

Photo: Mk 19

In the photo, you can barely tell which is which. One of us is squatting down atop a Humvee, pretending to point toward the horizon somewhere over your left shoulder. The other figure leans into the first, half emerged from the gunner's hole in the roof of the truck, gazing toward the same vista. Both figures are clad in camouflage uniforms, both topped by turtle-shaped helmets: K-pots, we call them. We call the gear we're wearing *Full Battle Rattle*: helmet, armored vest and a mesh ammo vest over that, black gloves, black boots, olive drab gas mask attached in a carrier. We're wearing bright green, cash green, safety glasses. I found them in a dust-covered box in the back of our storage Conex a week prior and passed them out to the other gunners in my squad. We started calling ourselves the Cash-Money gunners. This doesn't mean anything really, not to us. Cash-Money is just something we heard on the radio.

The truck, wide and squat, wears the same pattern as we do. It holds earth between the tread of its front tires, also pointed toward you. The windshield looks water-stained and dusty. Beside the figure half concealed in the truck, a gun is mounted and centered on the roof. You might miss that it is a gun; maybe to you it's just an odd metallic attachment to the truck, an antenna perhaps. You might miss that the perfect black circle near the top of the object is a barrel pointed your way. It's a grenade launcher, Mk 19. To us, it is used to hurl up to three hundred and seventy five 40 millimeter grenades outward toward whomever we're told.

It's easy to miss that Danyel is the one next to the gun. You can't tell, but she has silky brunette hair that she hides under a brown rag beneath her K-pot. The bottom half of our faces, below the glasses, is the only flesh exposed in the photo. You can almost tell that we're smudged

with dirt here. Danyel doesn't mind; she loves to smother her clear skin with camo whenever we're out at training events like this anyway. My hair, under the helmet, is cut in a high-and-tight, a rectangle of uniform fuzz atop an otherwise closely shaven head.

You can't see any of this though, can't tell that she's a woman, can't tell that we're both queer. You can't tell one of us from the other. It is all blurred by the uniform: features, gender, personality, history. The purpose of camouflage isn't to make a person disappear, but to break up the silhouette that makes the figure recognizable as a person.

Look closer. Squint. When you get to the details, that's when the illusion begins to unravel. The green, metal box attached to the gun is hollow, offering only empty space where a can of ammunition should be. There's no driver in the driver's seat. There's no one in the truck at all. The figures in uniform: we're just 19-year-old kids, fresh from working-class homes. If you look closely enough, you might see a smirk. We're safe, playing. We don't know yet know about America's longest war, still hot, fresh and 3,000 miles away from us here. We don't yet know about loss.

When you squint, you see that we're too young too, not even old enough to drink. It's hard to tell because of how we're dressed. Because we're in the uniform of aggressors. Because you're staring down the barrel of a gun. Think of how many shots like this one exist; baby-faced soldiers posed alongside the instruments of war. It's almost always when we're young, isn't it? Photos from our first tour, photos from Basic Training. Before the newness of the experience wears off. When we are still full of pride, proud to be on our own, away from working-class homes, fighting for something we think we believe in. We're excited about new challenges. Excited about new toys. Excited to be soldiers, something different than before, anything but kids from Reno, kids from Gary.