



The Canopy

Issue 3 / Volume 34 / Apr 2026

In the Shadow of Ali

Contributor Matthew Richards explores the intersection of news, history, and his personal experience

Read more on page 4.

Map to The Chapter Picnic

I have a full page map and directions to the picnic

Read more on page 8.



Chapter Officers

Position	Name
Chairman	Gary Blasczienski
Vice Chairman	Stephen Fern
Treasurer	Heath Davenport
Secretary	Vacant / Interim
Service Officer	Joyce Damon
Events Officer	Tony Alger
Recruiting / Villages	Tony Alger
Recruiting / Ocala	Tig Blackman
Canopy Editor	Ron Dahlgren

Upcoming Events and Historical Notes

April 5	Easter	The World Over
April 11 @ 1300 hrs	Chapter Picnic	17300 SE 58th Ave, Summerfield FL

From the Editor



Since the last issue went out, our military has become involved in a conflict in Iran. This has repercussions in a number of ways. The 82nd Airborne Division has been deployed to stand ready for ground operations. This includes the division headquarters. That means no All American Week this year. The communication came out from the national association office at the end of March. If you've already registered and made reservations for accommodations, be sure to check your email and get it sorted out.

I've heard (unconfirmed) that the devil brigade is the unit that was sent out along with the 82nd command team.

I urge you, dear reader, to keep the troops in your thoughts and to pray for peace to prevail.

This month's cover comes from Tech. Sgt. Joshua Smoot, US AF Central. Taken August 8th, 2024 during a force build-up to address threats posed by Iran

Airborne! All The Way!

Ron Dahlgren

Editor, The Canopy

<https://www.the-canopy.org>

Chairman's Message

April is upon us and there is only a short time left until we begin our summer hiatus. This is a good time for all of us to take stock of what is happening around us and with us. The weather is improving and it is the right time to enjoy and relax. Stress Awareness is observed this month, along with it being National Volunteer Month.

Not all stress is bad. We can stress ourselves in positive ways such as exercise, puzzles and brain teasers. I believe that volunteering can also produce a positive stress. We are all at least two time volunteers. First, we are Veterans of the all-volunteer military. Less than seven percent of the Country's population can claim this status. Secondly, only about one percent of the military is on Airborne status at any one time. A volunteer force within a volunteer force. Take pride in what you have given of yourselves.

I would encourage us all to continue to volunteer where we can. Donating money to a cause is always helpful if you can afford it, but to donate your time, experience and caring is far more impactful. If it is ten hours a week or two hours a month, it makes a difference. Not only to the cause you are helping, it also makes a difference to us. The positive stress will not only allow us to continue to grow, it can counter the negative stress that builds in our lives.

I hope that everyone enjoys any holidays you celebrate this month and look forward to seeing everyone at the picnic. Remember our picnic is on April 11th at 1:00 pm. If you would like to help set up we will be there at 11:00 am. We are asking that everyone bring a small desert, side, or appetizer with them. Main course and drinks will be provided, if you would like to participate in adult beverages, please feel free to bring your own. Please bring your own chair, if able. The party will be at Gary's Man Cave:

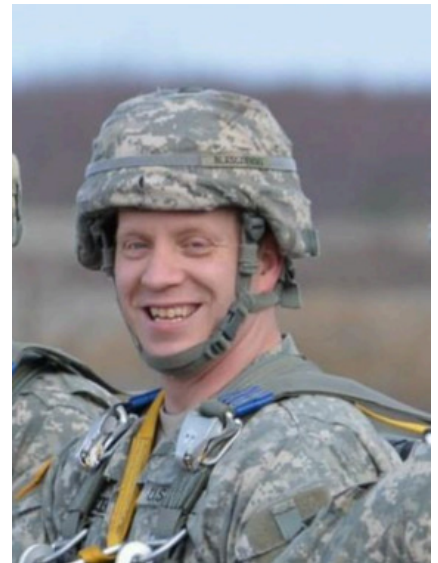
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Airborne!

Gary Blasczienski

Chairman

North Central Florida All-Airborne Chapter



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In the Shadow of Ali

By Matthew Richards



Marines investigating a rock pile, Iraq.

Photo by Matthew Richards

The shrine has a golden dome. It rises forty-two meters above the city of Najaf and is covered in seven thousand seven hundred and seventy-seven, eight thousand seven hundred and eighty-seven or nine thousand nine hundred and ninety tiles of gold. It has stood in one form or another since the eighth century. Beneath the dome there is an intricate cage of gold and silver filigree and beneath the cage there is a grave and in the grave there are the bones of Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin of the Prophet, husband to Fatima, the first Imam or the fourth Caliph depending on which side of a fourteen-hundred-year-old argument you were born into. That argument has never been settled. It has only been inherited.

Next to the shrine is a cemetery. It is the largest cemetery in the world. It covers six to nine square kilometers and holds five to six million bodies and they have been burying people there for fourteen centuries because the faithful believe that to lie near Ali is to receive his intercession on the Day of Judgment. During the war the cemetery received as many as two hundred and fifty bodies a day. There was no day of judgment for them. Only the day they died and the day they were put into the ground.

On December 19, 2004, late in the afternoon, a man drove a car packed with explosives into Maidan Square in Najaf. The square sits three hundred meters from the shrine and a short walk from the cemetery. There was a funeral procession for a tribal sheikh and the street was full of mourners and shoppers strolled through the market that lined the square and there were women

and there were children. The car detonated.

Reuters reported fifty-two killed and one hundred and forty wounded and the Associated Press revised the number upward the following day to fifty-four dead while Al Jazeera said forty-eight. Two hours earlier another car bomb had gone off near the bus station in Karbala and together the two attacks killed something like sixty-six or sixty-seven people depending on who was counting and when they stopped. The numbers never agree in war. They only go up.

No group claimed responsibility. Al-Qaeda in Iraq denied involvement which was unusual because they had done this kind of thing before. Fifty suspects were detained the next day.

The bombing came six weeks before Iraq's first multiparty election in half a century and four months after the Battle of Najaf in which Muqtada al-Sadr's militia occupied the shrine itself and fought U.S. Marines, soldiers and sailors in the streets and the cemetery for three weeks. A multi-million-dollar reconstruction program was underway. The car bomb was another wound to a city that had not yet closed the old ones. On that same day in Baghdad, gunmen pulled three election workers from a car on Haifa Street and shot them in the road. That was the way it was then.

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There is a word most people do not know. The word is *eschatology*. It comes from the Greek *eschatos*, meaning last. It is the study of last things. The end of the world. The final judgment.

The arrival of the one who is promised.

Every great religion has one. Christianity waits for the Second Coming and Judaism speaks of the Messiah and the Hindus have Kalki, the final incarnation of Vishnu, and in Islam there is the Mahdi, the Rightly Guided One.

The word *Mahdi* does not appear in the Quran. It comes from the hadith, the collected sayings of the Prophet, and even there it is absent from the two most trusted Sunni compilations. The medieval historian Ibn Khaldun questioned whether the traditions about the Mahdi were reliable at all. But the idea took hold and it grew and it split along the same fracture that split Islam itself.

For Sunni Muslims the Mahdi is a future figure. He has not yet been born. He will come before the end of days and rule with justice for seven or nine years and then the world will end. His coming is important but it is not the center of the faith.

For Twelver Shia Muslims it is the center. The Mahdi is not a future abstraction. He is a specific person. His name is Muhammad al-Mahdi and he was born around the year 869 and he became the Twelfth Imam at the age of five when his father died and then God hid him from the world. This is called the Occultation. He is alive. He has been alive for over eleven hundred years. His body is preserved by the will of God and one day he will return and fill the Earth with Justice as it has been filled with Tyranny. The Shia do not hope for his coming the way one hopes for rain. They know He is coming. The question is when. The question has always been when.

Both traditions agree on another figure. Jesus. *Isa* in Arabic. He will descend near the white minaret on the eastern side of Damascus wearing saffron-dyed garments with his hands resting on the wings of two angels and he will pray behind the Mahdi and he will pursue and kill the Dajjal, the false messiah, at the Gate of Ludd near present-day Lod in Palestine. Then there will be peace. Then there will be judgment. Then the world will end.

These are the last things. This is eschatology.

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The danger is not in the belief. People have believed in the end of the world since the beginning of it. The danger is in what men do when they decide the end is near.

In Shia theology there is a tension that has never been resolved. The Hidden Imam will return when the earth is filled with oppression and injustice. This is agreed upon. But if his return requires the world to be at its worst then a man who believes himself to be acting in God's service might reason that making the world worse is a form of devotion. That creating chaos is preparation. That war is the necessary prelude to redemption.

The scholars of Najaf under Grand Ayatollah Sistani have restrained this logic more recently. Sistani teaches that humans



A
Muqtada Militia weapons cache found by U.S. Marines in a parking garage near the Imam Ali Shrine in An Najaf, Iraq

can claim a limited authority of the Hidden Imam and that no human should hasten his return. Sistani has said that clerics should guide but never govern. He seems to represent a vision of the faith in which the end belongs to God and the present belongs to the people.

Iran chose differently.

In 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini built a state on the premise that a senior jurist could exercise the political authority of the Hidden Imam until his return. He called it *velayat-e faqih*. The guardianship of the jurist. It was a radical innovation. The concept had originally applied to the guardianship of orphans and widows. Khomeini extended it to the guardianship of nations. When Sistani was asked if Iraq should adopt this system he answered that it was not feasible.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stood before the United Nations General Assembly in September of 2005 and concluded his speech by praying aloud for the hastened return of the Hidden Imam. Upon returning to Tehran he reportedly told a gathering of clerics that a halo of divine light had surrounded him. His government spent seventeen million dollars renovating the Jamkaran Mosque near Qom where tradition holds that the Imam once appeared. Reportedly, his cabinet was said to have signed a written pact with the Hidden Imam and dropped it down the mosque's famous well.

This was not theology. This was policy.

The Islamic State operated from the other side of the fracture with identical logic. They named their English-language magazine *Dabiq* after a town in northern Syria where a hadith prophesies the final battle between the faithful and the armies of Rome. They fought to capture the town despite its having no military value. Their fighters called themselves by the names that appear in end-times traditions. They provoked sectarian war deliberately because they believed a sectarian war would be a sign that the final hour was at hand. They did not merely interpret violence through the lens of prophecy. They manufactured the violence the prophecy described and then pointed to it as proof.

The feedback loop is simple and it is devastating. The prophecy says chaos must come before the Mahdi. So men create chaos. The chaos appears to confirm the prophecy. The confirmation radicalizes more believers. The new believers create more chaos. And the cycle turns and it does not stop turning because to stop it would mean the prophecy is wrong and the prophecy cannot be wrong.

This is the inherent danger of eschatology. Not the belief in last things but the decision to bring them about.

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There is a war between the United States and Israel on one side and the Islamic Republic of Iran on the other. It is thirty-three days old. On February 28, 2026, U.S. and Israeli forces launched nearly nine hundred strikes in twelve hours. The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was killed in the opening salvo on the Leadership House compound along with his daughter and his son-in-law and his grandchild. His son Mojtaba survived by seconds and was named the new Supreme Leader within days. The defense minister is dead. The chief of staff is dead. Forty senior officials are dead. One hundred and seventy civilians died when a missile struck a girls' school next to a naval base in Minab.

Iran responded with over five hundred ballistic missiles and nearly two thousand drones aimed at Israel and American bases and Gulf oil states. Hezbollah re-entered the war from Lebanon and Israel began ground operations in the south of that country on March 16 and by the first of April more than thirteen hundred people had been killed there and over a million two hun-

dred thousand displaced. Israel's defense minister said homes in the south would be demolished and the displaced would not be allowed to return. The Houthis in Yemen fired their first barrage of ballistic missiles at Israel on March 28 and vowed escalation. Israeli jets struck the South Pars gas field, the largest in the world, and Iran retaliated against energy infrastructure in Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE and struck a fully laden Kuwaiti oil tanker off the coast of Dubai and hit fuel depots at Kuwait's international airport with drones. Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz through which one-fifth of the world's oil passes and oil surged past one hundred and ten dollars a barrel and American gas hit four dollars a gallon for the first time since 2022. On the night of April 1 Trump addressed the nation and said the war was nearing completion and that he would hit Iran extremely hard for another two to three weeks. He threatened to bring them back to the stone ages. Iran's foreign minister said Tehran has zero trust in Washington and is prepared to fight for at least six months. Former foreign minister Kamal Kharazi, who had been overseeing back-channel engagement with Pakistan for possible talks, was seriously injured and his wife killed in an airstrike on their home that same day. Pakistan hosted foreign ministers from Turkey and Egypt and Saudi Arabia in Islamabad to seek an end to the fighting. No deal has been reached.

Iran's nuclear facilities are damaged but not destroyed. The IAEA said there has been enormous degradation of physical infrastructure but that the material and the enrichment capacity remain. They had accumulated four hundred and forty kilograms of uranium enriched to sixty percent, enough for nine weapons if processed further. The Supreme Leader reportedly authorized warhead miniaturization five months before his death. Netanyahu asserted the strikes had eliminated Iran's ability to produce nuclear weapons. The IAEA said there was no evidence of a structured weapons program when the war began.

The human rights organization HRANA has documented over thirty-four hundred deaths in Iran including more than fifteen hundred civilians and over two hundred children. Iran International reported that at least forty-seven hundred security forces had been killed. At least twenty Israelis are dead and more than six thousand wounded. Fifteen American service members have been killed. Over one hundred are dead in Iraq. More than thirteen hundred have been killed in Lebanon. Tehran has become a ghost town. Internet connectivity has dropped to four percent of ordinary levels. Prisoners in Evin are receiving limited bread and water. The Shia Crescent that Iran spent forty years constructing through proxies in Lebanon and Syria and Iraq and Yemen has fractured. Assad fell in December 2024. Nasrallah was killed in September 2025. Khamenei is dead. The architecture is broken.

And yet the regime has not collapsed. And the faithful have not lost faith. Because eschatology does not require victory in the present. It requires suffering. It requires tribulation. It requires the world to be at its worst so that the promised one may come and make it right. Every bomb that falls on Iran confirms for the believers that the prophecy is unfolding. Every leader or civilian who dies is a martyr whose blood waters the ground from which the Mahdi will emerge. The worse it gets the closer he comes. That is the trap. That is the door that locks from inside.

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In 2006 al-Qaeda operatives entered the al-Askari mosque in Samarra dressed as special forces. They tied up the guards and detonated explosives that destroyed the golden dome. No one died in the blast itself. Within hours over one hundred bodies appeared in the streets of Baghdad. Within a week the count was thirteen hundred. The mosque sits near the cellar where the

Twelfth Imam is said to have disappeared. Both sides read the destruction as eschatological signal. Both sides mobilized accordingly. It is too easy to say Iraq's civil war began in earnest that day.

An attack on a shrine provokes sectarian retaliation which drives escalation which invites eschatological interpretation which fuels further mobilization which produces more violence. The sequence is mechanical. It operates with the logic of a machine that no one knows how to turn off because turning it off would require someone to say this is not the end of days. And no one will say it. To say it is apostasy. To believe the apostasy is to lose the only frame that makes the suffering meaningful.

If the conflict is ordained by God as the necessary prelude to redemption then peace is not merely difficult. It is theologically impermissible. Peace becomes the obstacle to divine will.

This is the road. It was always the road. And it leads to the place we said we would never go.

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Madness and chaos prevented Explosive Ordinance Disposal from inspecting the scene until late in the evening. It was large enough that they asked for a combat camera Marine to photograph the devastation.

Although it was not my official job title, I was twenty-one years old and I was a Marine and I had a camera and some training.

There was no moon. The city had a purple glow in the distance and nothing else in the sky but stars. Electricity out in the blast radius or fires banked low or just the way the dust caught whatever light remained. I do not know why but the darkness was enveloping.

What I remember most is the sound. The mothers. They came in the night and their wailing rose and fell and it did not stop. It went on for hours or it went on for days. I cannot say which because time did not work properly then in that short moment I was there. The sound had a quality I had not known sound could have. It was not crying. It was something older than crying. It came from a place that I think is the same in all people regardless of what they believe about God or about the end of the world or about who should have succeeded the Prophet fourteen hundred years ago.

I stood there and fumbled with my camera and the purple glow and the sound of the mothers. I had no night vision adapter for my lens. I had given our only one to the actual combat camera Marine who was on a mission and missed this lucky gig.

The EOD gunnery sergeant was gruff as I explained using a flash in this instance was not the best for our light security.

I had seen enough anyway. His flashlight traced stains and fragments in the dark I would much rather forget but I cannot.

Somehow the memories of what I saw were not the worst.

The mothers. The wails of the mothers in the dark night. Now, I realize what was so horrible: these women did not care about the Mahdi that night. They did not care about the Twelfth Imam or the Dajjal or the Gate of Ludd or the white minaret in Damascus. They cared about the children who were in the square that afternoon.

That is the thing about eschatology. It concerns itself with last things. But the mothers were not thinking about last things. They were thinking about the things in the world right now. They were thinking about the ordinary way a life begins and the ordinary things that make it worth continuing and the way all of that had ended in a flash of light and a sound like the earth splitting open.

Almost twenty-two years have passed. I am not twenty-one anymore. The wailing has not stopped. It follows me into rooms where there is no reason for it. It finds me in the dark. I have learned the word *eschatology* and I have read the prophecies and I have studied the politics, history and theology and I understand now what I was standing in the middle of that night. But understanding has not made the sound quieter. If anything it has made it louder because now I know that the men who built the bomb believed they were doing holy work and the men who will build the next bomb believe the same and the mothers who will wail over the next dead children will sound the same as the mothers I heard in Najaf in the purple dark in December.

The prophecies speak of a day when the Earth will be filled with Justice. All of them. Sunni and Shia and Christian and Jewish. They all describe a world made right. A world where the suffering ends and the righteous are rewarded and the dead are raised and the wrong is undone.

But the road to that day runs through the bodies of people who were only trying to live. The eschatological mind accepts

this. It calls them martyrs or collateral or the necessary cost. It places them on the scales against eternity and finds them light.

The mothers do not find them light.

I do not know if there is a Mahdi. I do not know if Christ will descend near the white minaret in Damascus or if the dead will rise or if the world will be made right. I know that a woman held a piece of cloth to her face in Najaf and she made a sound that I hear when I am trying to sleep.

If the end comes I hope it remembers her. I hope whatever justice fills the earth begins with the ordinary. The ones who were not trying to hasten anything. The ones who were just walking through the market or standing in a funeral procession or holding a child's hand in a public square a few hundred meters from a shiny dome.

The last things should not make us forget the things in front of us right now. The breath. The hand. The voice calling a name in the dark.

We are the point. Not the prophecy. We were always the point.



U.S. Marines from the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit fight against Medhi Army militia members in the holy Shiite city of Najaf, Iraq, on Aug. 5, 2004. Photo by Matthew Richards.

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