

THE AFGHAN BLOOD HOUSE

By Gabriel A. Tolliver

Some people swore that the house was haunted. It was Halloween. We had just arrived as replacements at FOB Gambit. Flying over Zabul province in a Blackhawk was like seeing the movie set of Conan the Barbarian—it was sci-fi Afghan ethereal. The house had been turned into a combat aid station and used to belong to some warlord who was killed by the Taliban a few months back. The Talibs shot up the warlord and his minions in a couple of the rooms—the bullet holes were witnesses to the executions. Despite its morbid past, the house was a place to treat the wounded from the outlying combat outposts and a place for the dead to be picked up and taken to Kandahar Airfield. The house had a wall of handprints drawn by the previous Canadian units stationed there. Hands big, small, and medium-sized outlined in a variety of Sharpie and paint colors with various messages. Some handprints became memorials for those who Death claimed for her quota. I had some time to kill and found a spot near one of the makeshift operating rooms to catch a nod. THOOM!... THOOM!... I had gotten used to the sounds of outgoing rounds. A Stryker's 105mm gun was sending up orange illumination flares toward the hills. Trick o' Treat Talib—I mused. The only thing in common on this Halloween night would be the possibility of giving and receiving bullet candy and hearing Michael Jackson's "Thriller" in the MWR hut. My mind drifted

off and I started to imagine Taliban zombies coming down from the hills and assaulting the FOB. As my mind was playing tricks on me—I switched to thoughts of home. No sooner as I drifted off to deeper sleep, I quickly woke up to sounds of the aid station coming to life. An IED strike hit a Stryker. The driver and the gunner were CAT-A and rushed in. The driver was in his 20s. His ACUs were burnt, bloodied, and ripped open. Dude had a dazed, quizzical look on his face as if to say, "Really???" as he was being wheeled in by the medics toward one of the bullet pocketmarked ORs. As the kid's gurney was passing the handprint wall, he raised his bloodied right hand and touched a row of hands—giving each wall hand a bloodied signature. I silently prayed that this wall of hands would give this kid strength to live and not be on that next Styx River ferry. "Let's go, Bix," my squad leader called. I gathered up my M4 and Mich and followed my squad leader out into the full moon October night. We were relieving the listening post team outside the wire. Hours later we came back in and I headed back to the aid station. The bloodied streak across the handprint wall was wiped clean but still left a faint smear. I didn't see the kid. I asked one of the medics about him. The medic shook his head and kept on walking. I stared at the wall of hands and that kid's now forgotten bloody handshake. Nothing was ever the same again after that.