rattle of machine gun fire, but the mist muffled everything and he found it impossible to judge its distance or direction.

By the time he pulled in to the outpost and parked his Jeep, his fatigues were mist soaked and clammy, and his nerves were wound tight. He grabbed a cup of coffee and typed up his report, the keys of the typewriter sticking with the damp. Just as he finished, a soldier he hadn't met before stuck his head around the door.

"Corporal MacGyver?"

"Yes?" MacGyver pulled the paper release lever and removed his report.

"We got a job, Sir." IED in a nearby village." MacGyver nodded, feeling adrenaline fizz in his veins.

"Lead the way, Soldier".

MacGyver rode in the cab of the 'duce-and-a-half' truck carrying the squad, his map spread out on his knees. Even over the engine, he could hear the squad talking behind him, sounding more excited than scared. He shook his head. The excitement he'd felt at being in a different country and fighting the good fight against the evils of the Viet Cong had lasted only until his first engagement. Since then, the lines had blurred for him, the soldiers he'd fought and the bombs he'd defused too close to their American counterparts for comfort. Now every time he went out, his only thought was 'don't let me get it wrong today'. He braced a hand against the truck door as a rough patch of track jolted him out of his reverie. They turned a corner around a rocky outcrop and the driver pulled to a halt with a stifled curse. MacGyver opened the door and hung out of the cab, finding it hard to believe the scene before him.

Where he'd expected to find the village, there was only a smoking tangle of wreckage. Broken bricks and scattered thatch. Possessions strewn across the clearing. It took MacGyver a moment to realise that bodies lay in the rubble.

He gripped the doorframe hard, his knuckles white as he fought for control. He turned to the driver and saw the squad were already picking their way through the blasted village, seemingly unaffected by the carnage before them. The driver met MacGyver's horrified gaze calmly.

"I guess it went off before we got here." He shrugged. "I'm sure glad I wasn't here when it did."

"Check for survivors." MacGyver's voice came out calmer than he felt. "All of you. And watch your step." He grasped the sleeve of the soldier carrying the field telephone. "Stay here. I need to call this in."

He listened to the noises on the other end of the line.

"Come on, Commander. Pick up the call..."

Los Angeles, 1994

"Come on, Pete. Pick up the call..." MacGyver turned, looking over his shoulder in the phone box. He had no

doubt that Cooper would be conscious again by now and working on getting loose. Once Cooper got out, MacGyver knew he'd be coming for him.

"Hello?" Pete's voice sounded tinny and distant.

"Pete! Man, am I glad to hear your voice!" MacGyver switched the phone to his other ear and looked up and down the street.

"Mac? Are you OK?"

"Jury's out on that, Pete. Listen, I need a really big favour..." MacGyver fed another coin into the payphone, watching a man turn the corner into the street.

"Anything, Mac. What do you need?"

"Well," MacGyver ran a hand through his shaggy hair, "I need the original report from a mortar strike, from Vietnam, 1973." He listened to the silence on the line.

"Wow." Pete sounded surprised. "I can probably pull some strings but it'll take a while. Dare I ask why you need it?"

"Long story, Pete. Something I DIDN'T do in Vietnam seems to have come back to bite me in the... never mind." MacGyver squinted at the man walking towards him, breathing a sigh of relief as the man put down his hood. Not Cooper. Not yet.

"I don't understand, Mac."

"I know, Pete. Neither do I." He could hear Pete drumming his fingers over the static on the line.

"Mac, what on earth's happened here?"

Vietnam 1973

"What on earth's happened there?" MacGyver could hear the commander drumming his fingers over the static on the line. He shook his head.

"I don't know, commander. My men are searching for survivors, I'm about to start investigating the remains of the village. First impressions, Sir – this doesn't look like any home-brewed explosion I've ever seen." He looked across the rubble at his squad, congregated around the remains of a large house.

"Be sure, Corporal." The commander hung up the call. MacGyver frowned at the receiver before returning it to the soldier.

"Yes, Sir."

MacGyver climbed up onto the truck to get a better view of the wrecked village. The damage was massive. The centre of the clearing had been reduced to a crater, earth and rubble thrown out in all directions. The nearest buildings had been destroyed, bricks and thatch thrown into the surrounding jungle. MacGyver turned away, sickened by the blood-and-smoke smell laying heavy on the misty air. He watched the squad digging into the ruins of the largest house, pulling crates out from under of the wreckage and stacking them to one side. Hoping that they'd located survivors, MacGyver hopped down off the truck and went to help.

"Corporal!" The nearest soldier straightened and saluted.

“Find anyone?” MacGyver crouched down to peer under the edge of the fallen roof.

“Thought we heard someone, Sir.” The soldier kept his gaze straight ahead. “We’re checking it out.” His finger was tight on the trigger of his gun and sweat beaded his face. “Haven’t seen Charlie, Sir.” MacGyver studied the young soldier. At first glance he looked shifty, guilty even, but MacGyver dismissed the thought, deciding the young man was likely just scared.

“Good looking out, Soldier.” He nodded to the rest of the squad, who’d paused in their clearing work. “What’s in the crates?”

“Dunno Sir, didn’t look. Just moving them outta the way.” A very muddy soldier heaved another crate out and pushed his helmet back to stare at MacGyver.

“Carry on.” MacGyver turned away to look at the crater from ground level. The more he looked, the less convinced he was that it had been caused by an improvised explosive. He walked to the edge of the crater and crouched down. He’d exploded probably hundreds of IEDs since arriving in Vietnam, and seen the bloody results of many more. This crater was all wrong, the damage too severe and the crater itself too deep and regular. He breathed in, smelling the lingering smoke. It didn’t smell right, not for an IED. This was a different scent... He stood up, deep in thought. What else could have made a crater like this?

Gradually the pieces of the puzzle assembled themselves in his head. No, not an IED. More like a... He turned at the sound of footsteps. The young soldier stopped and saluted.

“No survivors, Sir. No-one under the house after all.” MacGyver sighed, appalled at the senseless waste.

“Get everyone back in the truck. There’s nothing more we can do here.” He turned his collar up against the soft rain that had begun to fall, and followed the soldier back to the truck. He turned with one hand on the door, taking a last look at the village and saying a silent prayer for the villagers.

No, not an IED. MacGyver shivered. He’d been here long enough to recognise the smell of an exploded mortar round.

War Stories Part 3

MacGyver turned with one hand on the truck door, taking a last look at the shattered village and saying a silent prayer for the villagers.

An IED couldn’t have done this. This looked more like a mortar strike. MacGyver shivered. That meant the village had been destroyed on purpose.

He got into the truck and shut the door.

“Let’s get out of here.” The driver nodded, starting the engine. The truck wallowed, digging into the mud far more than when they’d arrived.

“I guess the rain’s soaked the ground.” MacGyver leaned out of the window to look at the wheels. The truck seemed lower, more weighed down than before. Or perhaps not; it was hard to be sure with all the mud and debris on the ground. The driver shot MacGyver a suspicious look, but made no comment as he concentrated on getting the truck going. Behind him, the squad were quiet.

MacGyver spent the rest of the afternoon writing his report. He explained why the damage couldn’t have been caused by an IED, but could have been caused by a mortar strike. He read it three times before signing the bottom and handing it over, aware of the trouble he was stirring up.

If the village had been destroyed by an American mortar, it meant that a strike had either been ridiculously off target, or that a village with no discernible military connections had been bombed deliberately. Either option meant a court martial and the end of someone's career; in MacGyver's opinion a small price to pay for wiping out a whole village full of civilians.

He dodged through the rain with the report tucked under his coat and knocked on the commander's door. The commander read the report without comment, then read it again. He folded it neatly and placed it on his desk, lining it up exactly with the edge.

"You realise how serious this accusation is, Corporal?"

"Yes, Sir." MacGyver nodded. The commander stared at him for a moment longer, then looked back down at the report.

"Thank you Corporal. Dismissed."

"What will happen now, Sir?" MacGyver fought the urge to step back as the commander glared at him.

"What happens now is that you do not discuss this with anyone, Corporal. That is an order. Do you understand?" The commander's voice was all the more chilling for being quiet. "Do you understand?"

"Yessir."

"Dismissed." The commander kept glaring as MacGyver opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it and saluted before leaving.

MacGyver closed the door behind him and took off his hat, scrubbing a hand through his short hair. He'd seen that expression on officers before. He'd bet some very safe money that his report was about to be buried.

Los Angeles, 1994

MacGyver scrubbed a hand through his unruly hair, feeling the bruise where Cooper had hit him.

"And then they buried it, Pete. They threatened me with everything under the sun if I ever talked about it to anyone, and they buried the whole thing." He took another look down the street, relieved to find it empty. "No court martial, no-one held responsible for all those deaths. Officially, it was an unsafe IED that blew its maker to bits."

"So why has it come out now?" Pete sounded both confused and horrified. "Mac, you need to get somewhere safe. Can you get to my place? We can figure out what to do for the best."

"Sounds like a plan." MacGyver balanced the phone on his shoulder and pulled a Calgary Flames hat out of his bag, tipping the brim down low and tucking his hair up under it to try to disguise his appearance. "Gonna take me a while though, if Cooper knew the route I take home from hockey practice, I bet he knows where I live too. I'll get on a bus instead of going home to get the Jeep." He took off his jacket, exchanging it for the sweatshirt he wore for training.

"OK Mac. I'll try to get hold of that artillery report. But Mac, Vietnam was a long time ago – even with my contacts, I may not be able to find it." Pete's voice was worried. "Stay safe, Mac."

"Thanks Pete, I'll do my best." MacGyver hung up and set off for the nearest bus stop, where he spent an anxious five minutes waiting for one to arrive. He boarded the bus and chose a seat at the back, stowing his bag and stick under the seat.

Vietnam, 1973

Corporal MacGyver boarded the bus and chose a seat at the back, stowing his kit bag and rifle under the seat. The two weeks he'd spent at the outpost had been eventful. He'd defused four kitchen-chemistry bombs, supervised mine clearance of a road that ran past a school and safely exploded some antique grenades that an old South Vietnamese soldier had been hoarding since Korea. He was pleased to be returning to his usual team. The outpost had a strange feel to it, as if there was a lot going on under the surface.

MacGyver leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. Perhaps he was being unfair. Perhaps he was letting his frustration at his report being hushed up colour his perception of an otherwise perfectly good squad. The bus lurched over a rock and Mac's head bumped against the window. As uncomfortable as Jeeps were, they were far better than travelling by military bus. His Jeep had been commandeered by a Sergeant heading back this way the day before, leaving MacGyver with no option. He held onto the seat in front as the bus rattled and skidded over the muddy ground. At least they weren't getting bogged down this time. On the way back from the bombed village they'd got stuck three times, and MacGyver was sure that the experience of digging the truck out while snipers shot at them from the dripping jungle would haunt his dreams for some time. He'd helped to push plenty of trucks over the last few years, but never one as heavy as that.

He must have fallen asleep, because the bus was pulling into MacGyver's home base when he opened his eyes again. Charlie Robinson, his fellow EOD expert and general partner in crime was waiting for him when he got off. His usually cheery face was grim and he caught MacGyver's sleeve, pulling him aside before speaking.

"Mac, am I glad to see you. You heard what's happened?" Charlie's eyes darted to Cooper's office and MacGyver followed his gaze.

"What's wrong, Charlie? Did something happen to Cooper?"

"Oh, yeah." Charlie nodded. "You hear about a village getting flattened last week? IED went up, killed everyone and levelled the place!"

"Hear about it? I was there, Charlie!" MacGyver frowned. Charlie picked up gossip better than a radio receiver, so if Charlie had only heard the official 'unstable IED' story, the truth must have been sewn up very tight indeed.

"Turns out," Charlie continued, "that Sergeant Cooper had a Vietnamese girlfriend and a kid living there. He'd kept it real quiet, of course, but he's just about off his head with grief about it. We're all covering for him, but..." Charlie shrugged helplessly.

"Good grief, Charlie, I had no idea!" MacGyver blinked hard, images of broken bodies and a small hand clutching a doll swimming up out of his memory. "How bad is he?"

"Pretty bad." Charlie pushed back his cap and scratched his head. "You know Cooper, he's buttoned up pretty tight at the best of times. You maybe wouldn't notice if you didn't know him, but it's like there's no-one home, you know?"

"Yeah." MacGyver left his kit with Charlie and walked across to Cooper's office. He tapped on the open door and stepped into the room.

"Corporal MacGyver, welcome back." Sergeant Cooper's voice was quiet and even.

"Sir." MacGyver saluted. "Reporting back for duty." Cooper nodded without looking up.

"You've had an... interesting couple of weeks, Corporal." Cooper's tone was unchanged, but when he looked up, MacGyver took an involuntary step away from the pain on Cooper's face. "I read Commander Tyler's report, Corporal. An IED destroyed a village near us, yes?" Cooper put down his pen and steepled his fingers, staring at MacGyver with empty eyes.

"The village was already gone when we got there, Sergeant. We'd got a report of an IED and-" MacGyver stopped as Cooper stood, his chair scraping on the floor.

"I went, Corporal. I went to see for myself. That was no home-brewed bomb and you know it!" Cooper was pale, his eyes shadowed. MacGyver wondered if he had slept at all since finding out.

"Sarge, I-"

"No." Cooper cut him off. "I know you can't say anything. You've been told what will happen to you if you talk about an... incident that the chiefs have decided is to be kept quiet." His tone was bitter. MacGyver nodded but didn't speak. "No, that damage was caused by a mortar. And if I ever find out who ordered the strike, I will find him. And I will kill him." Cooper fell silent, so still that MacGyver couldn't even see him breathing. Then Cooper turned away and stared out of the window.

"You're dismissed, Corporal." MacGyver nodded and saluted to Cooper's back. At the door, he paused.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Sir." He waited for a moment, watched Cooper nod once and then went through the door, shutting it quietly behind him.

War Stories Part 4

Los Angeles, 1994

MacGyver waited outside Pete's apartment until he heard the door buzzer, and then went through the door, shutting it quietly behind him.

"Pete, am I glad to be here!" MacGyver went across to the window, drawing the curtains. Cooper was a decent shot as well as a good tracker and MacGyver wasn't going to take any chances. He stood aside as Pete came out of the kitchen carrying a cookie jar.

"Mac, I'm glad you're here safe. Help yourself to tea or juice and I can tell you what I've found out." He set the cookies on the table and sat down, feeling for the jar lid and taking one for himself. "Seeley should be here any minute too, with the report."

"You found it?" MacGyver sat down in the chair opposite Pete. "The original report on the mortar strike? Pete, you're a genius!"

Pete smiled and saluted MacGyver with the cookie. Finding the report had meant calling in a lot of favours and he'd dispatched another field operative, Seeley Atkins, to the Phoenix building to pick up the fax received from the National Personnel Records Centre in St. Louis.

"So what did you find out?" MacGyver sat forward in his chair.

"Well, your report stayed buried until just this month." Pete located his coffee mug and took a sip. "Then President Nixon died and a whole lot of stuff got declassified. Some of it paints the US Army in a very unfavourable light, so I'm not surprised it was classified at the time. It looks like you were right – a mortar strike WAS ordered on that location on that day, by an artillery officer Alfred Hawkins." He took another bite of his cookie.

"Hawkins..." MacGyver shook his head. "I don't remember the name. Why would he want to bomb the village? There wasn't anything there, no military target..." he broke off as Pete's door buzzer sounded. Pete thumbed the intercom, checked their visitor's identity and let him in.

"Mac, this is Seeley. You two may know each other, I think you've crossed paths a few times at Phoenix."

"Yeah, I believe we have." MacGyver grinned and held up the cookie jar. "Cookie?"

Seeley looked from Pete to MacGyver and back again. He shook his head at the jar and pulled a file out of his briefcase.

"Hello Mr. Thornton, MacGyver." He opened the file on the table. "Mac, what does Cooper's file say about you?"

"Yeah, that." MacGyver took the file from his sports bag, flipped through it and threw it on the table in disgust. "It says I ordered a mortar strike on a civilian target, which killed everyone in it." He waved a hand at the offending file. "No wonder Cooper was after me, except that I didn't do it!"

Seeley reached out for the file, picking out a typed page and placing it next to a page from his faxed copy.

"This is the page you need. It shows the strike was ordered by Hawkins at 11:15 that day, when you were out on a completely different assignment. He turned the page round for Mac to see.

"I was. But why me? Why did he use my name?" MacGyver got to his feet and paced.

"My guess? You were an easy target." Seeley shrugged and smiled at MacGyver's outraged expression. "Think about it. You were the odd man out there, borrowed from another squad, you didn't know anyone and you were going to disappear back to your own unit in a few days. If I'd wanted to pin a crime on someone there, I'd have picked you too!"

"Yeah, OK." MacGyver frowned. "But why hit the village at all? It doesn't make any sense."

"I may have the answer to that too." Seeley turned to the back of his file. "Hawkins was eventually prosecuted for involvement in the black market, so it's possible that your village had some connection with that."

MacGyver nodded, remembering the crates the squad had dug out of the ruins and the odd heaviness of the truck on the return journey. The horrors he'd witnessed at the village had dulled his thinking – he'd never even suspected that the squad were up to no good.

"So what's the plan for dealing with Cooper?" Seeley leaned forward, looking keen.

"In the broad strokes, we go back, convince him of the truth and then get him the help he needs to come to terms with losing his family. He's basically a good man, he's just not himself right now. Let's work out the details when we get there, OK?" MacGyver gathered the papers and moved his sports bag into a corner where Pete wouldn't trip over it. He thought for a moment, then retrieved the hockey stick.

"You're seriously going in there with no plan?" Seeley folded his arms. "This man is armed, trained and a prime candidate for a section eight! We need the layout of the building, more backup, a solid plan of action..." He shook his head as MacGyver grinned at him with the hockey stick on his shoulder. "Not sports equipment and blind faith!"

"You coming?" MacGyver opened the door and gestured Seeley through.

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Seeley brought the car to a halt near the empty building Cooper had chosen. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and stared at the alley mouth in the headlights. The sign reading 'Allen's Professional Printing Company' hung faded and askew on the wall beside it.

"I don't like it, Mac." He drew his gun and checked it was fully loaded.

"Me neither. After all, it's me he's going to be shooting at!" MacGyver glanced at Seeley. "Hey, put that thing

away, would you?"

"You're joking, right?" Seeley stared in disbelief as MacGyver shook his head.

"I hate guns." MacGyver gave Seeley a look that was more sad than angry. "I really hate 'em, Seeley." They have a habit of killing the wrong people." He unclipped his seatbelt and opened the door, picking up the hockey stick. "Come on."

MacGyver pushed the door, listening before ducking inside. Seeley drew his gun and then followed. They crept along the narrow corridor, past the room MacGyver had been held in and down to a set of double doors, a faint light streaming out from underneath. MacGyver used the hockey stick to poke the door open a crack, standing well to the side.

"Cooper?" He flinched as a bullet cracked off the door, then poked it open again. "Cooper, you've got this all wrong!" A second bullet shattered the glass in the door's small window.

"Eleven o'clock, high." Seeley pressed himself against the wall and inched nearer to the door. "He must be up on a balcony, or something."

"Then there must be stairs to get up there. If we're really lucky, they'll be on this side of the door." MacGyver looked back along the dim corridor, but they hadn't passed any stairs on the way in. Cooper fired another shot, the flash from the gun showing, just for a moment, the steel of a staircase bolted to the far wall.

"Three! Plan, MacGyver! Now!" Seeley cocked the gun, ignoring MacGyver's glare.

"I'm working on it!" MacGyver lay down flat and peered through the crack in the door. "OK, got it." He crawled backwards and stood, tucked in as close to the wall as he could get. "I need to get to that staircase. To do that, I need you to distract Cooper while I make my run. Seeing as you've brought that thing—" He gestured to the gun, "- you can use it to help me out. Fire at the ceiling so that Cooper stays down and too busy to shoot at me, OK?"

"And if I get a clean shot at him?" Seeley glanced at MacGyver, watching him pull up the hood of his old black sweatshirt and pick up his hockey stick again.

"You continue to shoot at the ceiling, Seeley! Cooper is basically a good man, who didn't deserve what happened to him. I don't want him perforated!" Another shot ricocheted off the door and MacGyver ducked.

"Four! He's shooting at you and you don't want me to shoot back." Seeley shook his head. "You're crazy, you know that?"

"It may have been mentioned once or twice, yes." MacGyver grinned at Seeley and crouched down behind the door. "Ready?"

"Go!" Seeley aimed the gun through the door's broken window and fired up. MacGyver ran in, keeping to the shadows and moving fast and low. He skidded to a halt with his back to an old printing press, his black sweatshirt making him all but invisible in the gloom.

"Go!" More shots rang out against the ceiling and MacGyver made a dash for the staircase, hiding himself in the shadows underneath it. He listened to the scrape and click of Seeley changing clips on his gun and curled up small as Cooper took the opportunity to fire back. Three more shots sparked against the metal door and MacGyver heard Seeley swearing under his breath as he counted off Cooper's shots.

"Go!" MacGyver launched himself up the stairs bringing his hockey stick up and over in a scything arc that cracked down on Cooper's gun hand.

Cooper yelled and spun, just in time to catch MacGyver's return stroke flat across his cheek. He lost his

balance, the gun clattering on the metal catwalk and falling away into the darkness.

MacGyver dropped, pinning Cooper down.

"It wasn't me, Cooper!" He fought to keep Cooper down. "It wasn't me!" Desperation lent strength to Cooper's struggles and MacGyver felt his grip slipping. Leaving his weight pressed on Cooper's chest, he moved around him, Cooper's flailing hand catching him a stinging blow on the ear.

"OW! Stop!" He could hear Seeley running up the stairs. He slid an arm around Cooper's neck. "I don't want to do it, Cooper. Stop fighting me, would you?!"

"Mac, you need a hand?" A flashlight clicked on and showed Seeley, stopped at the top of the stairs with his gun raised.

"No, I got this." MacGyver tightened his grip, watching as Cooper's struggles grew weak, then stopped. Seeley watched as MacGyver checked Cooper's pulse, held a hand in front of his mouth and then laid him flat to wait for him to come to. Reaching behind himself, he pulled the reports out of his pocket.

In the glow of the flashlight, Cooper stirred and woke, squinting into the light and sighing as he recognised the gleam of the gun barrel pointing straight at him. He closed his eyes, his expression defeated.

"Cooper. Cooper!" MacGyver shook the reports. "I can prove it wasn't me, but you have to read these. Look." Cooper opened his eyes and reached up a hand to take the reports.

"What is this?" He angled the papers to read them by the flashlight's beam.

"This is the original report on the mortar strike that destroyed the village your family was living in. Look at the name at the top. That's the officer who ordered the strike." MacGyver tapped the top of the page.

"Hawkins..." Cooper held the pages side by side, his gaze flicking between them. "Hawkins..." Then his eyebrows shot up. "Fast Freddy Hawkins! But he's – he was – a..."

"Purveyor of unauthorised merchandise, yes." Seeley holstered the gun. "We're rounding him up right now because as well as being armpits deep in the black market, he ordered a mortar strike to a civilian population." He sighed, impatience clear on his face. "Mac, are we going to stay here all night?"

MacGyver ignored him, looking down at Cooper.

"If I let you up, are you going to take another swing at me?" Cooper shook his head, looking weary. In the flashlight's beam, MacGyver could see how grief had aged Cooper. He was thinner than MacGyver remembered, looking as though far more than twenty years had passed.

"Just help me up, Corporal." He held out a hand and MacGyver got to his feet, pulling Cooper up with him.

Seeley strode ahead, with Cooper and MacGyver hanging back. Cooper laid a hand on his arm, slowing him.

"You know I'll go after him, don't you?" MacGyver stopped and turned, facing Cooper in the dark room.

"Don't, Cooper. If you kill him, you're the crazy guy who shot the Vietnam vet, and nobody gets to know the truth. If we bring him to trial, he gets made into an example and a warning to others as to what happens if you cross the line." MacGyver watched Cooper in the poor light, waiting for him to think this through.

"He killed my family. I owe him." Cooper's voice trembled, and MacGyver was unsure whether with anger or grief.

"I know you do." MacGyver put both his hands on Cooper's shoulders, staring into his eyes. "If we bring him to trial, it might help stop the same thing happening to other families in warzones. You know it's the right thing to do." Cooper glared back, years of pent-up hate clear in his eyes.

Eventually Cooper swore, stuck his hands in his pockets and started walking again.

"You're right. I hate it, but you're right." He kicked at a coke can lying on the floor, sniffed hard and scrubbed his sleeve roughly across his face. MacGyver looked away, pretending not to notice. "I'll give evidence. I'll give all the evidence they want, and I'll recommend the harshest punishment for him. I can do that, right?"

"You can do that." MacGyver nodded. "And when it's done, I want you to talk to someone about all this, OK? Keeping it all locked away doesn't work, Cooper. Trust me, I know." MacGyver met Cooper's gaze calmly, letting the older man stare as long as he needed.

"Yeah, you do, don't you? I remember. OK, I will." Cooper nodded, then took a deep breath and looked over at Seeley, waiting impatiently at the door. "Who's your friend?"

"Colleague, Cooper. He'd not be happy to hear me call him 'friend'..." MacGyver grinned. "He reckons I'm crazy."

"Not a bad appraisal!" Cooper's answering smile was watery but genuine. "He's laced pretty tight, isn't he?"

"You have no idea." MacGyver scooped up Cooper's fallen gun, dismantling it and stowing the pieces in his pockets.

"Oh, you'll get him knocked into shape!" Cooper squared his shoulders and strode through the door with a trace of his old confidence, ignoring the filthy look Seeley turned on him. Grinning, MacGyver saluted Seeley with his hockey stick and followed him out.