Strange to think about it, the black smoke.

As it turns out, the eventual killer of Billy McKenna was lurking in the photographs he snapped in Iraq. Billy wrote captions beneath some of his photographs: TYPICAL DAY ON PATROL reads one. The photo is partially obscured by the blurred image of a soldier's upraised hand. Brown desert unfurls away from a vehicle toward an empty horizon, and a wavering sky scorched white hovers above. Off to one side: Balad Air Base and the spreading umbrella of rising dank smoke from a burn pit.

Billy told his wife, Dina, in e-mails from Iraq that the stench was killing him. The air so dirty it rained mud. He didn’t call them burn pits. She can’t recall what he called them. He didn’t mean killing him literally, just that the overwhelming odor was god-awful and tearing up his sinuses. He didn’t wear a mask. It would not have been practical. In heat that soared above a hundred degrees, what soldier would wear one?

Dina doesn’t know when she first heard the words “burn pit.” A Veterans Affairs doctor may have said it. The doctors were telling her a lot of things when Billy was on a ventilator. All she could think was, How can he have cancer? He’s indestructible. He’s been to hell and back. He can build houses, race cars, fish, camp. He was an Eagle Scout as a kid. He doesn’t smoke cigarettes.
But Billy had been exposed to something much more harmful than cigarettes. Since 2003, defense contractors have used burn pits at a majority of U.S. military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan as a method of destroying military waste. The pits incinerate discarded human body parts, plastics, hazardous medical material, lithium batteries, tires, hydraulic fluids, and vehicles. Jet fuel keeps pits burning twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

The U.S. government, however, has only recently acknowledged the harmful effects of burn pits. According to a report released last year by the United States Government Accountability Office, “burn pits help base commanders manage waste, but also produce smoke and harmful emissions that military and other health professionals believe may result in acute and chronic health effects to those exposed.”

When asked recently about the number of veterans suffering from respiratory illnesses, a military spokesman, Major T.G. Taylor, responded only by citing a contrary May 2010 Department of Defense study, which he says found that illnesses due to smoke exposure in war zones were no more common among soldiers exposed to burn pits than those who were not exposed.

The VA states on its own webpage that chemicals, paint, medical and human waste, metals, aluminum, unexploded ordnance, munitions, and petroleum products among other toxic waste are destroyed in burn pits. Possible side effects, the department notes, “may affect the skin, eyes, respiration, kidneys, liver, nervous system, cardiovascular system, reproductive system, peripheral nervous system, and gastrointestinal tract.”

The burn pit at Balad consumed about 250 tons of waste a day, exposing 25,000 U.S. military personnel and thousands of contractors to toxic fumes.

The pit was shut down in 2009, though as of last year, twenty-two other burn pits were still in operation in Iraq. But the damage was done.

“Patients don’t fully understand the implication of their symptoms,” says Anthony Szema, head of the Allergy Diagnostic Unit
at Stony Brook University hospital, who has studied the effects of burn pits on returning veterans. “Most general internists don’t know how to treat this. Hundreds of people are coming back [from Iraq and Afghanistan]. We have to create special centers of excellence within the VA with expertise to address this. We have to invent new drugs. Test sand, burn pits, what soldiers have been exposed to. Screen those exposed. We’re talking a large-scale effort.”

When President Obama took office in January 2009, 144,000 U.S. troops were deployed in Iraq. One month later, Obama announced there would be an end to U.S. combat missions there by August 31, 2010. After a series of drawdowns, about 50,000 U.S. troops remain at war. That means 94,000 troops have returned home in under three years, many of whom were likely exposed to burn pits. Already, Veteran Administration physicians have seen an increase in respiratory problems in returning veterans.

“The system is going to be overwhelmed,” Zenina said.

Of course the smoke would be harmful, Dina thinks now. But at the time of her husband’s return from Iraq, why would she have thought anything about black smoke rising from something called a burn pit? What should a big hole in the ground the military used to destroy waste have meant to her? Why would she have thought about anything other than that her husband was home alive?

Not that long ago Dina felt the wild, heart-thudding joy of her husband’s return, the smiling-until-it-hurts kind of delight, that impassioned feet-off-the-ground body-crushing embrace of I’m home, but it seems long ago today.

Dina and others have joined in lawsuits against KBR, Inc., a Texas-based government contractor, and its former parent company Halliburton, alleging it had exposed American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan to lethal air pollutants by burning toxic waste. The heavy black burn-pit smoke lingered for days and weeks at a time over U.S. bases and areas nearby, affecting soldiers and local populations. Claims against KBR and Halliburton have been filed in sixteen states by almost two hundred plaintiffs.

But the problem runs deeper than just KBR and Halliburton. The burn pits were intended to clean up Iraq and Afghanistan, to remove inevitable litter and detritus from the war zone. But in the process of cleaning up, the toxic smoke has become an unintended killer of American troops abroad.

Nearly six months after Billy died, on a muggy Florida day this year, when the cool of the morning has been consumed by the wet-plastic wrap of afternoon humidity. Dina trudges from room to room, boxes in hand, and begins the tedious task of packing up her Spring Hill house. She and her two daughters will return to Long Island, where she grew up and met Billy more than twenty years ago, when he played bass guitar and dreamed of being a rock star. Dina will get the girls enrolled in new schools and then what? She is forty-one and doesn’t have a college degree. Maybe she’ll work at a supermarket or become a receptionist. What does she want to be? Previously, all she wanted to be was an Army wife and to look after her kids. Six months after Billy’s death, she must start over and find something else she wants.

An hour and a half drive north in Eustis, Florida, Jill Wilkins sits in her study reading the latest entries on the burn-pit Facebook page she set up after her own husband, Kevin Wilkins, died of a brain tumor in 2008. After Kevin’s death, the Facebook page was an outlet for her grief and anger. It also gave her a mission: help veterans exposed to burn pits, and advise their families how to get the benefits due them. The page has become a kind of “chat” way station garnering more than two thousand fans. Jill dispenses advice based on her experiences with doctors, the VA, and her own loss.

Do you know what life insurance you have? she writes to one veteran who complains of ill health resulting from his exposure to burn pits. Do you know where your paperwork is?

Jill had not known where her paperwork was when Kevin died. A lieutenant colonel in Kevin’s Air Force reserve unit made some calls on her behalf so she received his reserve retirement benefits. The soldier also told her she was eligible for Kevin’s VA benefits, benefits that would help pay for her two children’s school and health care. She was furious she found out by chance. Shouldn’t someone have told her?

Jill wasn’t worried when Kevin was deployed to Iraq. He was a nurse; he wouldn’t be going to the front lines. She had grown accustomed to him being away once a month for his Air Force reserve drills. His unit had been activated for the first Gulf War in 1990. She was pregnant. Back then she worried. But that time, his unit wasn’t deployed. When the Iraq War began and Kevin was called up, her children were teenagers. I can handle this now, she thought. Oh, she told friends and colleagues as casually as she might comment on the weather, my husband is in Iraq. She was proud of him, boastful. Jill never had a bad feeling about Iraq. She never thought Kevin would die.

I got a paper yesterday saying [the VA] will not accept service connection for the cancer but granted [Billy] unemployability insurance comp. I was also turned down for aid and attendance. I am very disappointed and so exhausted from the wait time.

—Dina McKenna

I don’t care what their paper says. Never take “no” for an answer. And I also will do whatever it takes to help you guys. [I’m sorry, I’m just angry because more guys are dying!]

—Jill Wilkins

FACEBOOK [MAY 9, 2010]

Like so many others on Jill’s Burn Pit page, Dina McKenna just appeared one day. Another desperate spouse of a critically ill veteran. But Dina made an impression. Perhaps because her last name, McKenna, was also the name of Jill’s daughter. Dina had written to Jill in April 2010. Billy had been diagnosed with cancer. Dina had quit her job to take care of him. They had no money. Were they eligible for VA benefits?

Jill read the note again. Billy was dying. Just like Kevin. Once more, Jill’s mind returned to the crowded hall of Florida Hospital.
Waterman, in Eustis, where Kevin worked as a nurse. He was on a gurney. A doctor was explaining the results of Kevin’s CAT scan.

We found a mass.

What’s a mass? Jill thought.

Kevin listened quietly.

The doctor pulled up a chair and cautioned them not to get excited. Oh my God.

The doctor didn’t know what the mass meant. Possibly an infection. Had Kevin been exposed to anything toxic?

Yes, Kevin said. To all kinds of stuff in Iraq. He mentioned the burn pit on Balad Air Base where he worked in a clinic. He walked through the smoke every day without a mask.

“Kevin talked about the smoke and what was in the burn pit,” recalls Jill’s friend Lori Ross who was with Jill at the hospital. “He mentioned medical waste. It was more than just garbage. He talked about how thick and heavy the smoke was. He said it saturated the base.”

Jill waited for the doctor to say he knew a patient with the same kind of mass who turned out fine. Instead, the doctor said he wanted Kevin examined by a brain surgeon at Florida Hospital South in Orlando. He told Jill to go home. Sleep. Otherwise she would sit in the hospital all night. Okay, she said. She had two kids at home who knew only that their father had not been feeling well the night before.

The doctor left to arrange for an ambulance to transport Kevin to Orlando. Kevin asked Jill to buy him a chocolate milk shake at a nearby Steak ‘N Shake. When she returned, she saw the doctor pacing back and forth outside Kevin’s room, a worried look on his face.

Jill tried to make light of her own worry by teasing Kevin about riding in an ambulance.

Do you think it will have its lights on?

No, hon, I don’t think so.

See you tomorrow. I’m going home to bed.

Might as well. I’ll be laying around.

You don’t have to tell me what to do.

She called Kevin later. What time will you get there? He didn’t know. Don’t worry, they’ll have a room for me. See you in the morning, hon.

After she hung up, Jill played Monday-morning quarterback with herself. Why hadn’t she realized something was wrong, seriously wrong? Kevin had been complaining of headaches for months. He’d say, God, my head, and take Tylenol or Advil. But why would she have thought to say, Go get a CAT scan? He was the nurse, not her. They were just headaches, right? Everyone gets them.

Kevin had been tired when he left on his first tour of Iraq in May 2003. Had that made him more susceptible to the toxins he inhaled? Jill remembers him telling her. We all have cancer cells. When we get weak, they can get ahold of healthy cells and start to grow.

However, at the time, Kevin’s focus was not on himself but on how Jill and the kids would do in his absence. When I’m gone, I don’t want anything to go wrong, he said. I’ll figure it out, Jill told him. I put an extra five hundred bucks in our checking account just in case.

Just in case what? Jill asked. You think I can’t handle this?

Kevin would call her from Balad Air Base. What’s going on? How’re the kids? He told her he swam laps in an Olympic-size swimming pool once used by Saddam Hussein. The weather was very hot. There were two places to eat on the base and one of them was not good at all.

At night, insurgents fired mortars and he would crawl under his bed. He talked about working cases, taking care of kids. He never mentioned burn pits.

By the end of his tour in August 2006, he could not wait to return home. He celebrated by buying a Honda motorcycle and a 2007 Keystone Outback Camper. They used the camper just twice before he died.

The headaches started in 2007. A little nagging pain. The pollen was bad then. Maybe Kevin was allergic to orange blossom. His eyes looked funny. Like he had the flu. Something wrong, Kevin? Yeah, I’m really tired. What’s for dinner?

Kevin returned to the Gulf in January 2007 and was stationed in Qatar with a medical air-transport team. He didn’t mention his headaches when he called home. He was not the kind of man who would waste what little time he was allowed on the phone talking about headaches.

The headaches continued when he returned to the U.S. in April. Back at work, at Waterman Hospital, he wore a jacket and complained of being cold despite the Florida heat. Do you have the flu? his supervisor asked him. No boss, I’m okay. He had sinus problems and was constantly blowing his nose. He had always received the best work evaluations, but he had become neglectful. He would forget to hang antibiotics, chart patients. His colleagues thought he was readjusting to being home.

Almost a year later, on March 25, 2008, he spent the night in the bathroom sick to his stomach. He was late for work the next morning. His supervisor told him he had kept a patient waiting. Are you okay? He told her he had been awake throughout the night vomiting. Go to a doctor, his supervisor said. The doctor referred him to the Waterman emergency room. He returned home to pick up Jill so she could be with him. She drove. He vomited twice out of the truck.

In the waiting room of the ER, Kevin leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. You all right? Jill asked him. Yeah, I’m all right. Jill bought a sandwich, came back, looked at her husband.

They had met years earlier in a Friday’s restaurant in Orlando, when Jill worked as a travel director. She was a friend of Kevin’s brother-in-law. Kevin was the opposite of Jill. She was outgoing, he was shy. He lived in Kentucky at the time, and offered to delay his departure home so they could hang out for a week. This is it, Jill thought. They married in 1989, lived in Kentucky for five years, and then moved to Eustis.

Someone called Kevin’s name interrupting Jill’s thoughts. An attendant led them into an examination room. A doctor entered soon
after. Kevin told him about being sick to his stomach. He mentioned that his head had been hurting for months. The doctor arranged for a CAT scan.

Hey Jill, I took a few days off from the stress and now I am getting ready to fight back. Where do I start? I want to reapply for the service connected VA decision. Do I have to go to a VA rep for that?

—Dina McKenna

Dina will send you everything you need. I am glad to see you took a few days off. You can make an appointment with your local VA rep then tell them why you are needing to file your claim. If you at all feel like they are giving you the “cold” shoulder (it happened to me) tell them you will come in and get the paperwork that you need to file your claim.

—Jill Wilkins

FACEBOOK [MAY 14, 2010]

Dina closes Billy’s book of Iraq photos and puts them in a box in the garage beside other boxes packed for the move to Long Island. It will be good to leave. Leave all the horror of Billy’s cancer behind. For months, this house was nothing but illness.

She has yet to remove the framed photos of Billy from the wall. Of him in his military fatigues, shaved head shining beneath the sun, holding his oldest daughter Katie in Colorado. It was snowing. Katie smiles, sitting on his knees. Of him in his twenties playing bass guitar, his shoulder-length hair waving about his face. Of him mowing the yard. He hardly ever cut the grass. So when he did, Dina snapped a photo. That was a fun day. A fun Sunday when all they did was laugh and enjoy one another’s company.

Dina will leave the pictures on the living-room wall for now. The house would be anonymous without them. She has moved a few times without Billy, but not like this. Not with him gone as in gone for good. She has all his stuff: six guitars, a toolbox, shoes, T-shirts. She can’t sell them, doesn’t want to.

One thing she can’t find is Billy’s garlic press. Dina put it in his toolbox. She didn’t know what it was. Maybe it was something he used when he worked on his car. Oh, God, he laughed at that. Really laughed. A hissing laugh. He laughed the same way when he watched Married with Children and Everybody Loves Raymond. A very contagious laugh. Dina smiles. Frickin’ garlic press. She doesn’t know where it is now. Stupid thing.

She shakes her head and breathes deeply. Her daughters, six-year-old Sabrina and thirteen-year-old Katie, will be home soon from school. Billy always did homework with the girls. Dina worries Katie or Sabrina will come home with math and science problems she won’t understand. She hopes Katie can help Sabrina with those kinds of questions. Katie handles math on her own. Knows her mother doesn’t understand it.

Dina looks through the refrigerator thinking about dinner. Something simple. Steak. Billy was the cook. Fresh garlic, fresh basil. He had his own special recipe for everything. Dina looks at the ingredients of a cookbook and wonders, What is all this crap? Billy rarely bothered with a cookbook.

Okay, dinner. What else? Katie has a horse-riding lesson later. Dina might drop Sabrina at her sister’s house nearby. Depends on Sabrina will want to watch Katie ride. Sabrina has been doing okay these past couple of weeks in school. No more timeouts. She had not understood Billy’s death. Teachers saying sorry to her. She began telling other kids she wished they would die. She didn’t mean it. Die to her meant go away.

Dina had Billy’s photograph embossed on necklaces shaped like military dog tags and gave one to each of the girls on Valentine’s Day, two months after he died. Katie wears her necklace every day. Sabrina wore hers only once. Dina thinks kids at school asked her about it and their questions made her cry. Sabrina said she lost the necklace in her bedroom.

Sabrina is too young to remember her father when he was healthy. She only knew the sick Billy. He had begun having problems before she was born. After his first tour, he had complained about his breathing. He couldn’t run without losing his breath. Army doctors reminded him that he grew up on Long Island. Now he was based in Colorado. Altitude adjustment. That’s all.

They called him the old man from New York. He was old, too. Thirty-three when he joined. Before then he had been living the rock-star wannabe dream. Gigs, drinking, staying up until four.A.M. September 11 changed all that. He told Dina he would join the Army. Will you marry me now? he said. They’d known each other since high school when she drove him away from a beer-drinking party the police had busted. He had the beer, she had the car. They were eighteen.

Billy and Dina married on New Year’s Eve 2002. About four weeks later, they left Long Island and took off crosscountry to Billy’s first duty station, Fort Carson, Colorado. Colorado was so different. Mount-
tains and streams. Snow in frickin’ April, man. Dina looked at the mountains and felt they were staring back at her. Whoo, she thought. Dina and Billy had done it, escaped New York. Everybody else they knew had stayed behind, stayed the same. Not them. It was just the two of them without the crowd. About four months after they moved, he shipped to Iraq.

What happened? Jill heard him ask a nurse. He was fine yesterday. The surgeon was shaking.

Jill can’t recall how much time passed before the doctor came out of the intensive care unit to speak with her. Fluid build-up had put pressure on Kevin’s brain, he explained, resulting in cardiac arrest. Kevin was on a ventilator. We’ve been checking on him, the doctor continued. There’s no brain activity. He’s not going to make it.

Jill called the pastor.

How do I explain this to the kids? Jill asked him in a shaking voice. I can’t. Your dad’s on a ventilator. I can’t. We did what they told us to do and now he’s not going to make it? You have to be with me.

At the hospital, Pastor Edwards sat with Jill and her children. He spoke quietly, directly. He explained Kevin was breathing with the help of a machine and would not survive. McKenna’s eyes opened wide. She clung to her mother. Keaton stared at the floor. Neither spoke. Jill tried to remain calm but her voice shook, her face drawn and mournful. We don’t know why these things happen, Pastor Edwards said.

He stayed with the family when the doctors took Kevin off the ventilator the next day. His daughter touched his face. Keaton held his father’s hand. They watched a monitor show his heartbeat slowing to a stop.

Hello Jill, Bill’s cancer relapsed, it’s now in his nervous system, he has lost sight in one eye and half his face is paralyzed. I have been at the hospital every day all day trying to comfort him. The chemo is 3 times stronger now and every two weeks. I have been contacting his former comrades asking for information about what exactly happened over there. The VA denied the claim of being military related. I appealed and am waiting for a response.

—Dina McKenna

FACEBOOK [JULY 18, 2010]

Pastor Doug Edwards of Trinity Evangelical Free Church in Buxton has known Jill Wilkins since 1995, when she and Kevin first began attending his services.

Jill called him when Kevin was admitted to Florida Hospital South. Pastor Edwards had his own doctor’s appointment in Orlando. He visited with Kevin and told him he would be fine. He ate lunch with Jill and the children while Kevin had an MRI.

The MRI confirmed the existence of the brain tumor. The next day, a Friday, doctors operated to remove it. Before the operation, Kevin and Jill’s seventeen-year-old son, Keaton, drew a heart on his father’s shaved head. No one had any bad feelings. The family spent the day in the hospital waiting for the operation to be completed. Kevin would get through this, Pastor Edwards thought. They found the tumor and will remove it. This is a slam dunk.

After the operation, the doctors let Jill and the children see Kevin. He was sitting up, his head wrapped in a white bandage. He was alert, but his speech was slurred from the anesthesia. He wanted to take a shower. He tried to walk, but felt sick. He complained his head was hurting.

On Sunday, while talking to his mother, Kevin collapsed. When Jill arrived at the hospital, she saw a pastor outside Kevin’s room. We almost lost him, Kevin’s mother said. Kevin’s surgeon ran past.

Late one night, shortly before he entered the hospice, Billy stumbled and fell in the house. Dina screamed, closed Katie’s bedroom door so she wouldn’t see her father’s agony. He looked like he was having a seizure but he was actually shivering against the tile floor.

Now, nearly half a year later, Katie and Sabrina McKenna burst through the front door of their house and veer off their separate ways—Katie to a breakfast-nook table where she picks up one of the family’s three cats and sits beneath the hand smudge left on the wall from when her father tried to break his fall. Sabrina scoots into the kitchen for a snack.

Hi, Dina says to Sabrina. Did you get a smiley face at school today? Yeah.

What are you doing?

Washing strawberries.

You going to clean your mess?

Sabrina resembles Billy; same blue eyes and red hair. She likes it when people say, You look like your daddy. Dina thinks Sabrina resents Katie for having memories of their father. Like how they built model cars together. Seven in all, painted different colors. Katie has them in a box in her bedroom. Billy liked the purple car best. Sometimes she takes them out and looks at them on the white...
knitted blanket he used in the hospice and that now covers her bed. His Army cap hangs from the night table. Sometimes she wears it. Billy wore it when they fished together in Colorado. They would get up early in the morning while it was still dark and drive into the Rocky Mountains. She used worms, he preferred black spinnerbait. She would catch more fish than he did.

Katie, how was your day?
Boring.
Boring?
In archery, I almost got a bull’s-eye.
That’s not boring.
Katie shrugs. She has long hair like her mother and wears jeans and a Carrie Underwood T-shirt. She held it together when Billy was sick, and did what needed doing.

Okay, okay, how do I fix it? Katie said. Like it was her burden. Her fault. Her problem.

It’s not up to you, Dina said.

Katie made her father get-well cards and watched his favorite television shows and told him what happened. One time in the car, Dina tried to explain how ill Billy was. I know, Katie said, and turned up the radio. She didn’t want to hear it. She was Daddy’s little girl. She only broke down when Dina told her her father had died.

Billy had been stationed on Balad Air Base his first tour. He spent some time in Baghdad, too. He told Dina stories. How insurgents stuffed dynamite into the bellies of donkeys. When the animal exploded in a crowded market, guts and fur blasted everywhere.

Billy would guard dead Iraqis while the Army waited for their families to claim the bodies. He had to shoot the dogs that tried to eat the corpses.

He also had to shoot at a boy who ran at some U.S. tanks yelling, Mister! Mister! Mister! The boy was told to stop but continued running. Billy never knew if his bullet killed him or not.

When he called home, he talked about the stink hovering over the base and asked Dina to send him Tic Tacs, sweet taffy, any kind of candy to get the sour, lingering taste out of his mouth.

He especially liked Jelly Bellys and always reminded Dina not to substitute them for the store-brand jelly beans. It became a joke in his family. How particular he was about his Jelly Bellys. Dina stuck some of the candy in the pockets of the leather jacket she buried him in.

What are you doing? Sabrina asks Dina.

Waiting for the French fries. Do you want me to cut you some steak?
Can I have an Oreo?
No. Here, I’m cutting you meat.
I want an Oreo.
How about tomatoes?

All I want is an Oreo.
You can have two Oreos. But you have to eat your dinner first.
Now do you want greens or celery?
Celery.
Deal.

Billy was home eight months before he was called up a second time. Although he complained of being tired, he was okay. Still Bill. Drank beer on weekends, fished, worked on his car. Dina knew he would go to Iraq again. Soldiers were doing as many as three tours. It was a sad day when she showed him the deployment letter. He couldn’t even tell her, just handed her the paper. Dina just went on. She had Katie to look after.

Billy was afraid this time. He wasn’t with guys he had trained with. His commander was a kid fresh out of West Point and Billy didn’t trust him. He told Dina he no longer understood why he was in Iraq. When he returned, he was diagnosed with traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder. He received eighty percent disability from the VA and vocational rehabilitation funding. He quit the Army and no longer wanted to remain in Colorado. His friends were leaving for war. He was no longer a soldier. He wanted to put Iraq behind him. He enrolled in the Universal Technical Institute in Orlando to learn how to build high-performance engines and rebuild classic cars, a passion since he was a teenager.

In Florida, Billy developed a lump on his jaw the size of a pencil eraser. His face swelled. A doctor told him the lump might be from something he ate and referred him to a dentist. The dentist found nothing wrong with his teeth and gums and suggested he consult a jaw surgeon. He was put on a waiting list. Three months later, the jaw surgeon found nothing wrong.

Two days after Christmas 2009, Billy lost his breath when he and Dina took an evening walk together. He sat down and thumped his chest, struggled for air. What’s wrong? Dina asked him. I just need a minute, Billy said. They returned home and he went to bed. Three days later, he had trouble breathing again.

Dina drove him to James A. Haley Veterans Hospital in Tampa. As they entered the hospital, Billy collapsed onto a gurney. Hospital staff rushed him into the emergency room. After an hour, doctors told Dina that Billy had suffered complete kidney failure. They also found a mass the size of a pancake wrapped around his heart and lungs. The doctors didn’t know if he would make it through the night. You’re crazy, Dina thought. You got the wrong guy. He’s only forty. You’re not talking about Billy. Hospital staff kept coming at her with forms to sign. We need this, we need that. Do it, she said. Fix it. Do it.

Billy was on a ventilator for nine days. He fought when he was
The *Oxford American*’s filmmaker Dave Anderson and “Smoke Signals” author J. Malcolm Garcia teamed up and traveled to Florida to produce a documentary film on the McKenna and Wilkins families and the burn pits of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Watch the film at [OxfordAmerican.org](http://OxfordAmerican.org)
taken off it, tried to pull the tubes out of his arms, and he was put in restraints. He thought the nurses were against him. He pleaded with Dina to untie him, sneak him some clothes. When she refused, he became furious. Get her out of here! he shouted. She’s not here for me. The next day, he didn’t remember. The next day it was, Hi, babe, how are you doing?

In January 2010, test results from the mass showed Billy had t-cell lymphoma, a rare and aggressive cancer.

Mr. McKenna has a diagnosis of lymphoblastic lymphoma, his physician Donald C. Doll wrote to the VA in May 2010. Mr. McKenna was “exposed to multiple chemicals and toxins by the burn pits while serving in Iraq...” Exposure to chemicals and toxins have been linked to the development of lymphoma... [T]his exposure to chemicals and toxins while in the military in Iraq is a causative factor in [Mr. McKenna’s] lymphoma.”

Jill, I got a call this morning from a VFW rep and he said a decision was made on Friday that Bill is 100 percent totally disabled. The cancer is service connected. I should receive the papers in the mail soon along with a retro check from in January when I originally filed the claim.

—Dina McKenna

Dina, please copy and paste your above note to me on my burn pit page for all to see. We need more positive comments on my page and you can inspire more people to keep trying.

—Jill Wilkins

FACEBOOK (NOVEMBER 1, 2010)

What did Daddy tell you about Iraq? Dina asks her daughters as she gives them their dinner. Share your memories.

Not much. Got really hot, Katie says.

Do you remember him talking about the rain?

No.

All the rain would be black because the air was so dirty. What do you remember about Daddy, Sabrina?

He’d throw me in the air in a pool.

I know he shared jelly beans with you. He hid them under his bed. I was rotating the beds after Daddy went to heaven and found a few under there. How many times did he take you to Walmart and not tell me what you bought? He’d come back and say, Oh we didn’t buy anything.

He bought three lures one time, Katie says.

Billy wasn’t released from the hospital until February 2010. Months and months of driving back and forth, one hundred miles a day between their Spring Hill home and the Tampa hospital followed as Billy received chemotherapy treatments.

But the doctors held out little hope. They tried radiation to prevent the cancer from spreading to Billy’s brain, but the rest of his body was falling apart from chemotherapy. It was a year of medical information Dina didn’t want to know. Just fix him, she thought. She had to give permission for the doctors to use powerful doses of chemotherapy. Just show me where to sign, she said. What was she supposed to say? No, use a more medium kind?

On July 16, 2010, a doctor wrote in Billy’s chart, “patient is currently limited to his hospital room. It is unlikely he will improve due to the nature of his illness.”

Billy’s doctors advised against further treatment. Go home, enjoy the life you have left, the doctor told Billy. No, I want another treatment, Billy said. Start it. Right now. I want it now.

Billy’s best friend, Phil, from New York moved into the house to help care for him. Billy no longer wanted Dina or the kids with him. He didn’t want them to see what he had become. He was six feet, two inches tall. By the time he died, he weighed just ninety pounds.

Dina and Phil kept him as comfortable as they could. Billy listened to the TV. Phil babbled on about songs and movies. Billy’s dad drove down on Christmas Eve from New York to see him. Billy told his father, I’m going to die. With Dina it was, if I don’t make it, do this. Instead of breaking down, he got angry at her. Shouted, threw things. Everything he did seemed wrong.

One night he told her who to give his guitars and fishing tackle to when he died. And he made her promise that Katie would only marry someone who could identify at least fifteen different tools. That was as close as Billy came to saying good-bye.

The night he died in a hospice, Billy’s father roused Dina from a couch. It’s time, he said. You need to wake up. A nurse was checking Billy’s pulse. Dina crawled into bed with him. She pressed close against his body. The nurse looked at her watch.

Time of death, 10:50 p.m., she said.

My husband passed away on Dec 28 from a cancer caused by burn pits...I just found out that 2 other soldiers from his unit had/have scar tissue on their lungs.

—Dina McKenna

FACEBOOK (JANUARY 12, 2011)

Sometimes Keaton Wilkins thinks, I won’t ever be able to go camping with Dad again. Or he’ll see a movie and think, Dad would have liked this. His father was a fan of The Fast and the Furious movies. He was going to give Keaton his motorcycle. I’ll get a new one and you can have the old one. It was a piece of his father he wanted, but his mother hadn’t known that and gave the bike back to the dealer when Kevin died. It was an honest mistake, but a piece of his father gone.

The biggest deal about his father’s death was that it happened so fast. He was going to be better and then he died. Just like that. Keaton and McKenna were home when their mother called from the hospital. They told them not to go to school. They needed to come to the hospital. She would not say why. Keaton knew she was upset. He heard her strained voice as she held back and tried to remain in control. A neighbor drove Keaton and McKenna to Orlando. Neither one spoke.
Keaton's memory begins to turn cloudy at this point. He stares at his lap. Maybe he does not want to remember. He struggles, pulling reluctantly at details that give him pause, the words cracking as he speaks while he tries not to cry. He and McKenna went into some kind of room, like a conference room or something. Their mother was sitting down, her face drawn, pale. Pastor Edwards was there. Keaton's mother told them their father was in a coma and then broke down. McKenna began crying, too, and Keaton held his mother.

Afterward, he went up to see his father. All the tubes inside him. Then he walked outside and took a walk. Thinking, I'm going to lose my dad. Thinking, Maybe he'll get through it. Because yesterday the doctor said everything was going good. Thinking, the doctors have given my father twenty-four hours. If there's no brain activity, he's not coming out of it. This will not end well, then trying not to think.

He remembers crying alone in the hall on one of his walks. He remembers Pastor Edwards talking and then remembers embracing his mother when she said she had agreed to remove life support. He remembers the warmth from his father's hand slowly fade when his heart stopped.

Keaton is sure his father would not be angry with the military. He just would have thought it should have done a better job protecting the troops. Keaton only heard his father curse once, when he had trouble backing the camper into a campsite. He was not a complainer.

One day, a normal day, Keaton was playing video games when he heard a slight noise from his mother's bedroom. She was crying. McKenna was with her. He called Keaton over and held on to him and said, I miss your dad so much. Keaton sat on the bed. Why aren't you crying with us? His mother asked him. He stood up. Mom, Keaton said, I can deal with this in our own way.

His family, Keaton says, is usually drama-averse. Something comes up, they tend not to exaggerate the problem or make a big show of how to get through it. Stay calm. That's their attitude. Some days are better than others. Like his father, Keaton doesn't complain.

The morning after Billy died, Sabrina had a school field trip. Katie a horse-riding lesson. Dina let them have their day. She told them when they got home. Katie cried. She was upset. Sabrina futzed, confused by the grief around her.

Dina spoke with the VA in the following days. My husband just passed. What do I do? I need to get him to New York and buried where he grew up. Don't you escort him? Won't you settle this? She thought about the body. She thought about the cost. She didn't have the money. She was told to get a death certificate and submit it. Billy stayed in the morgue for six weeks until she received his death certificate and mailed it to the VA. Eight weeks later, she received two thousand dollars for burial expenses.

Billy was buried in Calvert National Cemetery in Suffolk County, Long Island. A plot for Dina beside his. He did not receive a military escort from Florida to Long Island. His unit did not attend the funeral. The funeral director and his staff carried the coffin from the morgue to the hearse. Cemetery-maintenance men carried the coffin from the hearse to the grave. The coffin was draped with a flag.

You excited about moving to New York?
Yes, Sabrina says.
What's the best thing about it?
Snow.

You saw snow before.
When?
The last time we were in New York. When was that?
Sabrina looks away.
Daddy's funeral. You forgot the word or don't like to say it.
Forgot it, Sabrina says still staring at the floor.
Dina continues cooking. She has so much to decide before the move, but the empty house is confusing without Billy. She has no one to share decisions with, and is afraid to make bad ones. Like what to do with Billy's car? She's keeping it. Just like his guitars, his T-shirts, and that frickin' garlic press if she ever finds it. But how to get the car to New York?
What are these? Katie asks.
Folders. Put your schoolwork in them. You have a hole puncher?
No.
I'll get you one.
Billy put everything into his car, a 1972 Plymouth Duster, an old stock car he bought in Colorado. It didn't run but the body was perfect. He had been slowly restoring it. A piece here, a piece there. Brakes, electrical work. Hood scoop. A 440 engine, 750 horsepower. He did all the math in his head. This part goes with that. He never used a manual.

When he got sick, he continued ordering parts even though he knew he didn't have time left to install them. They were all but broke. Dina was struggling to buy milk and there was Billy ordering fenders. He'd have them delivered to a friend and then his friend would sneak the parts into the garage. He planned to paint the car flat black, no shine. He died before he could do that, but he lived long enough to hear the engine.

Oh, God, did he hear it. The carburetor was so fierce gas shot up to the ceiling through the open hood. Billy had an audience of about twelve friends and they all started applauding.

He was as excited about the car as Dina had been about giving birth. When the baby came out and Dina went, Holy shit, a baby. That was Billy's response to his car starting for the first time.

A triumphant November afternoon. I built that, I built that, Billy said.

Earlier in the month, the VA had found in favor of Billy's appeal for service-related benefits: "as evidence of record confirms that you served in Iraq, we have conceded that you were exposed to environmental hazards, specifically multiple chemicals and toxins by the burn pits as discussed in the opinion of Dr. Doll."

The next month, Billy died.

What do you have again? Jill writes to an Iraq war veteran who has contacted her on the Burn Pit page. She has not heard from him in months but she assumes she remembers him. She can't even remember to send her children to the doctor with the right insurance card let alone all these fans.

She must focus on things other than advocating for families of burn-pit victims, Jill reminds herself. Like paying for her kids' college. Keaton is a college sophomore. Her youngest, McKenna, about to graduate high school. They still need her as they do their father. But Jill is the one here.

Jill had many good years with Kevin. So good she could live off that joy for the rest of her life. Still, she doesn't want to become an
eccentric old lady living alone with a bunch of stupid cats. She’s only fifty-one, she says. It would be great to meet somebody. She could see it happening and at the same time not see it.

Can she ever replace Kevin? Never. At night, she says a prayer thanking him for watching the kids. Or seeks his advice when something breaks.

Kevin’s colleagues at Florida Hospital Waterman tell Jill they have “Kevin moments.” They walk past his picture in the hallway of his workstation and pause. Or see a patient in a military uniform and are reminded of Kevin’s service. Or one of them brings in food. Kevin was always right there for food. Give him a McDonald’s sandwich and he was so happy. Patients continue to ask for him. They assume he has been redeployed.

One day on Balad Air Base, Kevin tended to an injured Iraqi girl. She would not sleep unless he held her hand. When he let go, she woke up. So he held her hand and didn’t let go. Jill imagines him glancing around the clinic, glasses perched on his nose, wondering. What am I going to do next? Chat-chatting with the other nurses, a nonchalant smile on his face. The girl asleep, his hand enclosed around hers.

Sometimes Jill wonders if Kevin knew what he was walking through when the burn-pit fumes washed over him. If he knew the smoke was toxic.

What would he have done if someone had told him you will walk through a toxic smoke cloud every morning to do your job? Would Kevin have said, Well, I’m not going to do that? Would he have chosen duty over family?

Kevin was a good soldier, he did what he was told, Jill says. If that meant he had to go through nasty-smelling smoke, he would do it. Even if he thought it was not a smart idea. He did what he was told.

Let’s go, Dina calls to her daughters. Billy saw Katie ride one time. He was too weak to get out of the car. He wore a patch over one eye and watched her out the passenger window. She wasn’t a little girl on a pony, he said. She was a girl controlling a horse. He cried. He made Dina promise to buy her a horse when she turned sixteen.

Dina smiles a wistful grin. Sometimes, when she reads posts on the Burn Pit page, she thinks, Stop the fight. Enjoy the time you have left. But Billy couldn’t stop fighting. She doesn’t really expect anyone else to either. Nor should they. She hasn’t.

She thinks of the photograph Billy took in Iraq with the smoke from the burn pit fouling the horizon. Strange to think about it, that black smoke. That it was as much an enemy as the insurgents. Maybe more so. How it took the life of her husband leaving her and the kids behind. How it took Jill’s husband, too. A father just like Billy. Strange to think so much time has passed and still she and Jill struggle to move on from under its shadow.

Dina hopes to meet Jill. Thank her for her help, advice, and support. Some day. Not now. Not yet. Dina needs to sort her life out first. She doesn’t want to just burst out crying when they get together. Instead, when the time is right, she will stand before Jill and show her how with Jill’s help and her own resolve she pulled her life together again.

Dina imagines they will talk for hours. She will tell Jill how Billy comes to her when she least expects him. Like the other day when she cooked ravioli. She had never made it before. She just knew, Billy, she believes, guided her. Another time, she poured his mouthwash out into their bathroom sink. When she walked back into the bedroom, she smelled him. That menthol fragrance on his breath.

I made a card, Sabrina says walking into the garage. She holds a folded brown piece of paper sprinkled with glitter and presents it to her mother.

For me? Dina says.

Yes, read it.

I love you.

Cool. What’s it say inside?

Read it.

Thank you for everything.

I accidentally spilled glitter, Sabrina says.

On your bed?

On the cover of my thing.

What thing?

Just a thing I made it on.

Well, it’s a beautiful card. Very nice and thoughtful of you.

Thank you for everything, Dina reads again. She smiles, wipes tears from her eyes.

May I ride my bike?

Sure, Sabrina.

Yes?

It’s going to be all right.

Maybe.

Definitely.

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