

## *Julie's War*

*By Michael Danese*

"I just can't believe this is happening to me. It was never supposed to be like this. But, I'm here to do a job and that's what I'm gonna do. I'm okay for now. I'll stay holed up in this abandoned garage until tomorrow night. Then they'll all know I'm here!" Julie thought to herself as she pulled an old blanket up over her shoulders.

Julie finds herself in the worst nightmare of any soldier. She is trapped behind enemy lines, and she is all alone. Several days before, her unit was ambushed in a firefight. She was the only survivor, barely avoiding death herself. She was taken prisoner and locked alone in a cell.

Julie is 24 years old, with short brown hair and a medium build. She has perfect teeth and a bright, dimpled smile, but she can't remember the last time that she smiled. She always wanted to be in the Army. Her father and grandfather were both veterans, and she was proud to carry on the family tradition. They were both there when she graduated from high school near the top of her ROTC class. Her years at West Point were as challenging as she imagined they would be, but she wouldn't have had it any other way. She knew that all of the hard work then was preparing her for what she is going through now. At graduation she met the gaze of her dad and noticed a tear. They both wished that her grandfather would have lived to see her graduate.

As far as being a prisoner of war, she was glad that they seemed to treat her fairly, although she knew that it would not be pretty if a certain guard was able to get her alone. He was huge and mangy-looking. Whenever he passed by her cell he just stood there and smiled an evil grin. She knew that it was just a matter of time until it was her or him.

She was constantly tired. The prison was loud with the sounds of people screaming and moaning in their cells. And, when it finally grew quiet enough that she was able to drift off to sleep, she was awoken by the screams in her head as she re-lived the firefight over and over. She saw each of her comrades gasp their final, painful breaths. One by one they died, in horror and agony. After each one died Julie thought she was next. She watched as an enemy soldier had a bead on her at close range, and as he pulled the trigger, George, her commanding officer, shoved her out of harm's way and into a wall. Before she hit the wall she saw George's head explode in the same place that her head had just been. His blood sprayed onto her face as she hit the wall, which knocked her out cold. When she woke up she was in the cell. She's seen that same scene over and over in super-slow-motion countless times in her head. No wonder she can't sleep.

From her first waking minute in the cell she planned her escape. The guards changed every eight hours. She was also brought food around that same time. She had a simple plan, probably too simple, but worth a try. Before they brought her dinner she scratched her head so it would bleed. She dabbed her sheet and got as much blood on it as she could. She climbed into bed and pulled the sheet up over her. When they brought her dinner the guard was alarmed and came over to see what was wrong. As he bent over to check on her, she pounced on him and choked the breath out of him. If there was one thing that she learned in the army it was how to kill, and she learned her lesson well.

Julie slipped off his shirt and put it on. She also grabbed his gun, hat and wallet. She stealthy entered the hall and heard her favorite guard breathing heavily around the corner. She caught up to him and pounced on him. She hit him in the throat with the butt of the gun and he went down. She grabbed his wallet and gun and lit out a side door.

That first night she just ran. She stumbled into a yard that had civilian clothes hanging on a clothesline. She helped herself. The fit wasn't quite right, but it worked well enough. She also scored a hat with a brim that she pulled down close to her eyes. She was cold and hungry, and brave and scared, all at the same time.

She did her best to blend in with the population. She knew it was only a matter of time before they were looking for her. She found a small grocery store and watched it for a few minutes. When she was sure there were no customers, she entered and headed towards the back. She grabbed a bottle of water and a loaf of bread. She heard someone enter the store and looked up to see the back of a man in uniform. She quietly put the bread and water on a shelf and as he went up one aisle she went up another and left the store.

"That was close – too close. I need to be more careful if I'm going to survive!" she thought.

She walked as fast as she could away from the store. Just fast enough to not look suspicious. A few blocks later there was another store. She staked it out for a good, long time before she entered. She skittered through the store and grabbed a few essentials. She pulled her hat down, and when she got to the register she didn't say a word. She knew she was on camera and she didn't want to draw any attention to herself. She just held out her hand with the money, took her change, nodded and left.

She stayed on the dark side of the streets, avoiding passersby and car lights. She wandered down a particularly dark street and noticed an alley. She went down the alley and found what appeared to be a line of storage garages. She was desperate for a safe place to have a little rest. She picked up a pipe and a brick from the ground and smashed the padlock that sealed the door. She entered and collapsed in a corner. Despite the war in her head she drifted off to sleep as exhaustion finally got the best of her.

Julie was suddenly startled by a noise at the door of her resting place. She quickly wiped the sleep from her eyes and sprung to her feet, grabbing her gun along the way. She froze and strained to listen. Had she been caught? The noise continued. She made her way to the door and waited, expecting it to be kicked in any second. After a long pause she opened the door a crack and peered into the ally.

She almost smiled when she saw a dog struggling to open a partially wrapped hamburger that someone had discarded. The dog spied looked at her with big, warm, friendly eyes. She opened her arms to the dog and the dog ran over to her. She led the dog into the garage. She slowly petted the large part German Shepherd female. She had a soft, brown and black coat and Julie guessed her to be about two years old. This was obviously a pet, and not a military dog. She knew that at first glance, since the military dog would have barked and attacked her.

"Are you hungry girl?" Julie asked as she gave the dog some bread and poured some water into the bottom of a small bucket for her. "I'm gonna call you Molly cause you remind me of the dog I had when I was a little girl. We'll watch out for each other, okay Molly?" Julie hugged the dog and the two of them fell asleep together.

The next morning they ventured out of the garage. Julie felt good about having Molly around, because, for one thing, the dog made her blend in with the locals better. They won't be looking for a woman with a dog. And also she loved seeing a friendly face. She couldn't remember the last time she saw one of those. She went back to the store and signaled to Molly to wait outside, which she did.

Julie slinked into the store as quietly as possible and gathered a few essentials, and also a few cans of dog food. Then she heard some voices a few aisles over. She immediately recognized it as Arabic. She learned a lot of Arabic at West Point for obvious reasons, and although she was quite rusty she was still able to make out the gist of the conversation – there was some type of important meeting or gathering happening Saturday night in the basement of a nearby mosque. She could tell by their tone that it was big. She decided right then and there that she would do whatever she could to spoil it for them.

She hung around the back of the store until she heard the men leave. She glanced out of the store window just as one of the men bent over to pet Molly. She saw Molly growl and the man quickly pulled his hand away. “That’s my girl!” Julie said smiling to herself.

Julie and Molly made their way back to the garage where they ate and got cleaned up. Then they took a walk to see the mosque. It was a large, stately building that took up half of the block. There were people going in and out. She saw the entrance to the basement. A few men were unloading some boxes and carrying them down the stairs. “Guns? Bombs? What could this be?” she thought. No matter what it was, tomorrow night she would find out when she takes the war to them!

Julie knew that she needed more guns and ammo. *A lot more.* She remembered passing a store that we would consider “sporting goods” and it catered to hunters. She led Molly and together they located the store. It was a normal storefront on a not-too-busy street. You know the type. Years ago the street was teeming with shoppers, but the malls and box stores caused the district to slowly dwindle, and now there are but a few stalwart stores. Julie knew she could use that to her advantage. The front windows and the door had bars across them. “No getting in there,” she thought. She went to the ally and the back door looked a little easier to breach. “The sledge hammer in the garage should do the trick,” she thought.

The duo returned to the garage. “Get some rest girl; we go a lot of work to do tonight!” Julie said to Molly. They ate a little and slept. Julie found that she slept easier now that she knew her mission.

When they awoke it was pitch black. Julie heard the clock in the town strike two, and that was her queue to move. She rubbed some grease on her face and hands, grabbed her gun, a black sack, and the hammer. Then the duo headed for the gun store. They travelled quietly and in the shadows, which was her new normal. When she reached the ally she signaled for Molly to wait. Perhaps she thought that Molly would warn her of trouble or something like that.

She slowly approached the back door, being careful not to make a sound. When she arrived she didn't waste a second. She hoisted the hammer and smashed the lock with one fell swoop. She pushed the door open as the alarm sounded. She flicked on the store's lights; saw her quarry – a semi-automatic rifle and matching handgun. She grabbed both along with a few boxes of ammo, slid them into the bag, and then she bolted out of the door.

Julie and Molly ran through several allies that she mapped out earlier. The sirens blared, and she knew that they would be long gone before they arrived. When they got back to the garage they both fell into a heap, exhausted. Julie's heart pounded out of her chest. She pulled Molly close and almost laughed when she felt the dog's heart pounding also. Julie said a prayer and asked God to bless her mission and thanked him for making her such a great soldier. She knew a lesser person would not have been able to make it as far as she did.

The two new friends drifted into a deep sleep. The next morning Molly was up first, before the sun. She licked Julie's face and Julie sprang up and startled the dog. Yes, she was still full of jitters. She pulled the dog close, smiled and apologized. They left the garage and went to a small park. As Molly did what was needed, a man came up from behind Julie and grabbed her.

"I've seen you around here and I thought it was time we met!" he said. He was a large man with a beard and piercing dark eyes to match his black hair. He held her tightly and squeezed as he lifted her off of the ground. His breath alone was enough to overcome Julie.

Julie had come too far to have it all end at the hands of this man. She squirmed and kicked, but he was too strong. As he carried her into the bushes Molly's jaws closed on his knee from behind. The man stumbled and it was just enough for Julie to break his hold on her. She spun around and with the heel of her palm she drove his nose up into his head. She then punched him in the side of his head. He went down with a face full of blood, enough to temporarily blind him. Molly loosened her grip and the two escaped. Yes, Julie's training was invaluable again.

"Come on, Molly, let's get outta here" Julie said as the two of them ran the long way around the block and back to their safe haven. "Good girl, Molly! I don't know what I woulda done if you weren't there to save me!" Julie opened a bottle of water and washed the blood off of her hands. They kept a very low profile for the rest of the day.

Julie constantly reviewed her plan in her head. She would wait awhile, until everyone was inside and the meeting was underway. She would push her way into the basement and take out the guards first. Then she would go for the leader, taking out anyone else in her path. She wouldn't be greedy, once she got the leader she would quickly retreat and escape. Sure, she knew it was risky, but wars aren't won by playing it safe!

She pulled Molly close and tried to sleep, but every time she closed her eyes she saw flashed of her unit in the firefight, and also her father's eyes. Eventually she just ended up staring at the ceiling and waiting until the time was right.

At about 7:00 pm she began her preparations. She let Molly out then they shared a quick meal of dried beef. She carefully checked her weapons and made sure that she had enough ammo. She smeared some grease on her face, then as soon as it got dark enough she made her way to the mosque. She spent some time in the alley across the street behind some large bushes. She watched as her enemy filed into the basement. When the time was right, she knelt down, hugged Molly and firmly instructed her to stay and wait.

Julie stealthy made her way to the door and entered quickly. There were two men just inside the door and she hit one in the head from behind with the butt of her semi-automatic rifle and slammed her elbow into the jaw of the other. Both quietly went down. So far, so good.

When she got to the main room from the back she was generally unnoticed. It was a large room with rows of chairs facing a small stage. Almost every seat was filled. All eyes were on the leader. She knew that she had the element of surprise on her side, but she had to act quickly. She had a clear shot and took it. Her first shot hit him in the chest and he went down. Then she started firing upon everyone in the room. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. As she fired upon them she had visions of payback for her unit, and for all of the fallen soldiers in this terrible war. She walked and shot, never once hearing the cries of her victims or even seeing the terror in their eyes. Then suddenly it was over. She was hit in the head from behind and then she collapsed on the floor.

When she was able to open her eyes she tried to rub them, but she was handcuffed to a bed. It looked like a similar cell to the one she escaped from just a few days ago. She heard a voice announce that she was awake and then the room filled with people. As she peered through bleary eyes she was confused, and the pain in the back of her head wasn't helping.

A doctor leaned over her and said, "Julie, can you hear me?"

Julie nodded her head. She was gazing into the face of a large man wearing a white lab coat. The lights were blaring in her eyes and she just wanted to be alone, to go back to sleep.

"I'm Doctor Sanberg. You will be staying with us for a while. We are going to do a few tests, and then I'm going to give you a sedative. But first, this is Detective Noonan. He needs to talk to you."

Detective Noonan was a tall African – American man with very broad shoulders. He leaned close to her and said, "Julie, can you hear me and understand what I am saying?"

Julie nodded.

He continued, "You are under arrest for murder and attempted murder, robbery, assault with a deadly weapon and breaking and entering. You have the right to remain silent, anything that you say can and will be used against you. You have the right to an attorney..."

As he spoke Julie drifted off. "What was he talking about? I remember being in a hospital room, something about a dog, and then waking up with this terrible headache." She thought to herself.

"Julie, do you understand what I just said? The detective asked.

"Yes...no...murder?" I'm sorry but you must have me confused with someone else! she said.

At that, Doctor Sanberg, added, "Julie, you've been through a lot in the past several days. You went off you meds and did some terrible things. I'm going to give you that sedative now and we can talk later."

He gave her an injection and she sunk back into a stupor. The room slowly cleared and she was alone again, still hand-cuffed to the bed.

As Detective Noonan left the hospital he was greeted by a large throng of reporters, both local and national. He was immediately peppered with questions.

"Why did she massacre all of the people at the wedding?"

"Is she a terrorist?"

“Do you have a response from the Islamic community, do you think they will retaliate?”

“Does she know how many people she murdered?”

“Quiet! I’ll make a statement and that will be it!” he announced. “First, this was not, I repeat, it was NOT a terrorist act. Julie Nelson is a very sick, delusional person. She is a decorated war hero, and unfortunately she suffers from very severe post-traumatic stress syndrome. She was under close medical supervision and heavy doses of medication. She somehow went off of her medication and managed to escape the hospital. When she was in the streets she thought she was right back in the war and her instincts and training too over, leading to her crimes. She is completely unaware of what happened. She is now back under medical care and custody, and charges will be filed soon. She remains very confused and we will talk to her when the doctor permits. That’s it. No questions.” He quickly left as the reporters continued to hound him.

That night, news reports across the country gave details about the 12 people killed and 14 wounded by Julie during a wedding ceremony at a mosque. They described Julie as a deranged mental patient that went on a murderous rampage because of her racist beliefs, dubbing her “The Mosque Murderer.” Over the next several days they highlighted the funerals of the victims, and interviewed surviving victims as they were slowly released from the hospital. They told of their horrific experiences at the hands of The Mosque Murderer. Within a week the story went cold as the media latched onto the next big thing.

Julie was eventually sentenced to incarceration at a mental hospital where she remains today. Her father visits her on a regular basis, and the doctors continue to keep her medicated. She is vaguely aware of the term “Mosque Murderer” but she still has no real memory of the event, except for some flashes of Molly’s bright, warm eyes. Her father eventually brought her a large stuffed German shepherd with big brown eyes. Julie finds comfort cuddling with her stuffed Molly.