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Ralph Willsey

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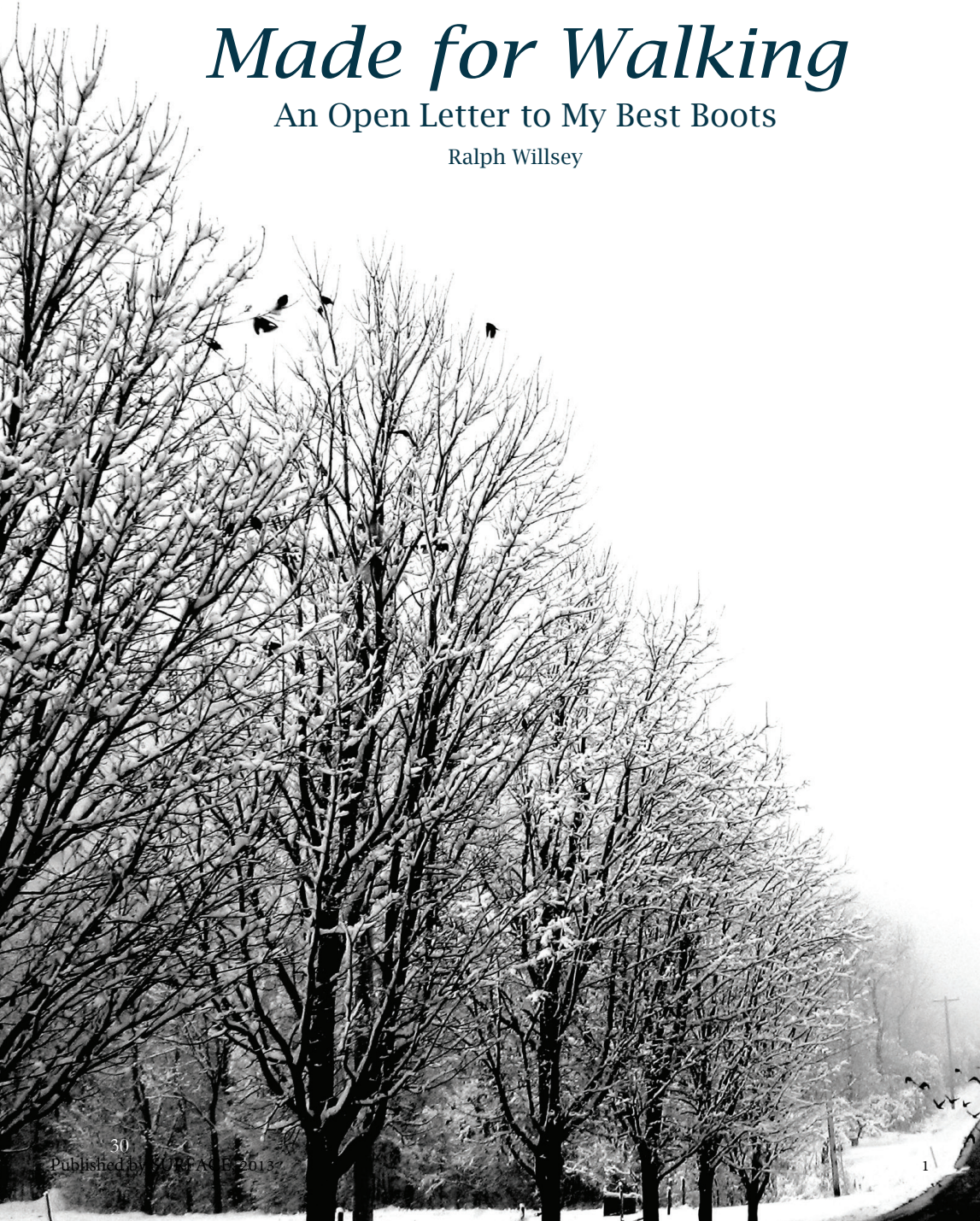
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Willsey: Made for Walking

Made for Walking

An Open Letter to My Best Boots

Ralph Willsey



We've been everywhere together. Not really *everywhere*, but we've been a lot of places: Seattle, Omaha, Syracuse, Bakersfield, Mosul, Kuwait City, Dublin, Reykjavik, Maine, and Portugal. Hell, I've worn you so many places you should have your own passport.

I joke that you two have spent more time in combat than some people, but it's not so true anymore. We've sure got any deployment dodger beat with our two years, three months, and three days. Maybe we should have done the paperwork and hoop jumping to get you a DD214 and a CAB. You would have earned it with me in Baghdad on CSM Huggins' truck during that three-mile running shootout. Do you remember that? We were coming back from FOB Loyalty the night when the Iraqis won that big soccer game. Sotillo was yelling about how the .50 wouldn't fire, and he had forgotten his M4 back in the parking area. Clayton and CSM Huggins were up in the air guard hatches, firing off rounds like it was going out of style. Verne—SrA Patterson—was sitting in the belly of the Stryker with us, pucker factor maximum, prepped and ready to pull down casualties and hoping no one got hurt. Then the shock and surprise at the "LOCK AND CLEAR!" from Huggy Bear as we entered Taji. Our first real combat, and we didn't even get out of the truck. Oh, but we got our fill later, didn't we?

We went on leave, and you got your first taste of snow after all that rain and mud in Baghdad. Two inches of sandy sludge stuck to your soles as we slid and slithered through chow halls and airports. But we made it. First to Erin's warm apartment, with your cozy place by the door, ready to be laced up at a moment's notice; then to Dad's for a while, Snoopy snuffling all the Iraq on you. I think he might have loved you as much as I do because of all your smells. And then the St. Patty's Day parade where you couldn't quite keep my feet warm enough. It's not your fault, not in the least. You're desert boots—you weren't made for temperatures below fifty degrees, let alone zero.





**“Even with as hard
and tough as I was
then, I don’t think I
could have taken it
without you.”**

Then those oh-so-short two weeks were up, and away we went. You remember when we caught up to the unit in Bahquabah? How Jim, the legendary SGM Mapes, came up to us and asked if I (we) still wanted to go to the line? “Well, then grab your stuff, you’re going to third platoon, Alpha. Let’s go meet your 1SG.” And there was SFC Howard, standing in while 1SG Montgomery was on leave. I know you remember him; he hung out in the TOC with us and shot the shit when Alpha fourth had QRF. His boots were always immaculate, even coming off a mission. I wish I knew how he did it, so I could have taken better care of you.

Then we met CPT Williams and SSG Plush. Papa Plush asked if we could carry weight, and I told him about my backpacking experience. Little did we know what we were in for! The first time I put on that AG bag, you sank a good half-inch into the moon dust, and I sank almost as far into your insoles. But goddamn if we didn’t hump that load. And boy, did we hump. All over Bahquabah—through rain, mud, sun, dust, and shit water. We traveled along roads, over canals, up and down stairs, across rooftops, along walls, in alleys, in shit creeks, up and down more stairs, through rubble and glass, around trash piles hiding IEDs, on top of a car or two, up and down even more stairs. Man, there were a lot of stairs, weren’t there? Fuck those stairs. But we weren’t

always walking. You got a nice break while I VCed 34 victor, even though I was going stir crazy in the belly of that truck. Then May 6th happened, and we wandered FOB Warhorse for a while. I did clean you up a bit for the memorial, and my rifle, Julia, too. We had to look good for the gun salute. That was the first time you saw me weep. It wasn’t the last, though.

We still had a mission to complete. We laced up, rucked up, and drove on. No more cushy trucks for us. Radio duty and acting as personal security detachment for CPT Williams was our new job. I lost weight and you gained salt stains as we humped a load that weighed more than I did. All three hundred pounds rested on your heels. I swear, some days it was you guys holding me up, figuratively and literally. If you hadn’t been broken in by that point, I would have been in even more pain than I already was. Even being as hard and tough as I was then, I don’t think I could have taken it without you.

Eventually, we rotated back to Kuwait and the US. You got a nice break for a while, but I wore you on the flights home. I wouldn’t have dared to pack you two away after all we went through. I wore you as much I could in the States. That first tour took as big a toll on your suede and your soles as it did on my body and my soul. You became my field boots, worn for ranges, ruck marches, battle focus PT, trips to the woods, and to Yakima. I got another pair for ceremonies, drill, and the NCO Academy, but if it was a memorial for the Tweezy, then I wore you. Because you had been there, you would want to see the honors rendered. But, man, they hated seeing you as WLC. What a fucking joke that course

was. You had spent more time deployed and in actual combat than half of the instructors. But CSM Huggins recognized you. He remembered you from our time in S-3 and authorized you for the “field problems” that the school held. You sure as hell weren’t garrison boots, just as much as I wasn’t a garrison soldier. Dirty, disheveled, beaten, worn, but put us in the field, and we were magic. We could almost work miracles. I know I’m exaggerating, but it certainly felt like we did sometimes. We made a few trips to Syracuse, we did EIB, we were in the field a bit, and we were transient. But, no matter where I went, you were right there with me.

Eventually, we deployed again. By that point, you had some serious aging and a few holes. I wasn’t allowed to wear you, but I’d sneak you on now and again. I bought those two pairs of Oakley boots and brought them to you. I saw you treating them how I treated the cherries, showing them the ropes, telling them how shit actually worked. And just like new guys, one couldn’t take the strain—couldn’t cut it. Sadly, that pair had to be tossed. But you taught the other pair well, like I taught Squier and Hill. They’re still not as comfy as you are, but they let me give you a break when you need it.

I couldn’t wear you often in Iraq because it was almost as much garrison as Fort Lewis was. But I still brought you along so I could keep up the claim that you had more time in combat. Selfish, I know, but I would have missed you if I had left you in storage. I wore you to Shay and Selge’s memorial because you knew them just as well as I did. You would have been pissed at me if I hadn’t. Once we got out to Caldwell, I got to wear you more often because of the relaxed atmosphere. CPT Case, LT Bradway, and a handful of the other officers paid you backhanded compliments, but 1SG Stokely and CPT Lynch both appreciated you for what you are: solid, broken-in boots. We made another two trips to Minoa and back. I would have liked to wear you to Dad’s funeral and memorial, but you don’t play

well with my class A’s. We finished that tour with the poise and grace expected of us: dirty, angry, tired, happy to be leaving, and more roughed up.

When we got home, we started clearing post and getting ready to leave the Army behind. I gave you another break, wearing my Converse around post while in civvies. But as soon as I had to start standing in lines for hours at a time, you were right there with me. We finished up, packed up and made the U-Haul trip with Frew to Utah. His couch was pretty comfy, but there you were, right by the door and eager to get moving again. So we got a rental and hit the road. Those were some of the best times. I’d get up and dressed, tying you on even before I had finished packing, then we’d take off. We’d drive for a few hours and hit a rest stop; I’d have something to eat, and you’d wander around on the grass or sidewalk or whatever there was, getting a feel for each state we went through and helping work the kinks out of my legs.

Eventually we made it to Syracuse; eventually we settled in. It took both of us some time to get used to the winter again. We haven’t traveled much since we’ve arrived here. A camping trip once in a while, yeah, but it’s mostly to and from work or school. And I can only take you to work on weekends because you aren’t “presentable” at a retail job. This is the longest we’ve ever been in one place. I know you’re getting the itch to travel somewhere because I am too.

We’ve logged some serious mileage, and we’ve earned these holes and stains. Along the way you’ve earned my loyalty. You are the best transport I own. No matter how old we get, how much wear we acquire, we’ll do it together. When I pass from this existence into whatever comes next, I know you’ll be there—my favorite boots waiting by the door, looking factory new but as well fitting as ever. And I’ll pull you on, lace you up, shoulder our load, and move out. Because if there’s one thing you’ve taught me, it’s that home isn’t where you hang your hat, it’s where your boots are.