

# INTRODUCTION

*Message from my Soldier who is a suicide attempt survivor:*

*I spent five years in the Army as an Enlisted Soldier. I've experienced so much in those years. From the ups and downs of everyday life to the Army life. I've spent time stationed around the world and learned so much from all that served alongside me, from the lowest Soldier to the officers. Those five years haven't been so kind. Depression crept up as a result of being away from family, on isolated bases, lacking healthy outlets, and being around others having issues with depression/suicide. On top of all this was a stigma about coming forward to get help.*

*During my time, I have gone from having friends to being alone and on my own, struggling to cope with my issues thus causing my depression to get worse. I felt I had to keep it a secret and never say anything, which isn't the case. You gotta speak up before it's too late and you go from depressed to attempting to take your own life: SUICIDE IS NOT THE ANSWER. Believe me, I tried it and woke up on the other side with a second chance.*

**To Those Struggling:**

*I wanted to reach out and say you're not alone. Yes, there actually are others like you all out here in the world. It's a sign of true strength for you to admit you need help. Don't listen to those that say it's weakness; they don't know the weight that it puts on one's shoulders. Find a leader who will listen to you, I don't care how high up the chain of command you have to go. I talked to my LT, the guy writing this book, and he cared!*

### **To Leaders:**

*I'd just ask those leaders out there that you take a step off your perch and come down to your Junior Enlisted Soldiers. Truly ask how they're all doing because just one small effort could change anyone's mood and day. Leadership needs to stop worrying about their unit's image and reputation and actually take the time to learn something from those under them. Doing this, I feel, would truly lower the number of suicides in the military tenfold. Leaders, don't wait till it's too late to speak up. Trust me, you'll be amazed at the difference it makes. When leaders truly care, it feels like being free as a huge weight is lifted.*

### **How I Turned My Life Around**

*After leaving the Army I turned to what I knew best: horses and the country. I got a job at a resort/dude ranch*

*giving guests trail rides where I'm still trying to take it day  
by day throughout the struggle*

*AGAIN, TO THOSE STRUGGLING ALONE, KEEP ON  
FIGHTING. YOU ARE ALL SO WORTH IT.*

*Cody*

*Wrangler @ Alisal Guest Ranch and Resort*

*former Enlisted 12B (Combat Engineer)*

*Retired SGT 12B (Combat Engineer)*

CHAPTER 1  
**MILITARY & ME**

*“His object should be to gain the love of his men by treating them with every possible kindness and humanity, enquiring into their complaints, and when well founded, seeing them redressed.”*

– *Baron von Steuben* (1794)

*Volunteered to help George Washington found the Continental Army*

Let me be the first to admit I actively wrestle with the astounding complexity of leadership. It’s unpredictable. People are messy. Constellations of variables exist. I wish every leadership decision came with a clear right-or-wrong response just like an academic test so I could know exactly what to do next time. *Nope!* Rarely is there a perfect answer when it comes to managing human beings and all the emotions we bring to the table. All I can say is that the

clearer a leader's mind is, the better decisions they will make. Simple problem sets in the workplace can quickly be compounded in difficulty by distressed psychological states of decision-makers. Military personnel know this all too well.

Hurry up and wait. Urgency can make everything an emergency. Stress is programmed into our combat training which increases the intensity of life both at work and at home. It's hard knowing how to rest. Before we know it, we take out our frustration on others. We must learn how to counteract prolonged stress states with science-based psychological tools and mental resilience. Self-regulation prevents self-medication. This is arguably more important than knowing how to fire a rifle. Post 9/11, more Veterans died by suicide than in combat by about 4:1. We owe it to them to deepen our awareness.

My goal with this book is to be a guide in navigating through psychological principles related to leadership. Having never been deployed to a combat zone, I hesitate to claim the role of military leadership subject matter expert. Instead, I see myself as an observer who listens and takes notes. Working alongside service members having multiple combat tours deepened my perspective. A few gave me permission to share their stories which I'm humbled by. Brutality of war seems impossible to convey in words. Many times, when my friends and mentors spoke about their past deployments, I found my jaw hanging. They shared things I could never imagine telling others, and it burns me to think how hellish this makes their inner world.

Even without deploying overseas, the amount of chaos we must manage is incredible. War throws gas on that fire. Leaders in the military must take into consideration the unspoken weight carried by so many of our peers and subordinates because of the battles they have experienced. I'm forever impacted by this. For anyone in the military, it's important to have a healthy mind ready to absorb constant shock, just like the suspension of a vehicle built to take on rough terrain.

This isn't just for us. Everyone can grow their mindset. Knowledge about managing our brains offers universal benefits. I invite those outside the military to learn as well. Leaders of any organization will benefit from these cross-disciplinary skill sets regarding self-control and professional human relationships.

Curating leadership advice, I wrote this book to focus on positive characteristics I admire in several amazing military service members. They helped shape me before and during my time of service. A few cherished moments with them outweigh all the hard times. Writing their words on these pages while I reflected on our time together somehow helped me feel like I was sitting alongside them. Their warm smiles eclipse any harsh scowls I have come across. They have taught me to focus on the wins in life no matter how small.

Gratitude reminds me to spotlight the good while acknowledging that any bad situations serve the purpose of providing contrast. Like any human, I have my biases, so it's

important to admit subjectivity when I define something as “good” or “bad”. Grad school hammered this point home! Quoting scientific research publications throughout this book is my way of trying to stay balanced. I hope you find objective truth and substance without any of my personal agenda clouding the message.

My contract in the military spans a total of 1,344 days starting January 2019 and ending September 2022. I was 32 years old when I joined, having spent several years running my own business. My path in the Army involved Basic Training (BCT), Officer Candidate School (OCS), Engineer Basic Officer Leadership Course (EBOLC), and Combat Engineer (Sapper) Platoon Leadership.

Once I decided to join the military and before I shipped out for training I sold my car, gave away my possessions, and moved out of my apartment. I went on a nomadic journey that involved crashing on friends' couches, floors, and sometimes secretly in church basements. (See *Six Figure Couch Surfer*).

My military journey was nothing as expected. Basic Training was delayed by almost a year due to MEPS having to clear me after shoulder and knee surgeries. Once I graduated from BCT I failed land navigation in OCS and recycled from Alpha Company back to day 1 with Bravo Company delaying my commission 30 days later than anticipated. A few days before the branching ceremony in OCS, whereby we discover what jobs we will have in the military, I decided at the last minute to select the Corps of

Engineers to pursue a career as an Army diver. However, the global COVID pandemic shut down our school options and altered our career trajectories due to lockdowns and stop-movement orders. Dive was off the table, and I was due to ship out for my first duty station for an unknown job: Sapper platoon leader.

The list continues. I thought deploying was a sure thing. I joined the Army to leave my home state of California and see the world abroad. However, my orders sent me right back to California where I had no idea Army bases existed. On top of that, I didn't know there was such a thing as non-deployable units. I went to such a unit and never once deployed overseas. More unexpected changes were to come. Just before the last year of my contract, my father died of heart disease on the 4th of July 2021. The American Red Cross helped ensure I was by his side when he passed, but many service members sacrificed such things in the name of duty. Three months later I was rear-ended in a hit-and-run collision that totaled my vehicle and aggravated a neck injury that occurred in training. Due to the injury, I was on a medical profile that limited me from being in the field my last year. None of this was part of the plan, but I needed to accept reality and move forward. Mindset was everything.

Expect flux. Uncertainty and change were constant during my time in the military. Mission planning never perfectly aligns with real world scenarios, and constant last-minute changes require flexibility and quick adaptation. I had experienced this same phenomenon in entrepreneurial



startups. Ideas are great on a sterile whiteboard, but in the field, numerous unforeseen issues arise. It keeps things interesting. Some solutions are immediate while others take a long time to implement. Some solutions don't work at all. That's ok. Failure is a part of the growth journey for any leader, but so is getting back up and learning from mistakes.

Consider my time in OCS. During land navigation through the dense forest of Georgia, I'd be in a frantic run towards my intended destination while trying to read my map and compass only to trip over a log and end up with a mouthful of dirt and moss. *Ooof!* I had to gather everything up, establish my direction, and pick up again. No matter what happened or how hard I fell, the map and compass were true and reliable resources. Good advice is the same way. Being able to fall back on sound wisdom from my friends and mentors helped me reorient myself and head back in the right direction. No matter how many mistakes I made, and I know I made many, I could always regain my bearing and try again.

As a junior officer, I accepted that most things were out of my control, except for my attitude. I could always work on that. New officers require mentoring and training to understand how their specific military unit functions. It takes time. Initially, my positional authority was low. Many people and scenarios I wanted to change were beyond my level of influence. There was no point in fighting reality. I mastered the art of keeping my mouth shut unless I could affect change. *Carry on!*

Whenever else possible, I took ownership of any variable I could control no matter how small. It's the little things. Enabling myself to optimize these few areas in my life gave me newfound confidence and a sense of discipline. My leadership style, finances, physical fitness, and education all incrementally improved. Every step counted. Resilience, creativity, and self-efficacy absolutely took off as I sought constant improvement. Though I must admit the pain and discomfort of Army life rocked my world, the toughest parts of the military brought about the most growth. Looking back now I needed all the good and bad to evolve. I especially needed the right people around me to provide encouragement and support.

Relationships helped pull me through the hard times. I couldn't do it alone. The biggest truth the military taught me is that the most valuable asset of any organization is its people. Organizations and policies are inherently lifeless. Without anyone willing to follow, a leader walks alone. We don't often discuss compassion, empathy, and love in the military, but that is exactly what it takes to keep from falling apart. I've seen strong people crash into a wall mentally and emotionally because they lacked sincere connection. I almost lost several colleagues to this personally, and it's for them I write this book. How can I say that I want to help support Veterans struggling with PTSD, depression, or suicide if I don't apply this to leadership on the active-duty side?

Shared struggles are powerful motivators. Hardships can galvanize the military community. Shared suffering bonded us beyond what I anticipated. Several of these relationships I made will certainly last a lifetime. Military brothers and sisters helped me keep hope through difficult times. I leaned on them for advice, encouragement, and connection when far from home. Whenever I felt alone or stuck, I called on them for heartfelt guidance. Many encouraged me to write this book because of how deeply my experiences resonate with theirs. I am grateful for their love and support. This book is as much their story as it is mine.

Thank you to every service member in this book. You are all encouraging examples to me and to countless others, I pray. As I write these words, I happily reflect on just how much you shaped my life. Many deficits in my character and mindset were filled because you lived out lives of discipline, adventure, and assertion. Thanks for being my first battle buddies.

Most of all, on behalf of my father (from Kirkuk) and mother (from Habbaniyah), as well as my entire family, thank you to all who fought for freedom in Iraq during the Global War on Terror. As the child of Iraqi immigrants seeking refuge from violence and oppression, I feel I owe you a debt. All I can think to do is try and strengthen our armed forces by encouraging holistic leadership through book writing. I hope to do more. Freedom here in the USA is worlds away from what my parents told me they experienced growing up.

You helped pay that price. We are forever grateful to call America our home where we are afforded liberties we otherwise would not have. This truly is the greatest nation in the world.

Now, remember to fight the war within.

## LIFE BEFORE THE MILITARY

I lived in San Diego, CA, on the sunny harbor overlooking the downtown skyline next door to my favorite cafe. With a nice Mediterranean climate, the ocean breeze brought in the smell of saltwater through the bright, open windows. Sunshine flooded my living room, along with the sounds of birds singing. Sailboats decorated the cool blue harbor, and palm trees swayed in relaxation. From this updated luxury apartment with white kitchen cabinets, beautiful dark wood floors, and in-unit laundry, I lived the life I wanted, or so I thought, making a comfortable six-figure salary. Life was amazing, at least on the surface.

I pursued authentic interests and avoided busy work. Relationships inspired my business development; I enjoyed my clients. I didn't aim to please any authority figure and my life was fully in my control. There was no rush to meet deadlines, so I could conduct my business with courtesy. Money was just a byproduct of my passion.

My income was generated around remote, freelance work. My industry of choice was the intersection of the genetic research industry and software engineering. They call this industry bioinformatics. Software coders create machine learning algorithms edging towards AI to predictively identify and cure disease. I loved these scientists. They were introverts like me and made me feel accepted as a fellow nerd. We were supportive of each other. We hated the idea of selling out to investors to be considered valuable. Passion for science drove us.

One company I worked with had the power to tell a barely pregnant woman all the diseases the child carried that would manifest decades down the road in adulthood. These companies have the potential to use gene editing tools based on both software and biological molecules to snip out bad genes and replace them with optimal genes. Imagine manufacturing human embryos genetically screened for disease and selected for optimal performance.

For now, the law is that scientists can't edit a human and have a woman give birth to the altered code. The modified embryo must be incinerated within 14 days of creation. Despite this law, there is at least one known case in which two genetically modified humans were born. The human arms race is just beginning.

While these clients of mine sought to change the trajectory of humanity, I wanted to find successful companies to work with. Work for me was cerebrally stimulating, rewarding, and fun. During my workdays, I had

plenty of time for Jiu-Jitsu, where I could hang with world-famous black belts. Even though I was around them daily, I could barely mitigate butterflies in my stomach whenever I crossed paths with these legends. Every training session was epic.

On a deeply personal note, about Jiu-Jitsu, it reconnected me with my body. I noticed my breath, muscle tension, and anxiety. After years of disassociation, I felt present again. Scary things started coming back up. Something from the past felt stuck, frozen in time. Coaches unknowingly guided me towards having to face this inner darkness. Many of my mentors on the mat were in the military and I trusted them. My heart was pounding out of my chest, and I wanted to run away. I'd go home with thoughts of being inadequate, a failure, and unwanted. Dark feelings set in. Thoughts in my head told me to stop trying to learn how to fight. Instead, I kept coming back to the mats.

Earlier in this book, I mentioned my struggle with self-medication through excessive alcohol consumption, parties, and social distractions, including friends who made poor life decisions involving illicit drug use. There was a powerful reason I sought escapism. At a young age I experienced repeated physical abuse and after that sexual assault. Shame crushed me.

Physical abuse during childhood trained me to not defend myself. It off lined my motor response to fighting off a threat. Easy target. This made me vulnerable for abuses I

experienced later in life. These experiences put my brain in overdrive. I suppressed it all as deeply as possible. I didn't want to face it. I couldn't. This took its toll on my body and mind. Anxiety was always high, so I needed to find ways to override the signal. The noise was the only way I knew how. I sought as much chaos as possible to drown my pain. Unfortunately, my newfound medicine now slowly began to poison me.

After years of battling hangovers and waking up to horrible life decisions, I began to make my way back to faith and spirituality. Reading hundreds of self-help books, I became obsessed with psychology. Meditation helped me delve deeper into past trauma and the darkness within. Breath control was a powerful new tool I used to guide my mind through tension. Jiu-Jitsu helped me heal, but the cost was that it brought about flashbacks from hidden memories of physical abuse. Experiencing the flight and freeze response in front of my coaches and sparring partners was heavy.

Despite this weightiness, my coaches helped me stick with it and not give up. True warriors never made me feel weak. Instead, they imparted their strength. They told me not to quit. This was a spiritual and physical journey. Faith helped. I believed in a restored version of myself. I didn't have to apologize for my existence anymore. I left the party scene and slowly broke addictive cycles. Next, I was sweating out my stress on the mats while bonding with healthy military friends. They encouraged me. I needed

encouragement because this is a long, messy process. Fear never stopped calling my name. I constantly wrestled against anxiety every time I parked my car and walked into the gym. Getting beat up on the mats made me feel like a victim again. It tore me up. Memories echoed. However, as scared as I was of facing my weakness, there was nowhere else to go.

Past memories get heavy. This was a painful, bloody fight that took me down to depths within myself I thought would end my life altogether. Repressed emotions felt like heavy chains wrapped around my stomach with a sinking anchor pulling me down through the floor into a hellish black abyss. Breathing was difficult under all the weight. I wanted to die. But I wanted to live more.

Every training session is a small win. Growth is still happening. I'm not done healing from anxieties of the past and probably never will be. I long to escape despair. I still fall on my face. I want to numb out from the revving thoughts and hypervigilance. But despite the odds, I'll never stop fighting. Even when I get laid out, I know to always get back up. After all, I didn't die in that low place. Coaches, mentors, and friends supported me. After surviving this dark chapter of facing my past wounds, I learned there was more life experience I wanted. This time I wanted to be present for it. I sought a new purpose beyond myself. Time for a new foundation. Which path to take was the question.

MY "WHY"



So why leave all the good stuff in life for the Army at 32? Well, I asked myself this question a lot over the past thousand days. One day before I joined, while invoicing my six figures from the beach, I got a call from a military friend who wanted to catch up. He was a Special Operations Forces Platoon Leader at the time and was in town between deployments to the Middle East.

War was brewing hot at this time in both Syria and Iraq. News media streamed videos of ISIS massacring men, women, and children around the clock. My friend was part of a community of warriors facing this evil and killing the enemy. Here I was enjoying the sunshine at the beach every day while he was fighting in battles across the world to liberate victims of tyranny. My parents are from Iraq. American service members I knew had fought to free the towns and villages my family originated from. This was the biggest reason I joined the military.

My parents barely escaped Baghdad with their lives in the 1970s when Saddam rose to power. Life was hell there. As children, they routinely lined up to applaud the public execution of political dissidents. Threats of death loomed constantly. Females especially had it bad. My mother's best friend was kidnapped by political officials as a young girl, never to be found again. The same evil men almost captured my own mother as they came knocking on her door in the middle of the night to drag her out of bed when she was around 16 years old. Men were regularly

forced as conscripts into the military without proper clothing or weapons to fight with rifles pointed at their backs. Life in Iraq entailed constant violence, threats of sexual assault, and government surveillance. This was almost my fate.

Luckily, I was born in America about ten years after my parents escaped. It wasn't easy for them because their family members had to split up and find various routes out. Some were killed. I was raised to appreciate freedom. Being here in the states is no small thing. Friends I made in the military were all contributing to the cause of liberty and justice. My brother deployed as a Marine, as well, to do his part.

Evil exists beyond our comprehension in some places in the world. Hell on earth. What if I lived this daily? Dictatorship could have imprisoned my potential. My God-given freedom could have been subject to government control or entirely snuffed out. Only America would fight this. I admire anyone stepping into such darkness to fight terror. Heroes. They'd never call themselves that, but I do. I dig being friends with such awesome warriors. Again, this buddy of mine was on secret missions around the world fighting without any recognition. He didn't want it.

Many battles obscurely mentioned in the news where enemies were killed and hostages rescued were, in fact, operations involving elite units the public would never know to thank. My friends were there. They didn't say much about missions, yet they came back from multiple deployments having an ever-growing intensity for patriotic duty. Their

energy was electric. Their eyes reflected weighty victories won in intense combat. They were constantly seeing death and killing enemies in dark corners of the world while I was living in a safe, small bubble kept safe by their sacrifice. I told myself I had to give back in some way and be even just a small, distant part of the global military family.

Outside of combat, these service members had discipline, big hearts, and a taste for adventure. Their presence in my life inspired me to be a better man. Every time we hung out, I had a mini existential crisis, wondering if I had what it took to be like them. Waking up at 4 am to train was routine for them. I longed for such motivation. Traveling the world to experience new cultures and lands grew their knowledge of our global ecosystem while I stayed put in one city. Learning new skills from tying knots to operating weapon systems and shaping explosive charges made my skills related to sending emails feel insubstantial. I wanted to get my hands dirty too while learning new things.

Physical fitness was also a powerful attractor. A casual workout or trail run with these friends left me keeled over and vomiting. Normal mornings for them involved waking up before sunrise to mountain bike in darkness with a headlamp or free dive in the ocean, all before sunrise. This was only the first workout of the day. The rest of the day could include skydiving, trail running, or surfing before capping off the night with a good beer. With a smile on their faces, they endured hours of physical exertion because they knew how precious every minute of free time was. After all,

in their line of work, death is a normal risk. Living life to the fullest is their way of remaining brave despite what could loom ahead. I wanted to live life with the same open sense of freedom. I felt like I needed more pain and less comfort in my life. I needed to stop seeking leisurely exercise and develop a powerful new version of myself built on a significant mindset shift.

Fear gripped me whenever I contemplated leaving my predictable life routine. I felt compelled to break out of my bubble, yet I felt helplessly trapped within it. Vicariously I attempted to live through military friends, but that only goes a short distance. An ache grew within me to put on a uniform and train alongside them. But what about all this fear inside me? These friends were versions of myself I wished I could be but was too scared to attempt. I feared potential, and they wielded it like a broad sword. Every time we hung out, I leaned a little more towards joining the military.

I wasn't satisfied with who I was in the business world because I had a deep, primal urge to learn what it means to fight. This sort of raw energy remains painfully caged up as it growls and roars to be released. Day and night, it paces the cage inside like a lion pining for open terrain to sprint and roam free. Sitting at my desk seemed wrong. While I could absolutely accomplish the goals set before me, the reward was nominal.

Experiencing truly terrifying risks is what I wanted, not a contract negotiation on unvested equity. I turned away a

potential \$1.5 million gig to help a startup company grow from scratch because I didn't want to settle down and grow roots that locked me into a role revolving around my computer. At this point, I knew that no dollar amount could pay me to stay put. Money with startups is never guaranteed anyway. I wanted to step into what truly made me afraid. It wasn't business development or startup risks.

Most men and women in my career field either found a way to release it or simply drown the animal out with drugs and alcohol. Jiu-Jitsu helped me free the beast a little, but I wanted to build my life around learning the tough skills of self-mastery. Military friends demonstrated the stark contrast between being a civilian and becoming a trained warrior. Many were battle-hardened, and I was corporate soft.

After years of back and forth, I was about to age out of the military recruiting window. Wrestling with the freedom and income I had was wearing on me. Yet I knew there would always be an opportunity in the future to restart my business hustle. Hungry for challenges and inspired by these friends, I decided to finally make the jump. I signed the contract in 2018 after a few sports' injury-related surgeries and began my process of getting medically cleared to join.

## AFTER MY DECISION

I doubted my own strength throughout life because I was convinced I was weak. Once I realized nobody was holding me back except myself, I knew it was time to make

big changes. Joining the military was a powerful, positive decision and the hardest thing I have ever done. It was time to choose the path of suffering to personally experience my own resilience. I had no idea what was ahead which added to the exhilaration. Embracing uncertainty was already a newfound strength that I found pleasantly surprising. What was I getting myself into? Definitely some tough situations.

Enduring pandemic lockdowns on remote, desert Army bases is no easy feat. I had to quickly find my own solutions to emotional distress. How could I feel like I was growing when I felt isolated and stuck? I invested in my mindset. Obtaining my master's degree in Organizational Psychology allowed me to pay careful attention to mental health, job satisfaction, and morale throughout the organization. Applying what my military friends taught me before I joined helped me listen to the stories and lives around me. I learned that people are the most important part of an organization though many leaders overlook this as they focus on policies and systems.

Often, I caught myself regretting that I hadn't joined earlier in life, but I remembered to stop comparing myself to others. Had I joined earlier, there was no way I could bring the knowledge I had at 32 years old. So rather than looking at what could have been, I chose gratitude for the path I took and the people I met. These brothers and sisters in the military will be like family to me for the rest of my life.

No two paths are ever the same. Being in the military has inherent risks that are subject to sudden change based

on global events. I would never have expected a global pandemic to start during my time in training. I also didn't know there were nondeployable units in the military. Nothing about my military journey went the way I expected. Knowing I grew in the midst of such uncertainty has bolstered my resolve to meet and defeat upcoming difficulties in life.

Difficulties allow strength to manifest. Darkness serves to demonstrate the impact of having even a little light. Pain seasons the tasteful joys of pleasure. The littlest things mean the most. Suffering alongside others creates a bond unlike any other. All of this comes with a cost. Freedom, autonomy, and comfort are jettisoned once that contract is signed, but great things lie ahead. It's a challenge most understandably don't take.

The regret of not having done it would personally bother me for the rest of my life. My heart told me to join, and I was scared the whole time. Looking back now, I see more growth than I felt during the journey. Writing this book was my way of processing the past several years. I appreciate anyone who takes the time to read what spills from my heart.

For anyone struggling to decide, I hope this helps,  
LT DAN Z JOSEPH

## CHAPTER 2

### ATTRITION, HUMILITY, & CALM

*“People assume everyone in Special Forces looks huge. If you want to see which guy is SF, look for the lean guy who looks like he’s been starved. We are endurance athletes. That’s how we train for most of our pipeline.”*

*– GREG [Army Green Beret Officer]*

*Attrition: reducing members of a group by prolonged stress or pressure*

*Equanimity: maintaining a calm, level-head during chaotic situations*

*Grit: persistent resilience and perseverance*

### REAL WORLD SCENARIO

I’m at a beach house party in Santa Barbara with the wealthiest kids I have ever met. Some of my college classmates invited me to come hang out. Children of professional athletes, movie producers, and Hollywood actors are out and about. World-famous pro surfers, Olympic athletes, and movie stars come and go. Some students are famous entertainers and reality television stars. It’s common to see



characters from recent blockbuster movies and reality shows walking around in the flesh. A few have a knack for wearing sunglasses indoors. People riding by on beach cruisers shout and wave whenever they spot someone famous standing in the front yard. Though I feel invisible, I desperately want to belong. This is it. College life is my chance to make up for being uncool in high school.

Socioeconomically, this Southern California college world is foreign to me. Growing up, a lot of my peers attended academies and preparatory schools costing tens of thousands per year. Royalty. Many grew up living lives I only saw in movies. While in prep school, they learned to throw epic parties whenever parents were jet-setting around the globe. Driving Italian sports cars and swapping prescription pills like trading cards were normal activities. One model told me her dad has a “cocaine lawyer” on retainer in San Francisco for whenever drug possession charges needed to be reduced or dismissed. Wow. While some of these trust fund babies are raised to work hard, they definitely partied harder. Some were gifted houses and real estate properties in trusts the day they were born. Others received early shares of billion-dollar companies in Silicon Valley. Born into greatness seemed so surreal to me.

My nerves were always tense just driving to these neighborhoods. Super fancy homes. In areas like these, I’m always sure to park my beater several blocks away to keep from flagging myself as the poorest one around. What would everyone else think if they saw my dented car? I want to avoid the truth as long as possible. I walk through the neighborhood like a tourist. As soon as I step into the house, I pan the room to ensure my clothes match the local populace. The brands match, but the person they cover does not. Outsider. My face shows I’m nervous, I don’t belong here,

and everyone else knows it. They are carefree, and I care way too much. No one at their level is concerned with anything but enjoying their elite status. *Ha!* Oh, how mistaken I am, but it'll be years until I understand. Stepping wide-eyed into the smoke and booze, I search for my classmates.

As a 17-year-old college freshman, I'd never had alcohol before. Before this, I was studious and avoided going to wild parties. Growing up strait-laced kept me out of trouble. Playing alone was my thing. Consequently, I also missed out on having the usual adventures. Wanting to explore my potential while feeling directionless led me down some bad paths. My academics suffer. I was introduced to a world of chaotic pleasure. No rules exist in this space, except to have fun. It's restless. Hedonism comes with constant noise and commotion which I don't care for, but what I want is to fit in with an exclusive group. I'm seeking validation and it'll cost me pieces of my soul, plus my money.

Unlike everyone else at these parties, I'm always broke. Going out adds thousands in credit card debt. I spent \$100 on one shirt plus \$280 on pants so I could try to blend in. A friend told me that once I put on jeans like his, I'd never wear ordinary denim again. He was right, I never knew the fabric could be this stretchy. He encouraged me to spend money to look the part. Maxing out credit lines was a regular occurrence. Necessary. Name-brand polos and designer jeans served as camouflage at this time in my life. I'm scared of being different, but no matter what I do it's obvious I am. My awkwardness and interest rates keep compounding.

Party conversations are strange social exercises. Lots of peacocking. Teenagers around me talk about stock investments, real estate purchases, and family ties to politicians. Many discuss

running family businesses while others describe working with actors, directors, music executives, and various celebrities. Name dropping establishes relevance. Commanding the room with loud conversations is a way to compete for audience approval. Attention is currency. Family pedigree establishes dominance in the social hierarchy. With every new guest arriving more drinks are poured, the music volume increases, and chaos takes over life. The longer it keeps taking me to find anyone I know, the more I stand alone sweating.

How do I talk to anyone here? I'm nobody. What do I possibly have to brag about? Pressure builds in my chest and my heart rate spikes. I put my hand on someone's shoulder to try and swim through the crowd. They turn around, and seeing I'm a stranger, look down at me with disgust. Panic. I'm caught under a deep wave of social anxiety. My heart races, and I can feel my chest thumping. Time for a drink. Where is the keg? I'm way out of my league here. I need to get wasted.

I stayed wasted for years until I realized my identity was empty. Even my friends couldn't fill the ravenous void. My life was based on the judgment of others and the irony was that many of them were lost too. In the next few years there would be DUIs, overdoses, breakups, divorces, and jail time for many of them. I was alongside them running from a powerful, deeply isolating existential question: Who am I? I could never find the answer without leaving everything I knew behind.

Social reset. Ten years later in life, I met friends of a whole new type who were extraordinarily elite in a very special way. A class of rare warriors. Success wasn't handed to them. It was earned by their own personal suffering and deep sacrifice.

## BEFORE I SHIPPED OUT

On Thanksgiving 2017, I was invited to a friend's house for food with his family. I rode my bicycle 40 miles that day and arrived sweaty, exhausted, and hungry. Wearing a large, heavy daypack while pedaling uphill made the trip even more of a fun challenge. My butt ached. Hopping off my bike, I shook out my legs and tried waking up tingling body parts that had lost blood flow. Waddling sorely to the door, I barely knocked before it swung open.

I was quickly introduced to several relatives and family friends who were all smiles. Guests there included a Navy pilot, an EOD tech, and a quiet guy from the Army named Greg. To my surprise, he wasn't a civilian. He was the first Green Beret officer I had ever met. He had an unassuming manner of conducting himself given his everyman vibe. Physically, he was wiry. His build was optimal for sustained periods of endurance that required great stamina. He was calm, friendly, and approachable. We hit it off immediately. I enjoyed his sharp wit. Greg and I stayed in the kitchen drinking beer when everyone went to sleep that night. We discussed military leadership and global affairs. He tested my knowledge.

Up to this point in life, I had only met one other Soldier before. All my military friends were in the Navy or Marines. We didn't have many Army bases around. Greg immediately made me rethink my previous assumptions about his branch. I thought Soldiers would be robotic and show no personality compared to beach-dwelling Sailors and Marines. I couldn't have been more wrong. He demonstrated how Soldiers could be gregarious, educated self-starters motivated to lead with emotional

intelligence. His perception was keen. He possessed a powerful ability to read people and accurately assess them, whether friend or foe. His military training made him a well-rounded warrior.

I admired several of his personality traits, especially his drive. Overcoming tough challenges made his resolve unshakable because he had suffered through training, and now fear had no hold on him. He learned how to stay objective and control emotion. His level head allowed him to downplay the dramatic intensity others used to seem intimidating. Pain didn't scare him. The way he cut down to the reality of a situation made him a reliable source of guidance. Overall, I appreciated the calm nature with which he approached life issues. He excelled in the Army as a result. His take on the difficulties others complain about gave a reasonable, friendly perspective on what it means to pursue greatness. Tough times build strength. Motivation brings success. Work ethic and integrity were key elements of his steady approach. He dropped wisdom on me.

Greg fully understood the games people play to elevate themselves. He had seen guys try to look better than others and spotlight themselves, especially when working towards Special Forces. Those dudes failed out. Their willingness to step on others didn't stop him from relying on personal convictions to do the right thing. He ignored the noise around him and zeroed in on the goals he wanted to achieve. We spoke candidly about the psychological component of competition inside and outside the military. He quickly noticed my high-energy drive for embracing uncertainty and told me to consider joining the Army. I had never contemplated it before. *Hmmm*. I was humbled to be encouraged to join by a proven warrior like him. I knew to not take his invitation

lightly. My wheels turned. Eventually, when I finally signed a contract with the Army, he had everything to do with that choice.

During our conversations, I found that Greg preferred pursuing specific paths in life that others feared. He found comfort in the distillation process that occurs when people quit and drop out of a race. It's cleansing. Selection processes using hardship to wean away the weak create a close-knit clan that shares a common perspective. Suffering helps uncover strength. It holds, whether applied to civilian life as an individual facing great challenges, or military training pipelines. Grit is discovered only by the fire of trial.

Months later, I shared I was torn about which military career or branch to consider. He told me to not feel pressured. Instead, he encouraged me to focus on maintaining resolve to crush whatever path I choose, military or not. He was not critical or judgmental, and he perceived strength as having many variations. "Military life is not for everyone," he said. "Some seek to prove themselves through entrepreneurial ventures while others seek it in the military." In either case, whether I continued running my business or signed a military contract, he let me know I could always find a way to support troops. The way he removed pressure from joining the military only made me burn with a deeper desire to don the uniform.

When he asked me what I thought about Special Forces, I told him I was way too much of a geek to ever fit in with that crowd. He smiled and told me that I was wrong. He said every teammate he worked with was geeky in at least one area of life. They could be into electronics, comics, books, fitness, or anything else, but they were absolutely nerds regarding one specific thing. Most people would never expect that. He talked about the incredible

level of intelligence almost every team guy possesses and how the movies commonly get them wrong.

Team guys don't walk around with bulging muscles, especially the ones recently coming out of training pipelines. They are lean and trained to cover long distances with little food or rest. He spoke about how many outsiders make assumptions that are usually incorrect because they read about one or two things online. I admired his ability to laser through all the nonsense most people swear by. I was shocked to see how similar he was to the SEALs and MARSOC operators I know. Very chill. Once again, here was a team guy with a good heart and a solid head on his shoulders. He gives the military a very good name. We kept in touch, and he guided me in preparing for my role as a future platoon leader in the Army.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL APPLICATION

Attrition is a powerful tool when it comes to shaping the strength of a military department or program. It highlights mental toughness. Greg acknowledged that this process enticed him to pursue exclusive military communities. The biggest eliminating factor by far is psychological weakness even more than physical demands. The fear of pain alone is enough to make people quit. One research project conducted by the USMC on 3,438 Recon trainees found that individuals who decide to quit "most commonly cited mental stress...less commonly cited reasons were physical" (Barrett et al., 2021). Handling such stress requires a mindset that can see the big picture while breaking down the overwhelming challenges into small, manageable pieces.

Steadfast mindset is key to sustaining difficult training. Soldiers in Army SFAS (Special Forces Assessment and Selection) fail when they mentally dissociate or detach during stressful circumstances, causing them to lose the ability to stay present in the situation (Morgan et al., (2008). Being present hurts. Dissociation is a psychological defense mechanism that helps someone disconnect from their body to avoid feeling overwhelming pain. This is especially relevant when someone feels overwhelmed by a situation with no anticipated end in sight. Minimizing emotional overwhelm by remaining calm during military training is important. It's common for successful service members to focus on making it one meal at a time until they graduate.

Greg passed Special Forces selection because of the calmness and humility he exudes. I later found how impactful these qualities are to military success when I came across like-minded Soldiers. It's comforting. Such qualities enable leaders to be open and honest with teammates while simultaneously withstanding the desire to run from difficulty. Leaders like Greg keep stress levels manageable for everyone else and provide guidance toward solutions.

Military training has a way of breaking the ego. Pride gets bruised. Humility, on the other hand, is associated with less anxiety, psychological well-being, and heightened self-efficacy (Ross & Wright, 2021). Enduring suffering is more tolerable for those able to manage their pride. By accepting discomfort, they don't allow difficult situations to cause emotional distress. They know their limits and understand what they can handle. Humble leaders can process discomfort with openness thereby allowing increased resilience. Humility helps minimize denial and illusions evoked by pride (Kesebir, 2014). Leaders with this quality are willing to face



uncomfortable realities because they don't try to resist pain out of fear. They can relinquish any personal agenda to accept reality.

Humility also benefits leaders who are willing to keep an open mind. Flexibility is key. In the military, change is abrupt. Battle plans, for instance, can completely change once execution begins. Whether equipment malfunctions, supply lines break, or the enemy alters their expected trajectory, no plan can ever be perfect. Good leaders keep a finger on the pulse by listening to feedback from those on the ground. With bad leaders, pride kills receptivity to change, and people suffer as a result.

Being able to listen to one's colleagues and make changes means having the humility to relinquish control. Adapting plans may hurt the ego and admitting erroneous judgment can be difficult because of pride. No human is perfect, yet some leaders are too stubborn to admit errors. It's easy to excuse arrogance as tenacity but, over time, it wears down the team. Leaders who aim to serve others rather than demand blind obedience avoid this pitfall. They seek out correction whenever their directives misalign with intended goals.

Openness and transparency are other marks of humility within a leader. These acts demonstrate a willingness to be held accountable for critical decisions. Leaders with these traits encourage dialogue to ensure their decisions are helpful. They want others to know what to expect when changes must be made. Knowing what to expect helps alleviate stress in an organization. Such treatment always conveys respect towards subordinates. Treating service members in the military as intelligent adults is important. Leaders do this by providing reasoning to back specific orders and directives. Maintaining clear, respectful dialogue boosts

morale and trust in a leader. Nothing will destroy a leader's relevance quicker than speaking to people like they are stupid.

Calm is tied to humility and provides countless benefits. Calm, non-impulsive leaders bring about positive reactions in their followers because they reduce stress, even during high-intensity situations (Arendt et al., 2019). Simply observing their demeanor helps ease tension and invokes strength. As leaders exude desirable behaviors in the workplace, "employees develop trust, respect, and positive attitudes, not only toward the leader but also to the organization or occupation" (Kim & Cruz, 2022). Military leaders, therefore, strengthen the entire branch they work in by demonstrating good qualities.

Calm leaders are also able to make thoughtful judgments because they aren't distracted by their impulses. A calm mind inhibits impulsive reactivity or emotional overreaction. By staying in control psychologically, such leaders can endure difficult situations with increased resilience. They withstand the pain and achieve their goals. Studies are examining how "inhibitory control (IC), the executive control function which supports our goal-directed behavior and regulates our emotional response, may underlie resilience" (Afek, 2021). Inhibition keeps one from burning fuel on wasted efforts and instead channels energy into the pursuit of meaningful goals.

Leaders who manage their emotions maintain awareness of strengths, weaknesses, and errors. Their attitudes influence others to "calm a chaotic environment" (Bunin et al., 2021). In organizations built on uncertainty, calm leaders provide a buffer to absorb the impact of sudden change. When a plan falls apart, or an obstacle appears out of the darkness, taking things slow and steady is critical. Even if a situation can't be controlled, one's thoughts can

always be slowed through deep breaths and focus. Staying calm allows a leader to formulate strategic responses to any event or person who threatens destruction.

When it comes to studying the managerial impact of calm and humility, one publication on military leadership emphasizes three powerful results:

- 1) adaptability to change
- 2) caring for subordinates
- 3) open communication

Even in lethal situations these qualities “result in optimized performance at multiple levels when crisis conditions are encountered” (Bunin et al., 2021). Again, I see how all three of these aspects are handled through calm leaders who take a humble approach. Greg inherently exhibits all of these through his leadership style on the teams.

During our several discussions before I joined the Army, Greg continually shared several impactful statements. He let me know what books and resources he used to grow his knowledge. Leaders are readers. Anytime he mentioned a book on military leadership, I made sure to write the title down and get a copy for myself. I was hungry to learn as much as possible from him. He made his way through the “big Army” and onto the teams, allowing him to gain tremendous insight. I valued every minute we spoke. Writing his words in this book serves as my attempt to give back so others can benefit as well.

Some critics say that the leadership principles used in elite Special Forces communities don’t apply to the conventional military, but I disagree. Everyone in the military is an adult. We can

choose to grow our people rather than control them. Teach them to think for themselves. While I understand autonomy must be earned, there are principles that apply to the general population. Teams encourage respectful treatment across ranks while promoting autonomy and innovative thought. I understand these to be universally desirable qualities inside and outside the military. Any leadership principles that friends in elite military units give me are worth applying anywhere else. Their ideas are founded upon well-established research.

Here are three powerful pieces of advice Greg offered me before I joined the Army:

## LEADERSHIP ADVICE

*"Choose hard paths others complain about; they work as a filter. Just be patient for the process to work, and in time, you'll find the brotherhood you want." (Pursue Attrition)*

*"You'll eventually see the same people again, so don't burn bridges. Even if someone is a bad person and they try to start trouble, be the bigger person by showing them respect. They'll ruin their reputation while you preserve yours." (Stay Calm)*

*"Keep your mouth shut and never tell people how great you are at anything. Simply show them through your work ethic. Before you know it, you'll find yourself rubbing elbows alongside like-*

*mindful brothers. Stay humble and focus on putting out as hard as you can. Success will come eventually." (Be humble)*

From the minute I shipped out for BCT at Fort Jackson, these truths were powerful tools for me to keep in mind. They guided me whenever I navigated egos and personality conflicts. As a result, I was able to focus attention on the good people around me and block out the bad. There was plenty of distracting negativity to go around, but my mind didn't have to wander. I never needed to engage in frivolous arguments or prove any point. Silence was finally ok. *Growth!*

Advice from Greg works inside and outside the military. Thanks to him, I learned to accurately read people and assess the level of engagement I'd be willing to offer them based on what they brought to the table, positivity, or negativity. Respectfully, I minimized exposure to anyone seeking to increase tension in the workplace. No unnecessary negativity or complaining. My energy was reserved for setting and achieving goals. I invested in stable friendships and became intentionally selective about who I allowed to speak into my life. If someone caused rifts and fights among peers, I knew to disengage and walk away. With less tension in my life, I could lead with a calm state of mind.

In the past I was starved for relevance, my mind in restless pursuit of validation. Now I felt compelled to work hard without self-promotion and believed it would eventually pay off. Some leaders tried egging on competitions between peers even to the point of creating conflicts, but I saw that as detrimental to stability in the organization. Bragging about success or dominance was a

waste of time and attracted the wrong people. Competing for social relevance consumes valuable energy. Instead, I sought to push myself privately and connect with like-minded friends. No time for drama. Even if someone pushed my buttons, I accepted that it was my job to control myself, not others. It paid off.

One specific example occurred in OCS when we were learning what kind of leaders we would be. During a workout competition, a class peer tried to trip me and then shove me to the ground. We were running metal bleachers and the fall would've been ugly. He was also cutting corners throughout the race. Cheater. My adrenaline spiked and all I could think of was how disrespectful and dangerous he was. I saw red. Initially, my fear of inadequacy prompted me to retaliate. After shoulder-checking him, he responded in kind which really set me off, but I knew I had a decision to make. I paused.

I wanted to smash him and force him to admit how wrong he was. I wanted to tell him I was faster than him. I wanted him to apologize. But I remembered Greg's words about staying calm and never burning bridges. Deep breath. I let him finish the race by cutting corners. Had I started a fight it would have resulted in mass punishment from our instructors and ruined the day for all my peers. I needed to control my emotional reaction for their sake. Towards the end of the race, our instructor caught him cheating and he was handled; it was good that I focused on controlling myself.

Before joining the military, I was painfully insecure and defensive. A small slight could keep me reeling in rumination for days. Back in my party days, I was encouraged to show off to gain relevance. When someone made an abrasive remark, I learned to run my mouth. Talk was all I had. No Jiu-Jitsu at that stage in life.

God knows how badly I needed to be choked out and pummeled on the mats, but that comes later. Knowing I couldn't physically back up my tough act, I kept a loud bark. I was scared. Remaining quiet felt like a liability. But in the military, things changed. My phase of desiring social relevance ended. Squabbling felt nauseatingly childish, and I expected people around me to act like adults. So, I avoided fights, negativity, and gossip as much as possible, especially because the military is a small community.

Remaining stoic, I eventually understood helped to preserve mental energy and thus my sanity. Leaders who let emotions control them created terribly exhausting work environments. As students during initial entry training, we were able to put emotional control into practice. Stressful exercises during military training can set a lot of people off. For example, those who can't handle the pressure physically tense up or verbally snap at others. They lose self-control, cheat, or attack peers, sometimes resulting in their dismissal. When a peer lost emotional control it was a red flag, signaling they lacked the ability to lead. Seeing them removed from the class was a relief because it meant people would not have to suffer under the leadership of someone who could not control their emotions. That's attrition at work.

Attrition is a reduction in the number of trainees who graduate from a training program. It's a distillation process. Instructors apply pressure to see who breaks. When someone blatantly commits a serious infraction that gets them kicked out of a military program, we call that self-selecting out. They chose to remove themselves. Most times, they will never admit to wanting out of the program, instead claiming it was an honest mistake. However, when considering consistent behavior patterns, it's clear they never wanted to be there. Self-sabotage occurs. It's common

to lose several students per graduating class. Attrition did indeed work its magic as Greg predicted whenever the wrong people left, and the right ones remained. On many occasions, it boiled down to pride.

I wanted to be the leader I wanted to have. Managing my own pride took work. Military life bruised my ego countless times as I attempted to minimize my emotional reactivity to tough people and situations. When under pressure from sleep deprivation, hunger, or exposure to weather, I needed to control my words and behaviors. Remaining calm, assertive, and respectful is no easy task in these conditions. Triple-digit temperatures in a hot, barren desert don't make tactical battle planning and execution easier. Tempers run high. When someone makes a disparaging or condescending comment I want to react, whether they're a leader, peer, or subordinate. However, contemplating destructive fallout makes me carefully reconsider. Do I want the fight to drag on? Do I want to engage with that person if they lack good judgment? What is the best use of my energy? How may I respond without exacerbating the issue?

One of the toughest situations in any working environment is having a colleague who brings bitterness and resentment to work and means to hurt others. It's even worse when they are unable or unwilling to acknowledge their own negative attitude. There is no easy way to respond. Simply reprimanding them doesn't address the underlying issues they have. Worse, they'll simply find others to hurt. Establishing boundaries and guidelines at work is key to protecting people, but that doesn't stop passive aggression. Coworkers like this can sabotage good leaders. What's the answer? Fire them? But then society still carries the problem. Do we treat symptoms, quarantine the disease, or find a cure?



I still don't know the perfect answer to this, but I do know that staying calm and controlling an ego-defensive response mitigates damage. Pride ruins relationships. I worked for someone who was constantly draining the morale of everybody around him. At the end of the day, he was distressed from a lifetime of hurt that bled into his professional life. His marriage was ending, and he wasn't happy with life. On one hand I felt for him, on the other, I was frustrated. As a leader myself, I had to be thoughtful. I made it a point to never use his desire for conflict as a means of testing my own power. What would be the point? He needed help.

When he tried bullying me, I ignored his disrespectful behavior and stayed neutral. Eventually, he found my lack of response unrewarding, and this dissuaded him from further attacks. I felt relieved. Sadly, he did succeed in channeling his pain toward others and caused a great deal of emotional and mental distress. His job performance was good so there wasn't an easy way to flag him until people began speaking up together. When I finally found out what was happening, I did what I could to encourage those he hurt to pursue a professional response. Many were afraid. Silent. It was understandable given his level of authority.

Since he was a key asset to the organization, I wondered if removing him would be harmful or beneficial. Maybe I was being too sensitive. Then again, isn't sensitivity a strength that helps me understand how to best treat others? What made matters worse was this man's belief that subordinates didn't deserve kindness. Some agreed with him, though they disagreed with his approach. With so many opinions and perspectives, who was right? Yep, leadership is messy.

Overall, I tried my best to learn through hardships when it came to managing difficult people. Sometimes creating distance

was the only available route to take. It still felt incomplete. I wanted to fix the situation my way, but was that just my pride talking? As a leader, the game can be played many ways. There's even the option of ending the game altogether by pushing over the tables. It really depends on individual personality and beliefs. The biggest takeaway I learned is that just because I can protect myself from somebody toxic, feeling good doesn't necessarily follow. I lose sleep if I know others are still vulnerable to the abuse of a toxic leader.

Life in the military was the most challenging and rewarding time of my life. I constantly needed to remain calm and monitor my attitude. While I am forever grateful for the situations I experienced, there are some I never wish to face again. Death Valley, CA was one. On August 16, 2020, it reached 130 degrees Fahrenheit, one of the hottest recorded temperatures on Earth. While living in metal shipping containers, we wore our full kit (helmet, pants, long-sleeved shirts, and tactical vests). Heat waves emanated from every wall like an oven.

Somehow, I kept calm, even though my body wanted to collapse. Working 24 hours a day in this miserable environment with other exhausted Soldiers is not easy. Staying positive took sincere effort. One trick that helped was to put a handful of ice under your hat for a quick cool down. In tough work environments like that one, relying on strong, positive leaders was vital. I needed to know they cared. Because of them, despite the difficulties of the austere desert, we accomplished the mission while supporting one another.

Thanks to the Army, I can now handle myself in challenging situations better than ever. I learned more about my capabilities, limits, and ego. I know how to make a difficult judgment call and

manage complex situations that seem to have no clear end in sight. When chaos increases, I slow my mind, read the problem, keep my mouth closed, and formulate an approach. Calm keeps me in the fight longer and helps me contribute my best to the organization. I used to fear complicated, intense situations. Now, because of the military, I enjoy working through the puzzle before me and the ego within me— a powerful way to grow. I couldn't have done it without the guidance and advice from amazing friends throughout the suck.

Thanks, Greg.

## CHAPTER 3

### HYPE & STEREOTYPES

*"I'm a glorified button pusher flying expensive equipment."*

– **TODD** [USMC F18 Fighter Pilot]

***Objectivity:** having a clear perspective on a situation based on unbiased, accurate information*

***Self-Awareness:** understanding one's own abilities, limitations, and desires*

***Self-Serving Bias:** holding to specific ideas strictly out of a need to reinforce preexisting or long-held beliefs*

***Stereotype:** characteristics assumed as normal for everyone belonging to a particular group*

### REAL WORLD SCENARIO

Every Saturday morning I'd join a meetup group at South Mission Beach to play volleyball and start the weekend off right. Many of the men in the group I played with were in the Navy. We played in teams of six, so with over 20 of us, we had to rotate people in and

out after each point. Soft, warm sand cushioned our bare feet as we played.

South Mission Beach has about a dozen courts. Next to ours, some Olympic hopefuls were training 2x2. When our ball flew onto their court, I ran to retrieve it. I don't know the name of the female I spoke with, but I remember feeling like I was the size of one of her legs. She was super friendly and invited us to use their court once they finished. I thanked her and jumped back into my game.

As we played, someone pulled up on a motorcycle and everyone abruptly stopped playing and stared toward the parking lot. The people in my group kept saying, "It's her" and "She's on her bike." As I turned my attention to the parking lot, I saw someone removing a full-face helmet to reveal a beautiful woman with light eyes and an athletic physique. A man pulled up next to her on his motorcycle and everyone audibly sighed as if their hearts were breaking. "Who is she?" I asked. Without taking their eyes off her they told me she was a new fighter pilot. Eventually, we got back to our game, but the conversation about her didn't stop. She was a powerful symbol of untouchable beauty and military might.

The popularity of fighter pilots is based on the exclusivity of their club. Their career functions almost as a social class to which outsiders peer in with curiosity and awe. With all the tough training involved, it makes sense they stand out in the military. Commanding such fierce tactical firepower in battle is an incredible asset and symbol of American pride. For each pilot, there is an extensive support team standing behind them, receiving little attention. The spotlight falls on the face of the one in the cockpit. Immediately, it seemed this woman was a paragon of excellence because of her accomplishments as a fighter pilot.

Earning wings as a jet fighter is no easy feat. Fewer than one percent of applicants make it that far since air-to-air combat training requires physical and mental toughness. Stereotypes around this elite class of warriors are well known. They are assumed to walk around with an air of arrogance because they are the best. Sometimes this is true and sometimes it isn't. The same thing can be said about a variety of stereotypes. Whether someone has certain tabs on their shoulders especially feeds into assumptions about them. So does their size, physical fitness, and combat experience. Stereotypes serve the purpose of categorizing people, but they are often wrong, or at best incomplete. Being a female in the military only adds further presumptions.

Female military friends I consider sisters in arms have shared with me the frustration of stereotypes impacting their lives. Through ongoing professionalism, Erin demonstrated that she in no way desired special attention or treatment based on her gender. As a prior enlisted Soldier before becoming an officer, her insight into military leadership dynamics was rich. She maintains authenticity in her leadership style and is comfortable being assertive when necessary.

It's not easy for a woman facing negative biases to carry a rifle and lead a group of men into battle scenarios, but she did so, putting aside any presumptions. One night it was her turn to be evaluated for platoon leadership ability. She made me squad leader on our FTX (field training exercise) required for graduation. We were to secretly recon a concrete bridge to enable a convoy element to cross. Gathering the dimensions of the bridge would allow us to calculate the appropriate size of C4 explosives to demolish it once the convoy had passed. It takes time to determine how and where to place explosive charges when looking to cut

through steel structures. We needed to hurry before enemy forces spotted our element. Instructors threw several explosive simulation rounds around the woods to get us riled up. They also set several traps for us in one of the most intense battle scenarios we were going to experience.

Erin ordered me out into the darkness to secure the bridge. Cadre walked behind me to observe. Anticipating danger, I got on all fours, then belly down with my face at their boots. My weapon was slung onto my back as I bear crawled across the bridge to avoid potential enemy fire. I fumbled with my infrared light in a frantic search for potential explosives. Searching for trip wires and IEDs with night vision optics is tough. There are procedures to detect metal wires in the darkness, but I didn't know them yet. Moving slowly, I communicated back to Erin, who waited with the security overwatch element.

Suddenly, explosions started erupting. I had hit a trap. It was a mass casualty exercise where the cadre planned to kill most of us off. This increased pressure on us all and tested Erin's stress management. When opinions piled onto her during an influx of chaos, her responsibility was to make the final call and determine our fate. She knew when to ask for help and when to order tactical responses. We collected casualties, set up 360-degree security, and called up a very long 9-line CASEVAC request. After completing all this, we awaited our extract. Erin did everything required during this intense exercise. I was encouraged by her ability to remain true to herself without being swayed by what others assumed a female would be able to handle. She and several other females I know in the military shatter gender stereotypes.

Selena, a kickboxer, maintained a perfect balance between training as a fighter and embracing her femininity, even while in

military uniform. Throughout her life, she faced challenges that pushed her to fight back, but she somehow also stayed warm. As a musician, she channeled her feelings into songs between rounds on the punching bags. In the Army, she overcame stereotyping that made her feel she couldn't connect with her brothers in arms. In the field, she lived in austerity among her brothers as together we all learned squad-level maneuvering tactics. The military was seeing a lot of firsts for women around this time so many rules were still being developed. Men and women conducting hygiene together in the field can make some people uncomfortable. Not her. Her professionalism and maturity cut through any awkwardness.

She trained to shoot, move, communicate, and kill. Qualifying in rifle marksmanship, ruck marching, and learning to command artillery fire helped her develop warfighting skills most don't have. She joined the military to be an American Soldier. She wanted to serve out of a sense of patriotic duty because the United States had played a powerful role in saving her family from an evil dictatorship. Her grandfather and father inspired her to wear the uniform and represent freedom to the world. She didn't wish to be an outcast or placed into an outgroup because of her gender. Professionally speaking, she believed women should not ever have to be influenced by gender differences. She genuinely connected with others in uniform and didn't let anyone push her to the sidelines.

Negative stereotypes are daunting. Women face many. My Army sisters were often expected to quit during times of physical duress. But they didn't. Incorrectly, they were assumed to have difficulty in the field when it came to hygiene or managing menstrual cycles. Some were told to stay quiet during mission



briefs. Men, some would say, do not wish to receive tactical advice from females. None of this stopped them from putting on the uniform and stepping up to the leadership responsibilities before them. They refused to be outsiders. I wonder what women who fly multimillion-dollar aircraft say to critical comments about female drivers.

Positive stereotypes can also play a role in creating misconceptions about service members. Buying the hype of self-serving stereotypes can over-inflate the ego. A common misconception about elite military service members is that they carry themselves with an elitist viewpoint, causing them to look down upon others. Despite what pop culture portrays; this is not necessarily the case. While maintaining a sense of professional pride serves to motivate group cohesion, this doesn't necessarily mean it can't be toggled off. The competitive nature between military peers induces posturing, but ideally only within reason. Competitive jabs are more a modality of psychological play than an attempt to be disparaging.

I bought into plenty of inaccurate stereotypes about military service members before joining. My own assumptions about fighter pilots were obliterated once I got to know one.

## BEFORE I SHIPPED OUT

Todd was the first USMC fighter pilot I ever met, and all I knew about him at first was that he was a guitarist in a band. He could also drum and sing and was generally great at anything related to music, except hip-hop dancing. His high and tight haircut made it clear he was a Marine, but if there was anything he wanted

to be known for in the world, it was music. He dressed sharp, his green eyes had a piercing intensity, and he was deeply analytical. When I eventually discovered he was a fighter pilot, all these pieces fell into place. One thing that threw me, though, was that he drove an older SUV rather than some roadster. Don't fighter pilots always like to go fast? I asked him why, as a speed demon, he didn't feel the need to blaze around town in a race car. He responded, "I fly one for work."

Intelligent and modest, Todd carried himself with a great deal of confidence, but not to the point that it was overbearing. Being a musician nurtured his artistic streak and softened his intensity. He was one of my first examples of an artist-warrior maintaining a passion for both the craft of warfare and creative expression. Joining the military does not mean one must drop the things that bring joy to life. Individual pursuits of hobbies and creative outlets are encouraged to stay balanced. Staying true to oneself makes for a more robust military because it enriches the culture and prevents repression.

Todd's approachability was a highlight of his personality as he opened his heart and home to others. He welcomed strangers introduced by friends. He is a good man with a generous spirit. His fostering community is especially great for newly arriving military members with no preexisting support group in our city. Service members from various branches recently stationed in San Diego were able to network and connect with others thanks to such hospitality. During holidays it was great making new military friends who would have spent the day alone. Knowing there are people like Todd provides a sense of belonging and connection that otherwise would take tremendous effort to develop.

One time during the local air show he was standing around in his olive drab aviator onesie. I was able to check out his jet while meeting the rest of his squadron. Badass pilots. I asked them what it was like being up in the clouds pulling G's. I was expecting a high-adrenaline description straight out of the movies. Instead, they shared specific techniques for engaging muscle tension in anticipation of each turn. Contracting muscles in their core and legs keeps them from blacking out due to the loss of blood flow that would pool in their appendages. Before each turn, they clenched as they pulled the stick, then released and exhaled. It all sounded so routine. Basic fundamentals. This definitely wasn't what I expected to hear. They spoke about their job as if it was normal. Their humility didn't fit the stereotype.

Once again, my assumptions about the military were readjusted through genuine friendship. My disillusioned thoughts about military pilots were slowly being calibrated to fit reality. It wasn't all action. They put so much work into training, studying, and managing affairs outside of flight time that can go unappreciated. Todd helped me learn about the humbler parts of life in the military that people don't see from the outside. It was a mature approach to assessing life in uniform. While these were indeed elite fighter pilots, they didn't buy into the hype everyone else believed. They remained grounded even when their heads were literally up in the clouds. Todd modestly told me that fighter pilots like himself are fancy button pushers. I still have trouble seeing it this way, knowing how they tear through the skies in a roar.

Todd continued to break stereotypes I held as truth. He further deepened my appreciation for the common shared humanity of service members by describing his personal growth

through pain. He had some tough life experiences outside his career that increased his self-awareness and maturity. He openly shared about being divorced at a young age. Heartbreak cut through any facade or suit of armor he may have had. This shocked me as I never expected to witness vulnerability in a fighter pilot or meet one so disarmingly honest.

His ex-wife realized she hadn't done enough in life to discover herself and decided to do so by partying nightly at clubs and bars with newfound friends. She became caught up in the desire to have a social life that involved drinking until the early morning hours. This didn't fit well with a pilot who needed plenty of rest before returning to the skies daily. Eventually, their relationship lost its foundation. He realized there was no way to control someone else's heart. No rank or accolades can mandate someone's wholehearted, loving commitment.

Even elite professional careers are not able to prevent human frailties. I thought long about my assumptions. With the dissolution of his marriage, Todd refocused on advancing his career as a pilot and pursued genuine relationships with friends of substance. Music also played a large part in his healing process. Sharing that gift with others enriched his life and circle of community. Eventually, he remarried after meeting a grounded woman with a beautiful and humble soul. They played hip-hop at the wedding, and we all tried to dance.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL APPLICATION

Professionals in the military face many stereotypes oversimplifying their identities. Unfortunately, many existing

stereotypes discourage recruits who notice they don't align with expectations regarding personality traits or temperament (Peters et al., 2014). Oftentimes this includes assumptions made about expressed masculinity. Tough guy acts are constructed to camouflage vulnerability and are annoyingly fabricated. Stereotyping can also harm physical health in the military as service members feel they must portray strength by refusing medical care, thereby straining their bodies over time (Greene-Shotridge et al., 2007). Professionals in high-risk careers ought to avoid masking legitimate needs just so they can satisfy the expectations of others. Long-term negative impact results in loss of motivation, diminished growth, and even suicide. Stigmas against mental health disorders caused by stereotypes create a sense of isolation that leads to an increase in suicidality (Carpiniello & Pinaa, 2017).

Overcoming stereotypes is healthy for the mind, but it requires a strong sense of self-awareness and the ability to challenge biases. Stripping away the title, rank, and uniform allows for focusing on deeper identity traits. Naked truth. Self-serving biases over-inflate our own strengths because we buy into our own image of success and avoid honestly addressing shortcomings (Karpen, 2018). Stereotypes that invoke a sense of strength are a psychological means of protecting against vulnerability. Social pressure plays a role. Perspective is lost when influenced by peer groups so it's key to recalibrate one's personal viewpoint thoughtfully. Usually, this means being selective about who to receive feedback from. It's also important to reflect on the personal values that matter most. Mental health benefits from "insight, reflection, rumination and mindfulness" (Sutton, 2016).

Self-awareness is a concept in psychology describing how well we know ourselves. It's measured by how capable we are of

understanding and predicting our moods and behaviors. It's key in countering stereotypes. Individuals with high levels of self-awareness can focus on pursuing meaningful goals. They are not concerned with being what someone else thinks they should be. "Accurate overall self-awareness benefits the development and well-being of an individual" (Li et al., 2021). Health increases from self-awareness because we know our own needs, limits, and interests. We know how to take care of ourselves.

Self-awareness also helps us face challenges without being afraid of failure or shortcomings. Shock absorption. We become stronger because we confidently believe that our strengths and weaknesses balance out. There is no need to shrink away from tough challenges to cover up weaknesses. Lean into it. Accepting positive and negative personal characteristics increases self-esteem and authenticity (Showers et al., 2016). No need to hide. Fear of admitting shortcomings makes people fragile and imbalanced. Avoiding failure and fearing negative feedback is more likely when someone has fragile self-esteem based on low self-awareness. Having a robust identity helps handle stress, face negative events, self-regulate emotions, maintain optimism, and avoid self-stereotyping (Rivera & Paredes, 2014).

We even form stereotypes about ourselves. Self-stereotyping occurs when someone accepts limitations others project onto them based on a variety of potential stigmas. This deeply affects our health. A variety of stereotypes and outcomes exist. One specific example involves body weight. In the previously mentioned study, obesity increases in individuals who believe stereotypes about themselves at the expense of their self-esteem. Self-sabotage. Their behaviors begin to match what others think about them as they lack the motivation to eat healthy foods and

lose weight. Ethnic-racial individuals who internalize negative racial stereotypes about themselves are more likely to be obese because they believe unhealthy behaviors are congruent with their identities (Rivera & Pardez, 2014). Break the cycle! Anyone focusing on positive attributes can overcome stereotyping and maintain healthy lifestyles in line with their personal values.

Self-awareness is complex and involves both conscious and unconscious thoughts about who we are in light of what other people think (Carden et al., 2021). While it's generally healthy to be self-aware, it's especially critical for those in positions of authority. Objective leaders enhance their decision-making ability. They impact the organization by creating a culture in which reality takes precedence over any other agenda. This invokes a sense of humility which minimizes ego inflation, superiority, and arrogance. Leading from humility is a powerful way to nurture high morale in an organization (Owens et al., 2019).

Stereotypes can have another detrimental effect when it comes to overlooking the universal struggles all humans share. In Todd's case, it led to my assumption that elite service members are impervious to failure or emotional pain. Untrue. Being in the military revealed to me the vast amounts of wounds and struggles that exist. Often, the adversities Soldiers overcome early in life make them incredibly powerful individuals. Seeing them as people, not just uniforms with rank, helped me appreciate the depth and substance they each contributed. Many journeyed into the military from painfully broken lives, violent upbringings, and heartache. They are inspired to stand up for others.

Seeing firsthand how a fighter pilot was burdened with managing a tough career and a difficult relationship at home opened my eyes to a common military struggle. If an average

civilian fights with their spouse, they aren't necessarily carrying angst or distraction into a life-and-death situation at work. If a military member is distracted by emotional distress, this can certainly jeopardize lives depending on the job. Being in the cockpit while under a mental fog of anger and frustration could quickly lead to a high-speed, deadly error. Healthy social support is necessary to help service members maintain a clear focus on the job.

Genuine connection outweighs image. Todd demonstrated how receiving the spotlight for one's career is not necessarily correct, gratifying, or rewarding. Stereotypes are burdensome because they project so many assumptions. They also overlook personal identity. A sense of emptiness exists when all someone is seen for is their professional standing. It begs the question of where their value would lie if the job disappeared. Rather than oversimplifying someone else's identity according to stereotypes, I want to see past the hype. Who are they without titles? Doing so will allow me to understand how personal struggles and adversities contributed to their success. No military career or medal can fully encompass the identity or struggle of a service member, which is why Todd told me the following:

## LEADERSHIP ADVICE

*"We have cool jobs and some exciting training exercises, but regardless of the hype, we are regular people like anyone else. That's where our value comes from, not from our job."*



Certain military careers may be considered superior when it comes to the firepower, technology, training, and selection process involved. They carry a brand. Exclusivity drives up brand value due to the concept of scarcity or rarity. Not everyone can get in. Also, having associated support roles further implies an elite status. It takes a team working in the background to keep certain jobs going. Rockstars need stagehands.

Millions of dollars may go into training, as well. Placing a dollar amount on resources pertaining to particular jobs does understandably create a value hierarchy. However, there's an issue when the price tag of job training begins to dictate assumed value about the individual service member. It's a disservice to others. Shallow. Combat experience can also add weight to someone's relevance in the military and comes with a slew of misconstrued assumptions about the service member.

Considering how many media headlines or blockbuster movies spotlight elite military careers adds to the weight they carry in the eyes of society. This doesn't just occur on the civilian side looking in. Internally, to the military, the concept of comparing patches, ribbons, and medals feeds into the hype. Competitive tendencies between colleagues cause service members to measure themselves against each other. Taking pride in one's job is an integral part of being a service member, but this can become overblown without balance. Things can go very wrong when a person's entire value is tied to their career or awards. It can be devastating when they feel that ties are severed (by injury, separation, termination, retirement). What about others who opted out of accepting awards or choose not to wear the patches they earned? Several Soldiers I met refused to put on the patches they successfully obtained by graduating from tough military schools.

They knew they made it and that's all that mattered. For whatever reason, they felt compelled to hide it.

I also met many Soldiers in the Army who went on multiple combat deployments and earned various awards, medals, and other recognition for saving lives. I've seen them stereotyped as badasses, killers, and heroes, all of which they brush off. They're quiet. Hyping up the idea of American forces in battle is simple to do. Romanticized. Fetishized even. Reality is more complex than that. War was not one-dimensionally glorious to them. The good parts of combat are based on their relationships and love for one another.

Paperwork wasn't a priority. The priority was making sure brothers and sisters came back from their patrols. That's what many miss, the genuine love for each other. Pulling the trigger was their duty to protect a shared military family. Many lost multiple friends and carry silent emotional scars. Several have physical scars from direct-action firefights and IEDs. Asking about their experiences shouldn't be taken lightly because it's heavy for them to relive and discuss. I have seen the expression change on their face when brought back to those hellish moments. The hangover from memory recall can last days.

What puts them back at ease and makes them light up is bringing them back into the present by talking about their families, children, and personal interests. It reminds them of what their sacrifices paid for. Heaven and hell for them are separated by a thin line. They hate when that's overlooked by others, but they may lack words to paint such a picture. Many avoid civilians because it feels impossible to be understood. Silence is simpler.

On the other hand, war is not something they wish to constantly relive either. I noticed that while Soldiers with combat

experience indeed have rich wisdom to share about the military, they enjoy being seen for more. There's an interesting balance between talking about military hardship and flipping back to routine life before things get too heavy. Dark humor helps. Military life is both all-consuming and salvific. War to them is just part of the job for which they signed up and being totally numb at funerals for their brothers tends to go unnoticed, perhaps for a lifetime.

One mentor of mine who helped train me during my first few months as a platoon leader was an NCO with extensive combat experience who I call Army dad. War was initially exciting. Deployed to Iraq during the invasion as a young Army Engineer he worked with varieties of explosives he never knew existed before. He supported special operations units from several branches and conducted countless demolitions. (Ask me in person about pistols, boardshorts, and tank tops in Iraq). Insurgents were everywhere. On some occasions, he worked construction projects requiring entire nights of darting between concrete barriers to avoid incoming sniper fire. Every movement was calculated. His adrenaline stayed high for weeks on end in combat. Even decades later, his brain still "relaxes" at a high state of activation.

As a specialist, he had been through bloody situations in war and witnessed the devastating loss of life. On one occasion, he was denied the ability to help rescue friendly forces pinned down by fire because of conflicting mission sets. Men were dying. His plan was to use his vehicle as a shield to guide them out. Various command elements were involved in figuring out the response. He listened on the radio as voices called for help while taking enemy rounds. These same men were a couple of blocks away, bleeding out within his sight as they took fire from an enemy out of visibility. All he could do was watch as they screamed. His unit was ordered

to pick up and move out of the engagement area. Not knowing their fate still haunts him to this day.

On another occasion, he recalls washing blood out of Humvees and seeing the pieces of his fellow men. Good men died. Heavy losses occurred in battles he was a part of. The stench of death, gunpowder, and diesel were seared into his mind. Many times, after combat he considered ending his life, feeling unworthy. Survivor's guilt. It takes a lot out of him to bring this up. Asking him to recall war brings him to a dark place where he still hears the cries over the radio. An animalistic rage to tear his enemies into pieces to protect his brothers still burns inside. No medal will ease the pain he feels. No professional acknowledgment helps bring life back into their bodies.

This man is more than just a Soldier with combat experience, he's a living testament to the men he served with. Their sacrifice kept him alive. He learned to stop looking back and asking what else he could have done. Fate decided. He taught me to appreciate the raw humanity of service members underlying their uniforms. He told me about the complexity of wartime decisions and how some people break while others rise. He emphasized the importance of never judging a man based on what he says. Instead, watch how he leads. He focuses on the heart of a leader and couldn't care less about awards, tabs, or aggrandizement. He certainly doesn't give a damn about anyone who arrogantly demands attention for having deployed.

The hype of combat, as witnessed in war documentaries or films, can sometimes make war look too simplistic. The heaviness he feels in his chest when recalling the past isn't captured in those frames. While there is excitement and a sense of adventure in battling alongside brothers, there is also a tremendous weight

locked in those memories. To see service members only as symbols of tactical power can mask the raw reality of the insanity they witnessed. Disturbing stories he's shared are hard to repeat. His heart bleeds daily for these brothers as flashbacks race in his mind every night he puts his head down on the pillow to sleep.

For others like him, thoughts before bed fire off like .50 cal rounds: "Why am I still here? Why did I deserve to live? Why didn't those men? Who will avenge them? Why didn't I do more? Was it my fault? What's the point of going on like this?" Decisions made by leaders during battle echo in their minds. This is the human experience of war that no hype of military symbolism can readily encompass. No job title reveals the weight they bear.

Because of my Army dad, I try to remind myself to consider the depth of experience that uniforms don't capture. Of course, I'm human and I get caught up in admiring iconic patches, but leadership potential can't always be graded by resume highlights. When examining someone's military career, it's important to separate the service member from the job description or listed accomplishments. Their identity is not what they do for a living or what someone else measures. Their level of training or years of experience may say a lot about who they are as a person, but it's not a complete picture. This all ties into the stereotyping discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

Stereotypes exist because they simplify the process of defining someone we don't yet know. Insiders and outsiders to an organization are both guilty of it. While it's understandable that civilians view the military in light of media portrayals, this quickly loses relevance when talking to the heroes themselves. They perform job tasks that most fail to understand, and they train hard to keep up with demands. At the same time, they carry the

emotional weight of losses few can imagine. All this is done without visibly breaking. To evaluate them only by their titles and written accomplishments is to only consider small snippets and highlights while ignoring the full burden they carry on their shoulders. It blows my mind that I've been given permission to say all this.

These brothers in arms who helped me navigate the military deeply inspire me because of their refusal to accept even positive stereotypes. Many could easily feed off attention and inflate their egos, but they would rather stay true to themselves. Honor goes to the fallen. Rejecting hype is a great example of professional competency and healthy self-perception. The value of each service member rests not on a job title. Rather, it is tied to the primal human spirit of those still alive today, and those who gave all.

Thanks, Todd (Army dad, too).

*On a somber note, I checked in with my Army dad a dozen or more times while writing this book to ensure he was truly okay with me sharing even a sliver of his story. There's so much more to his experiences than words on a page can capture. I'm floored by the intensity of what he witnessed in war. We teared up at some stories he shared and wanted to punch a wall at others. Solid leadership during combat is especially vital. Things get nightmarish without it. I'm grateful and humbled he allowed me to hear and share his story. I don't want to fumble this. I'll do my best to honor what you went through in that hellish time.*