

The Sword And



the Lamb

Ron Breland

This work is dedicated to **Almighty God**, for without his grace and mercy my wonderful life and its rich abundance of blessings would have never been.

It is also dedicated to my wife, **Helen**, for her undying and never-ceasing love and support. She is my strength, and I would truly be nothing without her

And for my children, **Gary, Kevin, Austin, Bailey, and Abigail**;
I have learned more from all of you than I will possibly ever be able to teach you.
Your purity, kindness, and big-heartedness are examples for all to follow.

There are a few friends from throughout my life that I would like to mention below; for they have shown me The Lamb at various times throughout my life. Without them I would not be who I am today.

For my brother, **Gary**; you will always be one of my heroes.

For **Mrs. Corkhill**, my First Grade Teacher; for showing me the love of the written word.
May she rest in peace.

For **Michelle Thompson-Meyer**, my high school friend who's caring and tender words and advice carried me through the rough years.

For **Eric Russell**, my fellow leader of Soldiers and true believer in all-things-Airborne;
and all those KFC runs after we dusted ourselves off on the drop zone together.

For **Donald McRavin**, my fellow Paratrooper and Airborne mentor;
for showing me the love of giving it all in order to get it all.

For **Darrin Numbers**, who came into my life at exactly the right moment.
You are a true American hero brother, and it was a pleasure to walk by your side if even for a short while.

For **Jonathan Simmons**, my super Soldier and confidant; it was a privilege to lead you
and watch you grow. Our nation is stronger for having you in her service.

THE SWORD AND THE LAMB

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Don't wait until you love people to act on their behalf.
Act on their behalf, and you will come to love them.

~C.S. Lewis~

FOREWORD

What is the very essence of mankind? What is it that motivates us to do the things that we do? A man wishes to please his wife, as she wishes to please her husband. A father desires to teach his son the very best of what he knows; to give his child the very best of his experience and wisdom. In turn, the son wishes to please his father; to seek and gain his approval. The mother strives to raise her daughter to become a strong, good woman. Again, the daughter makes it her business to show her mother throughout her life the fruition of those planted seeds.

It is in this regard that as we grow older, our deepest and truest human nature comes to fruition and blossoms fully. Through our own rearing, we have been taught that service and respect to others has a high value of importance in our own lives as well as society. For some, this sense of service is carried on through a choice of career or vocation. Those who love to serve typically do it very well, and seek other ways in which to serve. To serve, and serve well is to make a difference.

There is a question that has been asked throughout the history of mankind. I find it very ironic that there are still those who would be naysayers to this school of thought; yet as long as the topic of religion or spirituality has been discussed there have, and always will be those on opposing ends of this very simple question. “Can one person really make a difference?” You might guess by now that I believe emphatically that the answer is yes.

Those who serve; those being our Armed Forces, Firefighters, Police Officers, Paramedics, Doctors, Nurses, and many others who are forced daily into life and death situations know what most of the general public does not. They have seen miraculous and near divine acts of heroism, fearless and selfless behavior of their coworkers, as well as those who have died on an operating table or in the back of an ambulance only to be pulled literally from the shadow of death from an individual whose tireless efforts were unyielding. Our armed forces fight not for politics, foreign policy, or anything of the sort. They fight to the death for the man or woman standing next to them. These are your sons and daughters. God bless them all.

I was motivated to put pen to paper on this occasion by a sermon that I heard this very morning. My Pastor, a young and enthusiastic Christian struck me in such a way that I’d never felt before. The sermon was called, “Running with Horses”. The message of this sermon was so powerful and moving that I reached for the chair in front of me, grabbed an offering envelope, and began to take notes. Rarely am I this motivated or moved to the point of immediate action. I took this feeling as a message from God to use my gift and begin writing again. Up to this point,

I've had three books published but was procrastinating, and the sermon that I heard seemed to be the prodding that I needed to write again.

The series of sermons that prompted this book brought something out in me that I was aware of, yet never considered a gift. At the age of forty-one, even I can still learn a lesson. God has given each of us a gift, and it is our inherent responsibility as His children to seek out this gift and offer its benefit to others.

Although this piece was prompted by a series of sermons, I have to honestly delve back a little deeper in my walk with God. About seven years ago, while I was serving in Ar Ramadi, Iraq, my wife told me very enthusiastically one day during one of our very few cherished phone calls that she was openly and warmly invited to a picnic in a park with a church group. Throughout our years in the Army, both Helen and I have maintained our beliefs and had visited literally dozens of churches throughout the country. Granted, no one church will emulate or edify every single belief that you hold dear to you to the point of being identical to a fault. However, this young Pastor and his church were as close as it ever got for either of us.

She regaled to me that the event was an amazing time, and that she would email me pictures of the event. The pictures did show a good time and I was pleased that she had found some support from church in my absence. Pastor B.J. Solander of the Assemblies of God Church in Junction City, Kansas is not a stereotypical Pastor. My Pastor, dear friend, and brother in Christ was a very young Pastor when we first met. For a man of only twenty-seven years, he had been raised in the church by two loving and very Christian parents, visited Israel, and finished Seminary. He was an accomplished younger man, and I was of course grateful for his support, friendship, and Pastoral prowess. I have to honestly say that I've never met a better 'Prince of the Pulpit'.

Through our correspondence over the course of the year, primarily by e-mail; B.J. sent me the highlights of the week, the lessons that had been covered, and made himself completely available to me as much as anyone could. I was truly impressed by his kindness and devotion to God, his ability to seemingly master any power tool, and of course for his fraternity in God's service.

In the many months that followed, we became very close and both Helen and I considered B.J. as much of a brother as any of our own. It was a pleasure to stop by the church on our way through town to say hello or just to chat for a minute, helping B.J. with some light construction on our leaky old roof, or to attend services on Sundays. He was as much a part of our lives as any other relative.

Then came a day that I would never forget. Helen had a job interview, and we were talking about one of the recent lessons in a sermon. She reeled on and on about how Jesus and John had been close in their earlier years, and how, as cousins often do, separated for a portion of their lives only to reunite to make history and save us from eternal damnation. I quipped to Helen that “Jesus and John weren’t buddies!” In my own ignorance, I had no idea how foolish I must have looked. At the time, I was on the path in my walk with God, but quite obviously I had a lot more walking to do. I even had the audacity to defend my own lack of knowledge and proceeded to tell Helen that I was going to call my resident expert on Biblical issues in order to prove her wrong. I even placed a bet with her over the outcome. I was so sure (I’m not sure exactly why!) of my being right that I bet her a month’s worth of dinner dishes on the results.

Helen walked confidently into her interview, as I sat in our minivan and called my pal B.J. for what I knew was going to be a waste of time. When I explained to him what had transpired, B.J., in his infinite wisdom and with great pity in his voice told me that not only were Jesus and John “buddies” as I had referred to them, but that they were cousins and had spent quite a bit of time together in their youth.

When Helen returned to the minivan from her interview, I just cringed. I knew that she would immediately tell me about the interview, the job itself, and how things went overall. I also know my wife, and that she doesn’t ever forget anything related to the Bible, and would inevitably inquire about my conversation with B.J. It seems that her remembering to ask me about my phone call was the only thing that I was right about that day. She quietly smiled as I told her what she already knew...that she was, of course, correct.

A few weeks later, during a very vocal and motivating sermon on service and devotion to our fellow man, on loving each other unconditionally, apparently B.J. had an epiphany. As a young Pastor, B.J. was what we came to call ‘the great illustrator’. If he could use a prop, a story, or any other mechanism to illustrate his point, he surely would. As he held his microphone in his hand and walked down the center aisle of the sanctuary; there I was, sitting in the aisle seat of my pew. As he neared my seat, B.J. raised his volume slightly and emphasized the point that we should love everybody, “even our buddies, like John and Jesus!” he exclaimed. All at once, I felt the full measure of my own ignorance; delight in the moral of the lesson, and the minor ribbing at my expense from a truly great friend. To this day I remember that lesson, and I wouldn’t have had it any other way. It was poignantly clear to me that day that God’s wisdom (and sense of humor) is greater than my own. I spoke to B.J. a couple of weeks ago, and in keeping up with old friends we spoke of his bride of almost two years now, our families, and, you guessed it ...the story of Jesus and John. We both still laughed.

My eyes were only then beginning to open to see the path that I was already on, and hadn't fully realized yet. It was enlightenment if you will.

I have been an Instructor of many topics for over twenty years now. I have taught my Soldiers many lessons while serving in various leadership positions throughout my career. As a firefighter in the United States Army Fire Service, I was surrounded by those who serve. When I became a Paratrooper, I joined a group of triple volunteers. Through the will of God and a whole lot of prayers, I survived three combat tours in various parts of the globe. Throughout these tours, I learned that I could be used by God as his sword when necessary. I have seen some pretty brutal places where life itself has very little value. It is in these places that I have seen levels of evil that most people cannot imagine. As one of many who comprised the Sword of the Lord, I took great pride in that level of service. And yet at other times, the sword was laid aside to enable the gentle touch of the Lamb. Jesus Christ is my savior, and it is an honor to even attempt to walk in His divine shadow. I pray that those who read these words will be empowered by this Spirit and be both as proud as I have been to serve in so many capacities. God Bless you all!

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"
And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*

Isaiah 6:8

I have been told by many people that they believe that these sentiments resemble my life. I have been asked by friends and even family before how I 'fit it all into one life'. The answer, not so remarkably, is simple enough. I'm very tired, because I never stop. I believe that in the divine scheme of things we owe it to our fellow man, our families, and even ourselves to give our best and to never stop trying.

As I have grown in my faith over the years, I have been more prone to quoting scripture than at any other time in my life. This is primarily due to the fact that throughout the years my eyes have continued to open, and these spiritual truths have become more obvious and completely self-evident in some cases. No one's life is perfect, but I dare say that through both good and bad I have come out on top for the most part. I have bore witness to the everyday miracles of life, but only because my eyes were open. This was not always the case, however with age comes wisdom. God has placed some truly extraordinary people in my life at exactly the right time that I needed them on the path of life. Some were

young, and some old; but all have enhanced my “life experience” or the experiences that have collectively become my life. May Almighty God continue to bless them all.

But He knows the way that I take;

when He has tested me,

I will come forth as gold.

Job 23:10

CHAPTER ONE

'Nam baby

I have to say that the beginning of my life would be considered nothing less than humble. I come from strong southern roots, which are deep seeded in patriotism. And, as a young, southern patriot my father heard the call to serve his country during its time of need. In the wake of the war in Vietnam, my father, along with his best friend, heeded this call as they inquired with the United States Marine Corps. The appeal to serve their country was only enabled further by the news that the Marines had a 'buddy program'. Under the auspices of this program, two buddies could join the Corps together, train together, and be sent off to their first tour of duty together. In their case, that was Vietnam. This dual-purposed program benefitted both the military and enlistees with all needs being met in order to support the war effort.

Landing at Tan Son Nhut Air Base just outside of Saigon, Republic of Vietnam; my father placed his boots on the ground for the first day of a one-year tour. At the time, most young recruits had a short life expectancy. The primary reason that I share this story with you is that it clearly illustrates how close that I came to never having been born. Some say that life is funny that way, but I believe that everything happens for a reason. Coincidence, truly, does not exist.

After debarking the aircraft after an incredibly long trans-continental flight, the recruits, my father among them; were rushed to trucks where they would serve as replacements for those who had been killed or injured too badly to continue the fight. Once on the trucks, men were funneled through the winding roads that wound through the countryside to their perspective Forward Operating Bases. Fearing the worst from their intensive training and being ever-alert, the men never even blinked as they had been trained to observe every leaf, blade of tall grass, and tree in order to search out the enemy.

As luck would have it, during the ride back to the firebase, my father's convoy was ambushed. Their vehicle disabled, the driver of the truck ordered all of the new recruits to hit the tree line and take up a defensive position. As luck would have it, panic struck (of course) as my father jumped out of the cab of the truck without anything besides his helmet. The driver threw his weapon to him on the side of the road, offering a sense of relief as he could now defend himself at a minimum. When the driver decided to

evacuate the vehicle, he grabbed my father's vest and other gear to take with him. As he tossed his gear out the door of the now disabled vehicle, the driver jumped out of the cab towards the shoulder of the road near my father. My father was now reunited with his gear, which only served to add a spark to his dwindling confidence. The driver, however, was not so fortunate. After jumping from the truck, the driver was shot in mid-air and killed instantly. My father's life had been spared in this firefight, and thanks to an unknown driver and fellow Marine he had something to ponder on his first day in country.

When the trucks finally pulled up to their new home, or firebase; they were then whisked off of the trucks and acclimated to their hooch to drop off gear, draw a load of ammunition, and be assigned to a Squad. And being an environment loaded with 'Type A' personalities, being the new guy in town was not the most envious position to be in. And, as with any other fraternity of sorts, the new guys always seem to make for easy targets. This rite of passage as it were is centuries old and enables even the youngest of recruits to feel at home after some minor teasing and testing of their grit.

When he finally arrived at the firebase, my Dad received his assignment, and was relieved to find out that he had a chance to rest for a while. Relieved to be "home" finally, he collapsed on his cot out of sheer exhaustion. Being the new guy in the unit, his relaxed state allowed and almost begged for some level of hazing by his fellow Marines. While lying on his cot and drifting off to sleep, one of his new bunkmates decided to place a rubber snake over his legs. Having it engrained in his head for months about Vietnam's infamous "two-step" snake, he leapt from his bunk and to his feet in an instant. Instantaneously, his fear turned to anger that someone would exploit that particular vulnerability.

He never spoke more highly about any other single group of people than those guys that he shared a year with over a lifetime ago.

While in Vietnam, he met one fellow Marine in particular. This guy was a joker of sorts, and they both took a liking to each other in no time. This Marine was the man who would become my Uncle only a couple of years from then. As troops often do, they talk a lot about their families while deployed. He mentioned that he had a little sister back in New Jersey, and that when they rotated back to "the world", as it was called then; that my Dad should come up for a visit, have a few beers, and perhaps meet this girl.

After their redeployment back to the United States and a homecoming that left a lot to be desired, the silver lining came in the form of a long-haired blonde girl named Linda. She was eighteen, and just out of high school. He was twenty-one. They fell in love, and married later on that year. He moved in

with my mother and grandparents in southern New Jersey, and got hired by the local police department. In April of 1970, while on a family visit to Louisiana, my mother went into labor and although it wasn't exactly her plan to give birth in a strange hospital, it was clearly out of their hands at that point.

As the story goes, my father and grandfather were in the bathroom, both standing in front of a urinal when my father's baby sister came running into the men's room yelling "It's a boy! It's a boy!" This of course startled my father and grandfather who, at the time were standing by the urinals and tending to their more immediate physical needs. It must have been a sight to see.

My childhood was pretty typical of the 1970's. My Dad was a cop, and I adored him as my hero. I have a few happy memories from my earlier years, after the age of five; though I would come to find out later how dysfunctional those times really were. I thought that every kid helped his mom carry his passed out father up the stairs at night. I never really compared myself to my friends, but I thought we all marched down to the local package store with a ten dollar bill and walked home with a case of pony cans of beer on our shoulders. I could also pour a mean mixed drink as a kid. Ah, the memories.

The earliest memory that I can recall in detail occurred on my fifth birthday. I was finally five, and I was excited as I suspect any child would be about this big day. I can't remember any presents, nor can I remember the color of the cake; but I do distinctly remember one thing. If you are a history buff or knowledgeable about the military at all, you may recall my birthday that year. The day was April 29, 1975. This day would signify the end of the war in Vietnam, as the city of Saigon fell on international television.

My father called me into our living room and we watched the fall of Saigon on television together, seemingly for hours. I remember with absolute clarity watching servicemen pushing helicopters over the edges of ships into the ocean. I also remember watching people frantically trying to board helicopters on what I would find out much, much later to be the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon. I knew at that age that my father had been in the war as a Marine, but what I couldn't surmise at the time is why he was making me watch this. This was my birthday, and this was not high on my priority list of things to do. As I look back now, I can now see of course that my father was a man in turmoil, and the images of Saigon falling must have meant a lot of different things to him. If I had only been older, perhaps I could have understood what he was going through that day. God bless him, always.

CHAPTER TWO

Mom's House – Dad's House



I suppose that you could say that I grew up in a traditional early 1970's home. The 'free love' mentality of the sixties was dissipating quickly, and the country was wholly focused on the war in Vietnam. Born in 1970, I had no earthly idea about the surroundings that I would soon find myself in.

My father was a police officer, and in my eyes he was famous. Everyone knew him.

By the mid-to-late 1970's, things were beginning to change, and after the gas crisis, the international hostage crisis, and the general public view that President Carter was a bit 'touched', things were seemingly calming down. My mother and father's generation, based on being raised in the 1950's was experiencing a transition as well. As they grew up in a post World War II setting, their stereotypical "Ward and June Cleaver" parents' way of doing things in relative perfect harmony was dissolving quickly. After a little over a decade of marriage, my parents became the newest members of the separated and soon-to-be divorced crowd.

In 1979 I was nine years old. Their separation meant doing things a little different than the business as usual that I was accustomed to. My father moved out of the house and into an apartment that was still in walking distance for me. This actually does say a lot, because in the late 70's a nine year old

kid could walk halfway across the state and nary a soul would question it. My kids today couldn't even fathom walking the distances that we did as kids, just to get to a friend's house, or the store, or even school; even if it was uphill both ways. I wouldn't let them walk around like that nowadays either.

My Dad was a cop. We lived in southern New Jersey, just outside of Atlantic City. As a kid, I loved the weekends because my father worked the graveyard shift and would come home early in the morning. I would usually be up watching cartoons, and I reveled with joy when he walked through the door. I was glad that he was safe, and my imagination ran wild with the thought of him chasing bad guys all night. He was truly my hero.

The life of a police officer is not an easy one, to be sure. As a Detective near a huge crime hub, it is a daunting task to keep everything straight and maintain one's sanity. My father at many points during his tenure in law enforcement was involved with several high profile cases which maintained a stressful level of heat on both his personal and professional lives. For instance, he made the first Thai stick bust in southern New Jersey history. Thai stick is a form of cannabis from Thailand formed from the premium elements of seedless marijuana, and gained huge popularity throughout the 1960's and early 1970's.

As we lived in Southern New Jersey through my formative years, I came to know many of the local kids. They were my neighbors, classmates, and teammates on the baseball field. Many of them were also the children of other police officers, construction contractors, and even Mafioso. It was pretty interesting growing up there.

Between my first grade and second grade years, there was a huge scare throughout New York with a serial killer by the name of David Berkowitz. Known as the "Son of Sam" to the general public and in law enforcement circles, Berkowitz shot and killed six people and wounded several others in a series of shootings. This man was 'motivated', per se, by a demon-possessed neighbor's dog in an admission after

his capture. The reason that I bring up this little piece of history is that one day my father was called to respond to a local bar and that the ‘Son of Sam’ killer was there. Not being that far from New York, this was a plausible possibility and he approached with extreme caution. Although it turned out to be a hoax of sorts, it certainly was an eye-opener for law enforcement agencies throughout the northeast.

The Gambino Crime Family was a prevalent force on the rise in the New York crime circuit back in those days as well. Subsequently, as an arm of this organization in New Jersey – Nicodemo “Little Nicky” Scarfo was a leader emerging as a powerful force to be reckoned with through a series of violent acts in the Atlantic City area. In a book published called “The Boardwalk Jungle”, by Ovid Demaris; my father was painted as something of a corrupt cop who assisted the mafia in getting off completely free from some very serious charges. This of course could not be further from the truth. My father, Detective Sergeant Gary Breland was a United States Marine and Police Officer who despised injustice, and has the integrity of a tough, loving, and fair American.

Now, living in the geographic area that we did also presented its own problems with regard to having a father who was a well-known police officer. We lived near the beach, and as kids we all knew every nook and cranny in the Atlantic City Boardwalk, as well as every house in Margate, New Jersey where we lived. There was one instance, where my best friend Joey Varani and I wound up running quite literally for our lives along the beach. Nicky Scarfo had been involved with many murders and was subsequently brought up on charges. My father was called to testify regarding a body that he found in the trunk of a car, and I suppose that’s when the pressure really came to a head. Joey and I were evidently followed, and a chase on foot ensued. Those guys in suits and dress shoes had no chance of catching us while running on the beach, but at the time I don’t even think that I was completely sure of that. Joey and I ran like never before, and it wasn’t long before we saw our pursuers stopped on the beach, exhausted

from the chase. In the end we were never caught by those mafia guys, and my father went on to testify in the trial. What a dysfunctional way to grow up. Sometimes it still makes me tired just thinking about it.

With all of these very stressful factors thrown into the mix, it isn't difficult to understand why my mother no longer wanted anything to do with it. In reality, it was very overwhelming for her, and as the court cases were followed and the accusations flew, she was ready to call it quits after twelve years of marriage. As the trend was at the time, the divorce was ugly. Of course my brother and I bore the brunt of the separation itself, but we muddled through it as best we could. We did become very close during that time though, and if anything good could have come out of it; the seeds planted then have developed into the excellent relationship that my brother and I share even today. The advantages of having two parents in two different homes are few, unless you are a resourceful kid who viewed each domicile as a potential adventure waiting to happen.

This next story shows one of the advantages that my friend Joey and I chanced upon during a weekend visit with my dad. Ah, those were the days.

PLAYBOYS IN THE ATTIC

After my parents were divorced, my father moved into an apartment near the beach and had an upstairs studio loft apartment as well which had a really cute waitress as its tenant. Things were starting to look up. I wasn't one of those kids who tried to milk their parents from both sides of the divorce table. I was just able to recognize an advantage; in this case, a really nice view when I saw it.

My dad's apartment was a house owned by two brothers. These guys were both bachelors who absolutely loved their lifestyle. Looking back, I suppose that the writing was on the wall about Joey Varani and me loving the single life as well, but we were too young to recognize it then. Time would certainly tell, and in short time as well.

My dad had secured a small house in town, which was a little bit further away from our house than the one he had when he split my head open with a baseball. It was a very clean, wide open space, and he seemed to like it a lot better than the last one. I did too, as it gave me a lot more space to roam around.

The weekend that he decided to move in was a visitation weekend for my brother and me. My brother decided not to come over until the majority of the moving was done, and Joey Varani and I decided to go exploring.

What we hadn't realized at the time was that the owners of this very small house had stored the remainder of their belongings in the attic space which ran from one end of the house to the other. As we wandered through the house, we spied a short rope hanging from the ceiling which was attached to what looked like a small trap door. We looked at each other, and in silent agreement agreed to pull on it. The small ceiling door swung down, revealing a very small ladder. This was our chance to peer into the unknown and was very exciting for the both of us.

We had both promised my dad that we would stay out of the way, and let him get his moving done without incident from us. Very soon, this would not be a problem at all. My dad didn't have very much, other than a few pieces of furniture and all of his police gear. The move itself wasn't very time consuming, but he finished the day with a beer run and a trip to the local hardware store for a new door lock.

My dad didn't have enough belongings to store anything up in the attic, so he told Joey and me to have fun, and to be careful to not get hurt. As he left to run his errands, Joey and I took off like a shot up that ladder into what I refer to later on as a 'pre-pubescent paradise'. When we reached the top of that ladder and stepped off onto the plywood flooring, I was surprised to see how clean the attic was. There were mountains upon mountains of books and personal items from the owners neatly organized in small aisles throughout the entire attic space. We found some small furniture and made somewhat of a clubhouse.

And then we realized our good fortune.

The mountains of books were not books at all, but literally thousands upon thousands of Playboy magazines. We were in paradise, to be sure. Not only did we have a really cool clubhouse with furniture, a small window, a light, and an open space; but we had one of the most widely distributed forms of entertainment in all of America. We had found the mother lode of treasure without even looking very hard.

We spent hours and hours in that attic discovering the secrets of life and finding out what we *really* had to look forward to in the years to come. And no, we weren't reading the articles either. This

went on for weeks and weeks until one fine Saturday afternoon my dad decided to come up for a visit. I suppose that in knowing exactly what we had to look forward to with each visit to the attic, we failed to have any sort of plan such as pulling up the ladder and securing our secret stash.

When I saw my father coming up the ladder, I saw my whole life flash before my eyes. The jig was up, and we both knew it. That afternoon, we were both told to climb down the ladder and not go up in the attic ever again. As we both stood there and watched my dad fold that ladder up for the last time and cut the rope to the attic space I remember feeling sad, but not too upset.

I knew now that when I got older and the time was right I would have more than just a few pictures, and the promise of a 'well-developed' future.

CHAPTER THREE

Hail To The Chief – B.R. Breland

As many men have said before, they have home-grown heroes in their lives. One of mine is not only a personal hero to me, but also to many grateful citizens in our hometown as well. In 1988, after forty years of service to the Monroe, Louisiana Fire Department; and ten years as Chief, B.R. Breland retired. It has been said that he was a hard worker who demanded a lot from his employees. As a retired Fire Chief myself, I cannot emphasize enough how demanding this career can be. It's not really a job; it is more of a calling. The demands and stressors of life and death scenarios being dropped into your lap every day at the drop of a hat are no doubt more than the average person can take. He was content though in enjoying his retirement and hitting the water at every opportunity to go fishing. It did not even matter whether or not he caught anything because the peace and quiet of the rivers and bayous of Louisiana were almost a part of him.

At the place of my birth, within the great State of Louisiana there lies a man-made lake called Bussey Lake; "Bussey" to the locals. It's just down the road from my home town of Monroe, somewhere around thirty or so miles away near the town of Bastrop. Bussey is a 2,200 acre man-made recreation area. Under normal circumstances, a good day on Bussey would be gauged by the size of your stringer dangling off of the edge of the boat. Not this day.

There was a point from my youth to that day on Bussey that I hadn't seen my grandfather for over ten years. Our visit to the lake that day was a transitional part of our relationship as we hadn't done anything similar in over a decade. As a matter of fact, I had only been reunited with my father and grandfather no longer than a couple of weeks by this time. This was an epic trip for me, and I was

determined to make the most of it with a man that I had loved as a child who was once again back in my life again.

The night before, I prepared my fishing reel with new monofilament line, checked and re-checked my gear, and got dressed before I went to sleep. To say the least I was excited. My grandfather was showing up sometime around 4 a.m., and I wanted to be ready. My camouflage pants and t-shirt didn't make for great sleepwear, however by the time he showed up I'd be ready.

He had a huge pickup truck, and with his boat and trailer in tow we headed out before the sun came up. We stopped for coffee, and by his silence I could tell that he was focused on the day. He always took his fishing very seriously, and he intimately knew every body of water in the surrounding parishes of Louisiana like the back of his hand. When we arrived at Bussey, we put the boat in the water while it was still dark. Looking back, I can still see him in his camouflage jumpsuit looking like a character straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting. It was an awesome day. It was our last fishing trip together before he would pass away, and I wouldn't have changed a single thing.

As we hit the water, we idled slowly away from the boat dock and off to some secret destination that only he knew. I was a pretty adept fisherman at this point but today was somehow different. I was with the master. He had fished the rivers and lakes of our home state for over sixty years. I never second guessed his navigation as I knew somehow that it was full of promise. Truthfully I didn't care if I caught a single fish that day as long as we were together. As I came from a broken home, I inherently knew the value of time; of time together being time well spent.

We were out on the lake for almost three hours, and it still wasn't even mid-morning. The sun wasn't very high, however strangely I started feeling warm for some reason. My stomach was churning and in retrospect I can see that it was probably the excitement of being out there on the water with him.

About an hour after I first started to feel sick, I just couldn't take it anymore. I had to go to the bathroom like never before and we were at least an hour from the boat launch. I didn't have any options, and I wanted so desperately to keep the day going well.

I had no recourse but to tell my grandfather how I felt. I thought for sure that this would ruin our fishing trip, but in my youth I misjudged not only his reaction but his wisdom during a crisis. Going back to the dock was not a possibility; certainly not in time to make it to a bathroom. In a moment of patriarchal wisdom his words rang true as he lifted his coffee cup, never moved, and offered the most simple of solutions. "Sling your butt over the edge of the boat and let it go!" he said.

As I soon found out, the edge of an aluminum bass boat is hardly as comforting as a warm, padded toilet seat. It worked, and as I sat there thinking of my dilemma of not having any toilet paper I glanced at my grandfather with a look of desperation which was rewarded by him passing me his handkerchief in silence. "It's okay, I don't need that back" he snickered.

As if this was a memorable enough event during our fishing trip, the adventure was far from over. Now that I felt better, we moved across the lake to a couple of other spots. We caught a few small fish, but nothing worth keeping. The memory of the day was already ingrained in my mind, but the day would prove to be even more memorable; so much so that the events of the morning would pale by comparison.

We were both relieved by now, in one form or fashion that the morning was over. I was feeling better by now, and as we moved to another one of his favorite fishing spots on the lake I felt the temperature drop slightly. I also noticed that the sky was looking a little overcast. As the boat stopped, we pulled into this little cove alongside a ranch property. The bank was rocky, but had a steep drop-off which was enticing, and offered the opportunity for some big fish. As I recall, I cast my lure out in an incredibly long cast. At that moment I looked over my shoulder; just in time to see the tornado forming on the

opposite side of the lake. I didn't hear my lure hit the water, but just pointed in the general direction of our impending doom.

I watched as my grandfather hastily reeled his line in and I subconsciously did the same without even so much as looking at my rod or reel. As he cranked the motor and got the boat up and running, I didn't think at the time that my seating was so unstable in the boat. No, I didn't fall out of the boat, but almost did. We raced up the shoreline for a minute or so, when he killed the engine and yelled for me to get out. I jumped off the bow of the boat and onto the shoreline, simultaneously reaching for an anchor line that he was tossing me. I secured the line, and as he exited the boat, took the line from me and tied it off to a fence post that enclosed a nearby cow pasture.

I didn't know much about cows at the time, much less a herd of Jersey cows that were extremely nervous about the tornado that was almost on top of us by now. The wind was howling, and I couldn't hear much of anything besides the wind. The water was choppy, and I didn't think the tornado would spare the boat.

My grandfather and I traversed the pasture fence line and raced towards what seemed like an old abandoned house. The house was the center of a visual that you might liken to an older black and white picture of Americana, or even something out of a John Cougar Mellencamp video. It was rustic and looked like it barely stood, but right then it looked a lot more comforting than the lake. And did I mention that Jersey cows can be very aggressive, especially when driven into a panic by monsoon-like conditions caused by a developing tornado that was closing in on all of us. The cows were running behind us, which motivated us to run even faster. I honestly don't recall ever seeing my grandfather move that quickly. As I learned later in life during my military career; fear can be a good motivator.

Thankfully, the door to this old house did not face the lake, and we ran around the other side to gain what little shelter we could. Only seconds after knocking on the door a frail old black woman opened the door, motioning us quickly to enter her home. Her husband, equally old and frail himself, slowly got out of bed and stepped into his slippers to come greet us. This had to be the sweetest old couple that I'd ever seen. They invited us in, greeted us openly, and put on a pot of hot water to make us coffee. I really don't know what we would have done if they weren't there for us.

After the tornado passed, we finished our coffee and talked about heading back to the boat. As we stood up at their kitchen table, my grandfather displayed his appreciation in silence as he laid a fifty dollar bill on the table. The old woman tried to argue about leaving money for hospitality, but B.R. Breland wouldn't hear of it. We thanked them both and with a warm hug from the old woman and a stern handshake from the old man we were on our way.

In our haste to get to the house during the onset of the tornado, we hadn't seen the path around the pasture to reach the shoreline. We walked cautiously through the debris and fallen trees to the lake's edge where we found his boat completely swamped. Our cooler, thermos, tackle boxes, and seat cushions were all missing. I remember thinking that they might be in a neighboring Parish by now.

Somehow, my grandfather got the sump pump running, and we gently pulled the boat by the anchor line along the shore until we got to the boat ramp. With ease his huge truck pulled the boat onto the trailer and we simply pulled the drain plug to allow the water to escape. As we climbed back into the truck, we felt a huge sense of relief as we pulled out and headed home. Before I nodded off to sleep, he looked over at me without a single word and smiled. The love and kindness in his squinting, yet piercing blue eyes was undeniable.

After twenty years since his passing, I still miss him dearly every day.

CHAPTER FOUR

Three Hots and a Cot – Uncle Sam is Calling!

In the summer of 1990 I was attending a local community college and working as many hours as possible in order to save money. I was living with a girlfriend and her parents which, as awkward as it sounds was not really too stressful at the time. It was a bit cramped, however. I was homeless a couple of years before and anything; I repeat anything, is better than that. I remember distinctly remembering that during those rough years that just a few select friends made it worth my while even attending high school. After a while of attending high school while homeless, the stressors in my life proved to be too much and I was soon after emancipated and finished high school in nearby Fort Lauderdale. Those friends of mine were angels who truly were the first signs of the Lamb in my life.

After a couple of semesters at the local community college, I was beginning to get bored with the core classes. Writing was my passion, and although I was the Editor of the campus newspaper I wasn't feel quite as fulfilled as I had hoped. There had to be something more. I had survived a dysfunctional home, being homeless, and finishing high school on my own. I was riding a wave of major accomplishments for a guy my age and in my circumstances, but I still felt like there had to be more. It felt like I had a 'rendezvous with destiny'. Soon I would find out how right I was.

While pondering my possible future one day, I left my newspaper office and wandered down to the café to grab a bite to eat. This is where I would meet Andy Thomas. Staff Sergeant Andy Thomas to be exact. I had looked into the military before now, but there was no firm commitment yet. Andy was an Army recruiter, and although I had seen him around, we were never formally introduced until that day. I had a complete packet from a recruiter I had met in Louisiana, which inevitably made Andy's job easier. My ASVAB scores were excellent, and I could have had any job in the Army that I wanted. When I showed Andy my packet, he must have felt like a gift had fallen right in his lap. All of my background work was done, and all I had to do was sign a contract. His supervisor was frothing at the mouth and pushing him to get me to sign that contract as soon as possible.

Eventually I would of course sign a four-year contract, but my date to actually leave for Basic Combat Training would not be for another six months. This was called the Delayed Entry Program. “DEPpers” as we were called were money in the bank for a recruiter towards his future quarterly recruiting goals, and treated like absolute gold. The early sparks of Operation Desert Storm were flickering and many enlistees in my shoes were getting cold feet at the thought of potentially going to war. Andy called me at least twice a week and we ate lunch regularly on the Army’s dime of course. He never had to worry about me, because I was ready to serve. I couldn’t wait.

I always knew that I wanted to be a part of something bigger than myself. I have always been a man of conviction, and this ‘marriage’ as it were seemed to fit both of our criteria. Soon to become a third-generation firefighter, I wanted to do it on my own terms and not ride anyone’s coat tails. Basic Training was very serious business, as the drums of war were getting louder by the day. The U.S. Army had not seen a major combat mobilization in years, and the logistics and operational functions of the best Army in the world would soon be tested as it sent five hundred thousand troops to Saudi Arabia in defense of its defenseless neighbor Kuwait.

In my entire Basic Training class I was the only one who enlisted to be an Army Firefighter. The rest were medics in my class, but the fact that I was going somewhere else after Basic Training left me excited. I would not have the familiarity of most of my classmates with me, or the camaraderie of being with the same men for over five months together. I was definitely on my own. On graduation day, I was loaded onto an Army bus and shuttled to a train station to relatively nearby Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana. My stay there would be very short lived, as I would merely sign in there at the command headquarters and immediately hop on a bus to Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul, Illinois. Chanute Air Force Base was a postage stamp by comparison to the two Army posts that I had seen thus far. I was a bit confused, but then I would be introduced to life on an Air Force Base as a part of a small Army Detachment. Life was suddenly good. No, it was great.

The softer life of the Air Force permeated all around us, and we took note, and advantage of their every luxury. The general theory throughout the military is that the Air Force has the prettiest women, and we all took full advantage of being a novelty of sorts among them. The Airmen at Chanute were technical geeks, and we were hard charging super Soldiers. Oh Lord, did we ever love having the spotlight on us by those Air Force gals. There was also a Detachment of Marines on the base as well, and they prided themselves on calling the Air Force gals “Marine Mattresses”. We were not even close to

them in being crass, but we played our cards right nonetheless. Unfortunately, we also developed a reputation as being ‘swooners’ of the women of the Air Force, but in more of a romantic sense. Reality came to a screeching halt one night for me while spending some quality time with a young, pretty gal from the training wing under the wing of an F-16 Fighting Falcon parked in the base Air Park. The SP’s (Air Force version of MP’s) didn’t find it as humorous as I did as their flashlights cut through the dark of night over to our wriggling forms on the grass below the plane. Oh well, chalk one more up for the Army. Hooah!

Throughout my time at the Department of Defense Fire Academy I felt more and more as though I had found a community where I had belonged. I absolutely loved being a Soldier and decided then and there that I wanted to make a career of this endeavor. Upon graduating the Fire Academy I then took about two weeks of vacation time before arriving at Fort Campbell, Kentucky; my first permanent party duty station.

When I arrived at the reception station to sign in off of my leave, there was a huge wooden sign in the common area outside of the main building. It was an enormous carving of the 101st Airborne Division insignia, the “Screaming Eagles”. Above the sign read “Rendezvous With Destiny”. I was in sheer awe, and I knew that I was in the right place. I had just found my new home.

CHAPTER FIVE

University of Mogadishu, Fall Semester 1993

I entered the Army with the hopes of going to war in the Middle East. I entered the military on the eve of Desert Shield and Desert Storm and dreamed of doing good things for God and country. In basic training I was trained by men who were sincerely preparing us for war. And then later on in my technical training, at the U.S Air Force's Fire Academy I was trained extensively on how to protect and save lives. Up to now my career was a dichotomy. I know both how to preserve life and take it, and sincerely hoped that I would make a good Soldier even though deep down I hoped the latter would never come to pass. I was now a third generation fireman, and was proud that I could be in the family business, but somehow still do it on my own through the Army.

It was mid December 1992 when I found myself in the position of being an expectant father for the first time. I was a young Soldier stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I was proud to serve with the 101st Airborne Division; young, and full of vigor. What I never did expect was for something so small and fragile to absolutely drop me to my knees. And then he arrived.

At 1413 hrs. on December 23, 1992 my first child was born. Ronald Gary Breland II entered the world at 8 lbs., 5-½ oz. He was perfect in every way, and he had the reins on me without so much as the slightest effort. Not so unlike most new first time fathers, I was a little young and very confused. Could I raise this child? Would I be a good father? Could I handle the responsibility? While on duty at the fire station I was one of the 'go to' guys. In a crisis I was cool and collected, and my crew and I quickly formulated the answers to any variable that would arise in a bad situation. But somehow this little person had the fear of God hovering over me and I was swimming in a sea of doubt.

We had chosen to go through the Army's Midwife Program instead of a traditional doctor. I can't say enough about this program. The midwife that we were assigned to was a young Nurse Midwife named Captain Graham. She was a straight shooter, and very professional. She eased many of the 'first timer' tensions that I had about becoming a father, and the entire pregnancy and childbirth process. I attended every single class that I could and left no stone unturned. I figured that the fewer surprises the better. CPT Graham was a little surprised that I showed up to the breast-feeding class, and as you can imagine I was

the only man there. She laughed, and the expectant mothers snickered as I posed questions about particular brands of breast pumps and what my role in this particular task was.

Like most first time fathers, I muddled through it. I attended Lamas classes and everything I could sign up for. By the time the big day arrived, I thought I was as ready as I could be. When the big moment came, CPT Graham was very calm but poignant in her guidance. As his tiny head crowned she placed my hands on it, with her hands cupping mine. We gently turned his head, and like every birth, once you get past the shoulders it's all downhill from there.

Everything went smoothly from there, and my 'number one son' as I've come to call him over the years has enriched my life as he's turned into a fine young man. The bravado that seemingly permeates the stereotypes of military men today isn't far from the truth in some areas. I am no different, especially when it comes to childbirth. I have worked with the nurse-midwives in various Army hospitals throughout my career when having my children. I am one of those fathers that don't believe in waiting rooms, unless it pertains to friends and in-laws. The fact that I have 'hand delivered' all of my children gives me no greater pride, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I have recommended it to my friends over the years, as there is no price on witnessing this miracle. Although I am through with having any more children, I still highly recommend it to anyone who may be thinking about starting or continuing a family. It is a miraculous experience.

The love of a parent towards a child needs no description here, however as I have been blessed to witness it four times myself I find no need to search for the reason that my father acted the way he did in the following story. Although I had a pretty rough childhood, and our relationship was somewhat estranged and rocky over the years; this is proof positive that the parental bond is never truly broken. In this case it was unscathed.

A VISIT FROM DAD

Please allow me to digress a little here. Although there are many stories in this collection, some funny, some just damned hilarious, and some horrifically serious, lest us not forget not just the Soldiers, but also the families that were involved.

Upon being notified that I was onboard with the peacekeeping mission in Somalia in July of 1993, I told my son, and then immediately called my father in Louisiana. This was on a Friday morning. I hung up with him about 9 a.m., and surprisingly by 7 p.m., he pulled into Ft Campbell to visit for my final

weekend before leaving. I remember being at my now ex-father-in-law's house, laying out my gear, and packing my ruck and duffle bag in the living room.

We ran out to Wal-Mart for a few incidentals; all of us. My dad, step mom, mother-in-law, father-in-law, wife, and son. We went out to dinner that night, and barbecued at his house the next night. My son sat on the floor, about six months old at the time wearing my boonie hat and a pair of sunglasses. He was so cute. After the BBQ, the men retired to his back deck for cigars and a couple of beers. This was the first time I ever heard my dad and father-in-law speak of their time in Vietnam. I was truly in awe, because not only was I sitting there with family, I was also in the presence of the recipients of (between the two of them) 2 purple hearts, a bronze star, and almost 2 1/2 years of collective combat time.

I listened intently to every word, never missing a point, or a change of the beer bottle. I couldn't sleep that last night, as I finally laid down at about 2 a.m. My dad still made it a point to get up with me. That morning was the first time I ever saw the old man cry...ever, as I pulled out of the driveway. I got up about 3 a.m., still not being able to sleep, and picked up my son out of his crib. I sat in my chair and held him for about 2 hours, weeping as the pain of leaving him had come to a head. He was so precious, lying in my arms; so ever trusting, cheeks bulging and long eyelashes closed and dreaming. Thank God he would never have to see and experience the things that I soon would. He was my inspiration to make it home in one piece. He might still be daddy's boy, but I would always be his daddy too.

My ex-father-in-law drove me to the unit, and then to the airfield, after a coffee run at a quick stop. His words inspired and mentored me more than I could ever express. Between our talks on the deck, my dad crying, and that drive to the airfield, I knew that this was going to be the real deal.

I am still thankful to this day for the Four Horsemen, and all my fellow Soldiers that made it possible for us all being able to get back home.

MOGADISHU, SOMALIA 1993

In early June, I had heard something about the battalion needing drivers, due to a shortage, to go to Somalia. I figured that I'm an Army firefighter, and if I can drive a fire engine then I can surely drive a Humvee. It seemed simple enough to me, and I was hungry to get my feet wet, so to speak.

I called my Squad Leader at home, and he told me "Sure, why not. Go ahead and volunteer." It wasn't clear to me until a few days later that he wasn't taking me seriously, as he and I were driving over to the company to see the Company Commander about me calling my Battalion Command Sergeant Major at home and volunteering for the mission in Somalia. As we walked into the orderly room, three Soldiers were standing in front of the Commander, being told that they were not going to Somalia for one reason or another. I thought, 'Oh damn, I'm really in trouble here', as they didn't have their squad leader with them. I figured that they too had made the mistake of bypassing their chain of command as I had somehow done.

The First Sergeant and Commander both had grins on their faces, and this made me just a little more apprehensive. This, as you know, is because a First Sergeant doesn't ever smile, if he can help it. The Commander spoke up, and he told me that the Battalion Command Sergeant Major liked firemen, and where I should report to the next morning. I did, and that is where I met the man who would become my squad leader and mentor for the next five months. He was going ahead of the main body of the unit as a member of the advanced party, and I eventually caught up with him at our base camp, 'Swordbase'.

I suppose I hadn't realized how long the flight could be for us. First we landed in Gander, Newfoundland, and then Shannon, Ireland. We were not permitted to get off the airplane in Shannon due to a recent terrorist threat. I longed to stretch my legs and get a breath of fresh air, but this would have to wait. The next leg of our journey took us to Cairo, Egypt. I of course had never visited any of these countries, however even at night Cairo seemed mystical. I can still see the Nile River lit up by green underwater lights and the laser lights show on the pyramids as we took off. It was truly a sight to see. The last leg of our commercial flights took us to a little country called Djibouti in northern Africa, and then finally to Mogadishu Airport.

We had to switch to a military transport plane in Djibouti because the commercial airline we had been traveling on couldn't travel any closer to the combat zone with support from their insurance carrier. That really made me think about where we were heading to, although I suppose if I had thought about it sooner it would have made sense. I was hyper focused on the mission, and 'truly' serving. A true Soldier will tell you that they are not *complete* until they have seen, performed in, and survived combat. Most civilians do not understand this, but it is common knowledge in the profession of arms.

It was early afternoon when we landed at Mogadishu International Airport. Little did I know at the time, but we would be on a convoy within the hour taking us to our new home. While offloading

equipment, a huge metal case containing two .50 caliber machine guns, I had a flight bag in my left hand and the handle from the weapons case in my right. I was already exhausted from traveling, and then hauling this stuff around, that I guess I just lost my head. I had a cigarette in my mouth, and, as I turned around, a man introduced himself to me. As he grabbed the lit cigarette out of my mouth he said, “Welcome to Somalia, I’m General Montgomery. You know son, smoking is bad for your health.” As he said this he tossed my cigarette on the ground, and promptly stomped it out. You can only imagine how fast I was imagining what was left of my career in the Army dissipate into nothing.

The convoy to our base camp, ‘Swordbase’ was uneventful; however the issue of a live magazine of ammunition prior to boarding the trucks was a well-needed wake up call for many. As we started off at the airfield and traveled down ‘21 October Road’, one of the guys in my truck hadn't seated the magazine in the magazine well of his weapon securely, and we watched as it dropped down to the ground. A few Somali kids wrestled around for it until the biggest kid finally won out. We thought he was in deep trouble for losing his ammunition but it turned out okay for the most part. In a combat zone, ammunition is lost and found like cigarette butts on the ground all the time; we just hadn’t learned that yet.

ARRIVAL AT SWORDBASE

Upon our arrival at Swordbase, I was a little disoriented, but I did however gain a little confidence in the double-stacked mil-vans that made up our perimeter. I had been inside them before, and knew that they were made of steel. That heightened my confidence level of keeping things out of the camp that didn't need to be there.

We arrived, and in the late afternoon hours I was tired. I wanted to get settled, and try and get some sleep...none of which happened. I soon met up with my Squad Leader again, and it was good to see a familiar face. He showed us around, and gave us the low down on the area, and everything they'd seen thus far. They told us that there were mortar attacks every night since before their arrival, and I would learn all too soon what they were talking about.

The first night there, mortar explosions woke me up, and it scared the hell out of me. My 'room' was in an old war torn building that, even by ghetto standards was rough. We fit eight men into a very small space, and realized very quickly that living in close quarters can be rough. We made the best of it. The American Soldier is very resourceful when he has to be, and in more ways than one.

I was shackled up with SPC Mims, a rather large (round) guy who was Jewish, and that he could only eat the tuna fish MRE's because the rest all had something to do with not being kosher. Like I said though, he was a large fellow, and certainly didn't look like he was missing any meals. The other guy in my tiny cubicle that was separated from the rest was SPC Brian Pilcher. He was a former Nightstalker, from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. He was a large guy in stature, but spoke softly. He would later become the 101st Airborne Division Soldier of the year. Brian was a big guy, and I was certainly glad that he was on our side. He was a born killing machine, and he lived for a deployment. He was a natural. Although this was my first deployment, Brian was already a veteran, and he helped me a lot upon our arrival in getting used to my new way of life.

During the first night's mortar attack, we were told when we heard the first explosion; we should immediately 'get your stuff on!' This meant to get your flack vest, kevlar helmet, and have your rifle at the ready. After three or four mortars, the attack was finally over, and the troops who had been there a while already seemed to go about their business as though nothing had happened at all. I was amazed. These mortar attacks would continue for weeks. Actually, we joked about it often. We would say, 'if the Somalis had a place they could actually train with their weapons, they'd almost be dangerous!' I think it was about the fourth or fifth night that I actually got more than an hour's sleep. I remember thinking 'this is gonna be a long tour if I don't ever get any sleep.'

THE ARMS ROOM

Upon our arrival in 'The Mog' as we called it, I didn't know what exactly to expect. Life in the Army for me at this time had consisted of "the good life" as most would agree. You see, I'm an Army firefighter and, as such am exempt from most of the mundane tasks that are expected of Soldier's in line units. I deployed from Fort Campbell, KY; an absolutely wonderful place. I truly loved the post, serving with the 101st and the surrounding area as well.

I was in one of six, 6-man teams Army-wide that were to deploy within 18 hours with our deployable fire engine, and set up anywhere to provide protection for our aviation assets. The aviation guys always loved us, and they were great to hang out with. Our duty was always the same: 24 on / 24 off, with a 3-day break, called a 'Kelly-day' every two weeks. We never pulled work details involving manual labor, Charge of Quarters duty, Staff Duty at Battalion Headquarters, KP, and did I mention; we never went to the field. Life was sweet, but all this would soon change for me.

After joining the Army because I wanted to go to Desert Storm, I believe that I just wanted to experience 'Army Life' as I thought it was, not the sweet and privileged lifestyle that I'd become accustomed to.

When I volunteered to go to Somalia, I tossed the idea around the fire station with a few of my buddies, and we all decided to volunteer. As you may have guessed, no one else was willing to give up 'the good life', and I was the only one sent. I was more than just a fish out of water; I was about to get a rude awakening. However, my new Squad Leader certainly made my transition easier than it could have been.

I learned soon that I would soon become the unit armorer, the gopher, and whatever else was needed...like a lot of guard duty. I grew up in Somalia, so it seemed, and attended the "University of Mogadishu" as we later called it. Many of us had our first deployment and combat tour in Somalia, and, although we 'grew up' there as far as our careers were concerned, a piece of all of us still remains there.

I was introduced to a small conex container by my Squad Leader, and learned that this small 6' X 6' steel box was to be my new arms room. I was not armorer qualified, but in Somalia, that didn't matter. I quickly learned about many weapons, the M60, the M2 .50 cal., MK-19, and stored more ammunition and flares than you can shake a stick at. After about a week or so, I got moved into a huge 40 foot MILVAN. The 'sweat-box' as I called it would be the place where I spent most of my time for the rest of the tour. I issued and received ammunition, learned about the weapons, and the Army. I also pulled more guard duty than I ever thought possible. I was no longer in Kansas...Toto.

Every day at guard mount, our Squad Leader would inspect the troops, check their equipment, and put out necessary information which was pertinent to the day. He was a rock, and that solid professionalism is what got me through a lot of tough days.

I remember thinking...'damn, if a mortar hits this damned arms room while I'm in it, at least I won't feel anything.' There was more rifle ammunition, grenades, claymore mines, M203 grenade launcher ammunition, endless belts of crew-served weapons ammo I thought we would ever need. SFC Morang, our First Sergeant, didn't see it that way though, and I just kept the ammunition coming. In the end, His wisdom was more than correct and I was to have as much as I could beg for, borrow, or steal.

Myself, and the other guards would occasionally receive harassment fire from a small tent village just off of our corner of Swordbase, and then we would return fire. We had no target, but it would keep

the harassment fire down for a time, and let them know that we were paying attention. Being a tent village, who knows what the actual body count was. They said we probably killed or wounded from ten to twenty people every time we had a minor engagement like that. War is hell, and there is always a price to pay.

At the end of every guard shift, my guys would come to me, and get anywhere from five to twenty rounds of ammunition to replenish what they had used and maintain their basic load of issued ammunition. It became somewhat of a joke after a while, and we would take bets among the Soldiers who would shoot the most rounds. But they would always come back and get their stuff from me, and we would talk a while. It almost became normal. It's truly amazing what you can get used to.

THE FOUR HORSEMEN - THE BEGINNING...

In our first weeks on Swordbase, everyone adjusted rather well, and being a resourceful bunch, set up our hooch as best we could. After a couple of weeks of being shackled up with three other guys, I decided it was time for a change. Living in close quarters can be tedious and aggravating at times. I started asking around for some wood, and that's when I met Will, Harv, and Veno. We would eventually become the Four Horsemen.

They all volunteered to help me out, and we set out to find some wood. Well, we were told we could have some 2 X 4's, and a single sheet of plywood. That wasn't going to be enough for the job, so we decided it would be better to ask for forgiveness than permission. We ended up 'liberating' some more wood from a unit we thought didn't need it as badly as we did. I've said it many times before; but the resourcefulness of a deployed Soldier is unmatched.

Will and Harv were particularly good at carpentry, and Veno was strong as an ox, so it worked out well. Those three guys dove into the task head first, and I found myself being more of a spectator. Before I knew it, I had a 10 X 10 foot frame made out of 4 X 4's, with a small frame extending up to waist level on the outside lip. This was my balcony. We couldn't change the shape of the building, so we built up instead. With a double-sheeted plywood floor, and a solid wall on one side, I now had a second story penthouse. It was great. There was a small ledge that separated my hooch and Veno's place. It was soon separated with a plywood wall, and a small hole cut out for communications purposes. At the end of the day, we were all exhausted, and we sat over in Will, Harv, and Veno's hooch for a bottle of water and an MRE. Now that we all had suitable accommodations, it was time to block any light that may creep

through the battle-scarred walls of our building. After all, we didn't want to give the Somali's any free targets. We acquired a light set, and we all had actual working light bulbs. Up to now it had all been luminescent glow sticks and flashlights.

We were all sitting there, after the construction site was cleaned up, and Will pulled a bullet out of his magazine and whipped out a Gerber tool. He would use the pliers, and wiggle the bullet out of the actual casing, and then twist a small piece of wire with a loop on the end of it. He would use his lighter, and heat up the bullet and as the lead in the center melted, he would insert the twisted end of the wire, and hold it there until it set again. He then had a little "charm" to hang on his dog tags. We all did this, and thus became the Four Horsemen. There would be many adventures to come that we probably shouldn't have been involved with, but more on that later.

THE POLISH RIFLE

There's a guy in every unit who's a jokester, pulls pranks, or is constantly making someone laugh. Ours was no different. He was one of those guys who was quiet for the most part around the hooch, but when he did pipe up and say something; he usually got you really good. He could be just absolutely hilarious.

Our guys name was SPC Lafferty. He was an extremely hard worker, and he was always moving, doing something. Well, being in our unit, he was kind of a 'go-to' guy. If you needed something done, he would do it. He may have been less than conventional about it, but he always got it done.

One day, he was moving some equipment with a forklift, and everyone was working as usual. Someone runs into my hooch, and says, "You gotta get down here man, you gotta see this". Nothing in Somalia was normal, so even if this was something new, I doubted it would surprise me.

I walk out my hooch, and there stands our little comedian holding his M-16 rifle, and the barrel is completely bent at a 90-degree angle. It looked like something in a cartoon, or a polish joke. He just stood there laughing, and saying, 'Can you fix it?' This was another one of those times when I thought, 'What the hell am I doing here? I'm a fireman'. We got his rifle fixed up, and drove on. I'll never forget how funny he looked standing there with his 'polish rifle'.

SQUAD PT WITH PSYOPS

One gloriously hot and crappy morning, my squad leader called us all out to an open area to do some PT. We dreaded the morning hours, because, if you didn't get up early enough, and the sun broke over the horizon, then you were definitely in for it. The heat was pretty much unbearable, but somehow we managed.

Our Squad Leader started physical training, or PT, and we tried to keep it together and at least try to be professional. We were young Soldiers, and terrible about joking around in formation. We were always picking on each other and stuff, but we kept it clean for the most part. I recall fondly the thousands of extra pushups I had to do for being a smartass. Most of you who know me have to doubt my words right about now. "Ron, a practical joker you say? That could just never be." You have no idea.

Well, there we were, standing at attention. Everyone heard the Blackhawk helicopters overhead, but it was so common that one rarely paid attention. Our Squad Leader was just about to bark out some exercise and these little 3 X 5 pieces of paper started raining down on us. They had some message written in Somali on one side, and silhouettes of Soldiers and tanks on the other. The Blackhawks we heard overhead were apparently dropping 'propaganda' or messages of good will down to be distributed among the locals. It's a tool that the folks over at Psychological Operations use to distribute messages to the masses on occasion. Apparently the pilot misjudged the wind, and literally hundreds of these papers were dropped right on top of our camp, namely our training site.

These messages were intended for the Somali people; however, the wind apparently shifted and spread hundreds, probably thousands of these little Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) flyers all over Swordbase. Our Squad Leader released us to snatch up on a token piece of memorabilia from the tour, and continued on with PT.

THE MAN WHO COULD GET AWAY WITH ANYTHING

Have you ever known anyone who seemingly gets away with anything and everything? They don't really hurt anyone, but it just kind of gnaws at your soul just knowing that if you tried something like that, someone would probably tell you to either go pound sand, or they'd beat the tar out of you.

Well, this guy definitely fit the bill. I'm sure that the mass majority of vets from The Mog know who he really is; they just don't realize it.

The man I'm referring to is (drum roll, please)...Ty Kendrick.

Ty was an Armed Forces Network radio disk jockey, that ran the afternoon show, and he was absolutely hilarious. Many of us likened him to the Vietnam era's Adrian Cronauer of 'Good Morning Vietnam' fame. Ty was always uplifting, had a joke, and had an 'on the air' love affair with a young Lieutenant named "Missy. (*Missy, we know who you are, but still don't know where you live)

Like any new Soldier in country, Ty broke the ice easily, and then gradually flew off the handle. He cut loose with no fear of repercussion whatsoever. Many commanders disliked his on the air style of wit and humor, but the Soldiers loved it. They could never pin anything on him though because General's Garrison and Montgomery loved his show. Even on a convoy, we would find ourselves taking a radio along so as not to miss Ty's afternoon shows while visiting another camp.

When he got the show off and running, he 'patented' his opening lines. The morning guy would introduce him, as they do in the civilian sector. Next, there would be this drum roll, and then..."From Mogadishu to Mombasa, from the empire state to the golden gate, with more crap than a Christmas goose, I'm SPC Ty Kendrick, and I love you Missy!"

Every day would vary slightly from the one before, depending on the action during the night prior, the morale around holidays, etc. His show was very close to the heart for most of us.

And oh boy was he just absolutely infatuated with Missy. He'd make comments about how much he loved her butt right on the air. Even as outspoken as I am, I felt a sense of shock every now and then while listening in. I dedicated a song to the Four Horsemen one day. It was Gary Wright's "Dreamweaver". Ty said, no problem, he'd get it right on the air. But when he got on the air, he gave my name, the song I requested, and then followed it up with, "I don't know what they're smoking over there at Swordbase.... think they're going through some sort of Jimmy Hendrix Phase or something". It was so funny. I have three cassette tapes of Ty's show, including the dedication. They're about worn out now, but I cherish them to this day, and my stomach hurts from laughing so hard.

TY BLOWS GATOR'S COVER...ON THE AIR!

Logically speaking, the modern military is merely a cross-section of society. And, like society, it is not without its problems and concerns. One such problem throughout both entities is infidelity, and the military is unfortunately no different.

Many of us have no doubt heard the phrase "What goes TDY(Temporary Duty, or business trip) stays TDY", and that phrase never held so true as it did for a man named 'Gator', in The Mog.

Gator, as he was affectionately known by many of us in The Mog, was a Marine officer, a Lieutenant as I recall, and an interrogator. He was a very popular guy; always hosting a barbecue, volleyball game, or some other social event in his spare time.

Many of us didn't know this at the time, but Gator was a married man. And none of us would have probably ever known except he was messing around with some enlisted female for quite some time. This was common knowledge among those close to him at the time, however; hell hath no fury like a woman's scorn.

Apparently this young lady with whom he was having intimate relations found out that he was married, and decided to exact her revenge...publicly.

She called Ty Kendrick while he was on the air. This was the perfect time to call because the whole country always tuned in to Ty's show. After all, he was practically a celebrity. So, she gets on the radio, and has a conversation with Ty for a minute or two, and then proceeds to tell the whole world that she found out that Gator was married, and what a lowlife she thought he was.

For reasons unknown, Gator decreased in popularity in the following days, as all of Kendrick's listening audience saw him for what he really was. I'm not sure how it works in the Marine Corps, but I'm sure that the Army Intelligence community wouldn't put up with such embarrassment.

Oh well, tough deal Gator.

TURKISH WHISKEY AND ROSANNE

It was just after Thanksgiving of 1993, and Will's wife, Melissa had just delivered their first son. Will couldn't get home because of the hot situation we were in, and it really began to wear him thin. His wife even called the radio station and dedicated a song for him on AFN Somalia. If there are any country music fans out there like me, the song "Wish I could have been there" can be a real tearjerker but was absolutely appropriate under the circumstances.

Harv decided to spice things up a bit by somehow 'securing' a bottle of Turkish whiskey. It was horrible stuff by our standards; it was pretty much toilet water.

Well, when in the field, once again, a Soldier can always be resourceful in a pinch. We raided the Class I freezer and acquired (*steal* is such an ugly word) a bunch of dry ice. We also had a ton of odds and ends from MRE's that were never eaten (hot cocoa, kool aid, sugar, salt) stashed in our hooch for future use.

So, we cut some water bottles in half with the lid still screwed on, placed the lid end inside the bottom half of the bottle, and used 100 mph tape to secure the two together. We then made a cup of Kool-Aid, doused with a shot of the Turkish whiskey, and plopped a chunk of dry ice inside. The bubbling effect of the dry ice was a nice touch as the drink rolled over 'boiling' like lava.

Well, I have to say that it lightened our spirits a bit; at least it did for me since I'm such a lightweight drinker. Harv had this giant boom box with a little 5-inch T.V. inside it, and the only channel we could get in over there was Armed Forces T.V., or AFN. The only show we could manage to tune in was 'Rosanne'. I'm glad we didn't have anything worthwhile to eat, because I think I would have surely lost it over seeing Rosanne. But the whiskey was good, and that night I think we all got just a little closer.

MY DAD AND THE REAR DETACHMENT LEADERSHIP

Upon seeing one of the D-boys being drug through the streets on CNN, my family, like so much of America was in dismay, and a state of extreme anger.

I was on my way back to my hooch one evening, and a guy runs up to me and says, 'Hey, the 1SG needs to see you right now.' I met SFC Morang at the entrance to our TOC tent, and he was smiling. Now, I'm concerned. He puts his hand on my shoulder and explains to me that since the footage of the Nightstalker pilot Cliff Wolcott being dragged dead and naked through the streets of Mogadishu was shown on CNN, my father had tried calling our rear detachment. Well, the Rear Detachment First Sergeant back at Fort Campbell was a Puerto Rican guy who had a very strong accent. And when a concerned parent calls wanting to know about his boy, their patience runs a little thin when they can't interpret the accent on the other end.

Apparently my dad was talking to this guy, who obviously and unfortunately had no answers for him. You see, when the body was being dragged through the streets, the whole world saw it, and no American parent knew whether it was their child or not. As a parent myself, I can certainly understand my father's frustrations. I can also empathize with that poor old First Sergeant. While the main body of a unit

is deployed, the Rear Detachment is responsible for taking care of family members and dealing with the results of unfortunate events like that poor warrior who lost his life.

My dad called over and over, and not understanding this guy very well, proceeds to tell him that if the Army is going to have someone there to answer phone calls, then they had “better be able to speak freakin' English.”

I got all of this second hand, of course, however, it made me feel good that without even talking to him, my old man could still reach out and show his concern half a world away. I called him that night, and through yet another mortar attack, got cut off the phone. That probably didn't do much for his nerves, but at least he knew that I was alive.

Thanks. I love you Dad.

OUR LAST NIGHT IN THE MOG

Our last night in The Mog was a beautiful thing. I recall throwing bags up on trucks and taking pictures with the Four Horsemen, and the somewhat sense of disbelief that we were actually going home. Any Soldier who's deployed can tell you that when it comes time to re-deploy, the rumor mill gets out of control. We're going home tomorrow, then it's next week, then it's on hold, then it's back to the original date. And after it's all over, the thrill and hopes of finally going home are what create the stress, especially in younger Soldiers like me at the time.

I remember getting to this huge hangar area with about a thousand cots spread out all over the place. My Squad Leader said, "Grab a rack, and get comfy, it's gonna be a while." I didn't care if we were there for another six months by then; I just knew that we weren't at Swordbase anymore.

We finally got word that we would be leaving sometime the following morning, and although we could actually relax, we were all very anxious. Most of us stayed up all night, and watched AFN T.V., smoked about a thousand cigarettes, and tried very hard to stay calm. Not a chance. This was impossible. I hadn't seen my son in five months, and the following day was his first birthday.

I calculated the time difference, the travel time, and if all of the tentative travel plans went perfect, I would meet my number one son at Hangar 1 at Campbell Army Airfield at 23:45 with 15 minutes to spare on his birthday. No such luck, but that's another story.

As for the Four Horsemen, I was going home to my wife and son. Will was going home to his new son, now a month old that he'd never seen. Harv was going home to a cheating wife and her boyfriend, who would eventually meet him at the airfield (the both of them), and Veno...what can I say about my buddy Veno? Veno was going home as single as he was when he left. He would later marry and have two beautiful children. Visiting in-laws at Fort Campbell a few years later, I would catch up with him, and catch up on lost time.

As we boarded the plane, the engines revved up, and just as the wheels left the ground, I don't think there was a soul on board that didn't flinch just a tad from the fear of a mortar or rocket propelled grenade maybe hitting the plane at the last second. Thankfully, this was not the case, and we were off...

GANDER AIRPORT

After flying half the night, we ended up stopping at the airport in Gander, Newfoundland. It was December; there was a huge snowstorm. Of course being from Ft Campbell, we all couldn't help but think of our comrades in arms who died here just a few years before. A planeload of Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division was sabotaged, as the History channel has it, and all died in the attack. There is now a memorial in a field behind the Fort Campbell Burger King where a tree has been planted for every Soldier that died that day. The memorial is well kept and is in full bloom every year. It really makes you wonder about those lives lost, as I look at those towering trees when I visit there from time to time. That field of green would have new meaning after this night.

We landed in Gander to resupply with food and fuel, when we got word that one of the engines on the plane had an issue and would not start. On top of that, a fast-moving snowstorm moved in quicker than anything I had ever seen, and grounded us whether we had a functional aircraft or not.

Anyhow, we were laid over there for almost a full twenty-four hours until the weather broke enough for us to take off again. I remember the kindness shown to us by the people of Gander, as we were seemingly lost in time. It was Christmas Eve, and though the local residents were tucked away in their beds, when they heard of our plight they immediately got dressed and opened the airport restaurants, gift shops, and brought blankets and other items for us to sleep on while awaiting our ride home. Their mechanics repaired the engine as we slept, and they did not charge a soul for any of the food we received. God bless the people of Gander Newfoundland.

All we really wanted to do was to get home again, however, I reflect fondly nowadays on the kindnesses of the people there during a special time for all of us. I ate a hamburger in the airport terminal, my first in months; and remember thinking that there were many times that I might not ever taste a greasy airport burger again. It never tasted so good.

ARRIVAL AT CAMPBELL FIELD - CHRISTMAS 1993

Our arrival back to Fort Campbell was seemingly uneventful. I spent many nights awake at Fire Station #3 on Campbell Field in the past, and when we landed, things looked as quiet as ever. We landed in a huge civilian jet, and at 0400 hrs. on Christmas Day there isn't much traffic. So I thought. As we taxied off the runway and down the parallel toward the main Hangar adjacent to the fire station, I didn't notice anything at first. And then a light shone so bright through my little airplane window. There were people; lots of people that seemingly came out of nowhere. As I stepped off the plane, Major General Jack Keane, the Division Commander shook my hand. With a slap on the back, we were guided towards the hangar and our families. Simultaneously, the fire station bay doors opened up as my fellow firefighters pulled the trucks out with lights flashing and air horns blaring. It was a sight to behold. The Division band was playing music; there was food everywhere, and my son never looked so handsome as I walked up to his tiny silhouette.

I spotted him about halfway across the tarmac to the hangar, and don't even think I could see or hear anything else. 'I love you daddy', he said. It was the first time I'd ever heard him speak and those few little words absorbed wholly into my soul. He was no longer the little baby that I cradled in my arms just five months before. I was torn between the happiness of being home and the bullet that drove itself straight through my heart over suddenly realizing all that I had missed. But it was Christmas, and my blessings were many.

It has been said that you can never really come home again; however I swear to you today that there is truly nothing in this world like coming home from war.

CHAPTER SIX

Learning to Fly- A Leap of Faith

What I never realized after joining the Army, is that there are many common experiences among Soldiers, as we are merely a cross-section of society. But Fort Bragg is a very special place within the labyrinth of possible assignments throughout the military. I will say this much: if you don't have a strong career or marriage when you arrive at Fort Bragg, then you will probably leave 'Bragg' with a new profession or as a member of the all-too-common fraternity of divorced Paratroopers. The Airborne life is a tough assignment, and certainly not for the faint of heart. You have to be prepared at all times to go "wheels up" with only eighteen hours of lead time. This factor alone within this elite lifestyle casts a stressful shadow over anyone with a family, or a rocky marriage.

Quite simply, you're either Airborne, or you're not.

Upon arriving at Fort Bragg, North Carolina I was more than overjoyed. I reveled with the seemingly endless opportunities that lay before me. Up to this point, I had requested a slot at Airborne school down at Fort Benning at least six times during my career. Most of the time I was at a post where jump slots were not readily available or in a jump unit where such a thing would be practical. However every request came with it a similar comment, which was usually something like, 'You're a fireman, why do *you* want to go to jump school?' Each dismissal was a little more disheartening than the last but I didn't give up.

At Fort Bragg, the Airborne mentality, lingo, and lifestyle emanated from everywhere. For those who are not familiar with this, it must be a lot to take in at first. You can't go a hundred yards on Bragg without seeing a formation of Paratroopers in Class A uniform, with perfect maroon berets and jump boots so shiny that you could read a newspaper in them.

I longed to be a part of this elite fraternity and I would soon join them. After six years of denied requests I finally received the approval I desired. A mere thirty days after my arrival at my new unit I would head south on I-95 towards Fort Benning and at the age of twenty-seven endure the same as my

classmates just out of high school. Every drop of sweat and crackle of my knees would be worth it. My knees still crackle to this day, only a little more often than then. I still think it was worth it.

Immediately after a relaxing tour of duty in faraway Alaska, I was assigned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. This would prove to be the crown jewel in my career, and a dream come true. Up to now, I had requested to attend Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia six times throughout my five years in the Army thus far. At that point in my life, there was nothing on earth I wanted more than to join the elite Paratrooper community and hurl myself out of a perfectly good, fast moving aircraft with a sheet of silk strapped to my back. After all, who could possibly want more? This was a no brainer.

The Army was full of both promise, and opportunity. Fort Bragg was the realization and embodiment of both for me. I wanted to learn how to jump, and this was the best shot that I would ever have to make my dream come true. When I signed in at Fort Bragg and in-processed, I immediately realized that I had a lot of work to do. I was slightly out of shape after my 'hunting and fishing vacation tour' in Alaska.

One of the first people that I met was Staff Sergeant Donald "Mac" McRavin. He was a stout black man that looked like the poster child for all things 'Airborne'. As my Operations Sergeant, I would come to know and rely on him for many things; including my next request to attend Airborne School. This was a no-brainer, and I finally had a foot in the door, so to speak.

I attended several jumps prior to attending Airborne or "Jump School" as it is known. I would tote parachutes, watch the jumps, and dream of flying through the air and becoming a lifelong member of the fraternity known as "Death From Above"!

Airborne School is comprised of a three week indoctrination into the elite world of Paratroopers. I was once told by a young Lieutenant that jumping is merely a method of insertion. As a combat seasoned Non-Commissioned Officer, I just laughed and mentally balked at the comment. Believe me when I tell you that being a Paratrooper is so very much more than that.

Our graduation ceremony was highlighted by some very special attendees. Our instructors did not pin our wings on our chest. This task was reserved for local World War II Paratrooper survivors who were honored to meet this task. As they passed the torch from one generation to another, you could see the love of the elite Airborne community in their eyes, and this added so much more to the sheer awe of the day itself. The gentleman who pinned my wings upon my chest asked me how many jumps I needed

to graduate from Airborne school. I told him that the requirement was five. He then placed his hand on my shoulder and informed me that he only had four jumps in his life, and that they were at Sicily, Salerno, Normandy, and Holland. I felt his living history coursing through his hand and into me. I would come to jump on the Drop Zones back at Fort Bragg named after these famed Airborne operations. I was now again a part of history.

After we were “pinned” at the official ceremony by World War II Paratroopers, those who opted for ‘blood wings’ notified the instructors. After graduating Airborne school I drove away from Columbus, Georgia with a sense of a destiny fulfilled. Our graduation came in the wake of a scandal involving a hazing ritual by the Marines which their superiors drove their wings into their chests leaving a bloody mess. Twisted as it may be, I still wanted it.

The wings on our chests still did not have the round metal closures on the backs of the sharpened pins, which affixed them to our uniforms. Our orders were simple; “Backs against the wall, and stand at the position of attention!” The instructors sounded off with a loud and thunderous “Airborne!”, and proceeded to drive the points on the backs of our wings deep into our pectoral muscles. None of us uttered a peep, nor shed a single tear. The pride and adrenaline coursing through us at that moment would not be hindered by something as trivial as pain. The Army is steeped in many fine traditions, and, although this practice may sound barbaric to some, it is not. It is a rite of passage into a higher caliber of Soldier; one which you will never return. Once you are elevated to an historical and epic stature, there is no turning back.

When I arrived back at my home outside of Fort Bragg, it was nearing midnight. As I had promised on the phone earlier that day, I woke my son Gary, now six years old. I told him what had happened, and his excitement was almost as obvious as mine. I allowed him to pull the wings from my chest, and keep my first set of wings. With the pins buried in my chest for hours, the small amount of blood had dried and honestly, it seemed a bit more painful coming out than when they were driven in. No matter. I placed the fasteners on the backs of the wings, and laid them on Gary’s nightstand. With a hug, he was off to sleep again, and I could now slip out of my uniform. I had awoken twenty hours before, and I was beginning to feel tired.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Paradise Lost

When I returned from my second combat tour, I was somewhat emotionally shaken. The tour was rough for me, as I led my men on one of the toughest and decisive missions in our team's history. We were an elite group within an elite group. Army firefighters are in a very special community, not only because we are First Responders, but also due to the nature of our limited population throughout the entire Army itself. Most folks think of the United States Army as a nebulous group of thousands upon thousands of individuals in perhaps different groups that are kept at different locations. The actual breakdown of the Army is very unique in and of itself.

The Army breaks down into branches, which are then further divided into different subsets of specialties underneath those branches. For example, the Engineer Branch of the Army contains a host of different specialties and collective expertise. There are Combat Engineers which have been affectionately described as "Infantrymen with shovels". They are experts at using explosives and in breaching techniques as well. If there is an impenetrable wall on a building and you need to gain entry, the Combat Engineers will gladly emplace a shape charge and create a doorway for you. They do love to blow things up. And then there are numerous other specialties under the Engineer field as well. Some build roads and conduct road clearing operations, some drill wells, some jump out of planes and clear forested areas; and some fight fires for a living.

Being an Army firefighter is by no means easy. Some would say it is like pulling 'double duty'. On one hand you are a professional Soldier, and responsible for maintaining your fitness, common Soldier task knowledge, and being ready to deploy around the world within eighteen hours notice. On the other hand, you are also responsible for not only conforming to and meeting the standards of the National Fire Protection Agency and International Fire Safety Accreditation Congress' standards as well. This is also a very specialized position to hold as you are in the public eye one hundred percent of the time. As a public safety figure, you must possess and hone diplomacy and 'people' skills. One day you may find yourself responding to a dumpster fire in the morning, a helicopter crash in the afternoon, and then end up running all night on false fire alarms during an electrical storm.

There is also a certain amount of discretion that comes with this job as well. As a First Responder you may also find yourself at the Commanding General's home because he accidentally burned a roast, or perhaps responded to a car accident involving a high profile personality. Regardless of the weight of responsibilities, technical knowledge, and discretion required it is a very rewarding profession. It is a true calling.

KOSOVO 1999-2000

'THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING'...OR IS IT US?

There are many people throughout the Army that will tell you that it isn't a very important thing to be a Paratrooper. The people that say these types of things are never Paratroopers. You will never hear those words cross my lips, nor from anyone that is close to me. Being Airborne is much more to me than it is a lot of folks. To me, a Paratrooper is a much better Soldier than most of the others. A man who is willing to exit an aircraft with nothing but a chute strapped to his back with his buddies is to be considered a revered man indeed. These men are willing to risk it all on a day to day basis while in training, not just when the balloon goes up to deploy to some hot spot somewhere around the globe. Although when the call does come in, Airborne units have but eighteen hours to be packed, board a plane and go 'wheels up' where they will forward deploy to parts unknown for as long as six months to a year.

I have always had the utmost respect for Paratroopers. Throughout my career I would attend air shows just to see the airfield seizure demonstrations. The mass exodus of billowing parachutes all lined up in a row as they exited a C-130 was a sight to behold. I'm not sure exactly when it happened, but I can't recall a time when I didn't want to jump out of planes and be one of the elite.

While deployed to Operation Joint Guardian in Macedonia and Kosovo, I met up with a guy who was heading up a team to go outside the wire frequently and inspect the many outposts where other Soldiers had taken up residence for the remainder of their tour. Oftentimes these outposts would be nothing more than an old bombed out building with some triple strand concertina wire around it.

They were living rough, but our team would see to it that they had everything they needed and some of what they wanted. Our group was a Quality of Life Assessment Team, or QLAT. It is exactly what it says.

The leader of our team was a young Captain out of Fort Bragg, and a fellow Paratrooper. He and I immediately clicked, and being a fellow Paratrooper he immediately placed more responsibility on my shoulders than the others. I was also the junior ranking individual on the whole team, but it really didn't matter. The young Captain was the Force Protection Officer for Task Force Falcon. He reported to the Commanding General on all Force Protection matters, and aside from being the Task Force Fire Chief, I reported to him. It was probably one of the best duties that I'd ever pulled during my career. Our efforts made a direct impact on the Soldiers' day to day lives, and it was very gratifying.

I would check their area for fire safety hazards, while another NCO would inquire about their needs for more frequent mail runs, weight sets, and any other amenities that we could provide. Another member was the Task Force Environmental representative while yet another served out of the camp hospital from the preventive medicine office.

During one mission, we would attempt to make a daylong trip to one particular outpost to check on some troops. Their camp was right along the edge of the Russian sector. The entire country of Kosovo was split up into different regions. Each group from the Multi-National Brigade East was assigned a different area to disperse the workload and to exercise diplomacy. It was a good idea, as our sector was busy enough.

We had a grid coordinate, a town, and a unit to find and it all seemed to be in place. The drive that day was actually a pleasant one through the country. The greenery of the countryside was beautiful as we wound through the side roads and byways. This area of the Balkan region offers diversity in its terrain. In a single day one could experience everything from mountains to forested areas to rural villages quaint in their surroundings.

It was in one such small village that we reached our objective, or so we thought. We pulled into the small hamlet and fully expected to soon see some Soldiers. We had only our team with us, and an interpreter was not available for this particular mission. We had gone out many times without an interpreter, however most Soldiers that I know are highly creative and know how to 'wing it' as we had done before. The outskirts of our base camp was primarily an agricultural area. Most of the time I had to find commonly sounding words or use hand gestures with goat herders and farmers, however this day would prove to be different indeed.

As we got out of our vehicles, we realized that we were possibly in the wrong area, but the presence of school-aged children playing outside seemed natural enough, and offered a sense of ease. My

most recent tour to Iraq has changed this and I have become a little callous in such situations whether children are involved are not.

I saw a few Soldiers near what looked like the village schoolhouse, but they certainly weren't Americans. The Captain and I walked towards them as the rest of the team remained near the vehicles. We all had weapons, with the exception of one civilian contractor among us. At first, we realized that perhaps we were just a little off course and not in any kind of real trouble. This would soon change as my boss and I were staring down the barrels of well-aimed Soviet AK-47's. The confrontation was a tense one, and all levels of comfort were instantly forgotten.

Maybe these soviet Soldiers were just having a bad day, but the tension soon broke. One of the soviets noticed the wings on our uniforms, and the Airborne tabs on our shoulders. About the same time, we noticed their patches, which were well hidden by their European camouflage pattern. They were Paratroopers as well. You could virtually see the light bulbs come on over everyone's head. They offered us a hand and we stood up. Prior to that, we were on our knees with our weapons slung on our backs and our fingers interlaced behind our heads. It wasn't a completely hostile situation; one that I certainly wouldn't care to be in it again anytime soon.

My Captain buddy looked at me with a sigh of relief as things were turning out okay. I felt a little primitive after that because we were reduced to a few Airborne words in broken English. All hope was not lost though. I didn't speak Albanian, Serbo-Croatian, or Russian but I did speak 'Airborn-ese'.

Before we left we took a few pictures and I wound up cutting off my combat patch and jump wings in trade for one of their Airborne patches. We all shook hands at the conclusion of our visit, and everyone was satisfied with their trinkets from the visit. My Paratrooper buddy and I were sweating it out there for a while, and were glad to walk away with a lot more than a souvenir patch.

'FALCON 3 TO SMOKEJUMPER 7; I SAY AGAIN...YOUR...MEN...ARE...LOST!'

About two months into our tour in Kosovo, a National Guard unit showed up and we went from working every single day with seven firefighters to working every other day with twenty-nine. It was much a needed and well-deserved relief for my men and me. We had developed standard operating procedures for fire safety and inspections for the whole base camp. We were wired into emergency phone networks with the airfield, the Military Police, and the Command Group. We'd established ourselves as a tight unit known to work hard and fast to get things done.

Just after the National Guard got there our next higher echelon unit changed from one battalion to another. I met with the command and was pleased to see that even though they were from Germany, their Command Sergeant Major was a Paratrooper. He was very personable, and we gave him his first ever ride in a fire engine. I'd given literally hundreds of 'first time rides' throughout my career. I could never get over however old, or how much rank any of them had; they all turned into little kids inside my fire engine. It was always good to see what a thrill it was for them as it still was for me after all these years.

Our schedule had now changed to 24 hours on and 24 hours off and it gave us all a chance to breathe. My guys were motivated though. I think that we were all used to the high operational tempo, and we weren't sleeping very well. On a deployment you're never really 'off', but we had a great schedule worked out. The only way that we would work was if it involved a security issue on the base camp, a huge fire off camp that the General wanted us to assist the locals with, or if an incident got way out of control on the camp. Thank God for us that the Army is hugely safety conscious.

The Battalion Sergeant Major approached me one day and asked what we were up to. He said that he had a dilemma. As I mentioned before, the OPTEMPO was high and resources were short in supply. He asked me for a vehicle, a Humvee, of which I only had one. It was my command vehicle, which I used as Fire Chief during our shifts. He also asked me for two of my men to take along with him on the same mission. I needed my men and my vehicle for the next morning at 0700 sharp, but I told him I had no problem with it as long as everyone was back in time and my truck was in one piece. I was reassured that my guys would be back by midnight and there wouldn't be any problems. I had learned one major lesson during my career thus far: Murphy's Law is always in effect.

Just after midnight, I walked down to the TOC to see what was going on. There were more people than usual in there, especially at that hour. My imagination was going wild. I ran into the night Battle Captain, whom I had worked with before with a few emergencies. He saw me coming and said, 'Houston, we have a problem.' I immediately thought the worst, and feared the worst for the men I had sent out. We were being deactivated upon returning home from this tour, and I talked to the men about expanding our experiences. One of the men I had sent out that night was a real redneck and told me plainly, "Sergeant, I think we should get our hands into every cookie jar we can while we're here". We were going out with a bang, and gaining experiences that most guys in our field would never see. I questioned my leadership decision at this point and asked myself what the price of experience should be. At that point I wanted nothing more than to just get them back safe and sound.

This was definitely a leadership lesson learned, as I probably shouldn't have panicked too early in the game. Apparently, the Sergeant Major had got caught in a winter storm and got my truck stuck. A Humvee is made for just about any type of terrain, so to get one stuck is pretty rare. Then they all had to walk to the nearest shelter they could find, which happened to be an old Albanian brick and stone house with the fireplace burning. From all accounts, it must have looked inviting because they looked no further. When an aged man opened the door, our Sergeant Major told me he immediately noticed a belt buckle prominently displayed on the fireplace mantle. It was simply three letters...KLA. This man was either a former or current member of the Kosovo Liberation Army, a rebellious group of bad guys whom we tried to disarm during our tenure there.

The man must have noticed our guys eyeballing the belt buckle, because he immediately motioned to them as if to say that it was a long time ago. My guys and the Sergeant Major stayed up all night pulling guard and making sure everything was as quiet as it was as when they got there. The night went without incident, and when they returned my men fell out of exhaustion. We delayed training that day and most of my other guys made sure that everyone around us was quiet so as to let them get some good rest.

We never let the Sergeant Major live that one down though. I felt like a father telling the son that he couldn't borrow the car again, and that my guys couldn't come out to play anymore either.

Years later at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri I would run into the Sergeant Major again where he attended my graduation from a service school. We enjoyed a meal together, shared some laughs, and of course told that story again.

A LATE NIGHT COOKIE RUN

I've been a night owl most of my life, and I've never really slept much. And somehow, I've also managed to always be an early riser. I suppose that this could be attributed to a dysfunctional childhood, or just coming from multiple generations in the fire service. Neither the military nor the fire service is conducive in providing an environment for a lot of sleep.

That being said, I also have to mention that I really don't believe in coincidence. I've witnessed too many miraculous things in my life to believe in something as elementary and crude as coincidence. As a matter of fact, when I hear my friends mention the topic as they feel it most recently applied in their lives; I often have to laugh...sometimes out loud.

I've mentioned previously that throughout the span of an Army career that sometimes events occur that you just wouldn't have seen coming. After I had served nine years already, I had been a seasoned Soldier, and was a veteran Non Commissioned Officer as well. I considered myself to have had decent social, diplomatic, and awareness skills beyond most of my peers. Let me just say that you can never place enough emphasis on situational awareness. But then again, we all have our off moments. And how a lack of my own situational awareness resulted in me receiving one of the most memorable accolades of my career; I'll never know.

When our small element of Soldiers from Fort Campbell, Kentucky had deployed to Somalia in August of 1993, the Commanding General of the 101st Airborne Division, (then) Major General John M. Keane was not going to allow any of his Soldiers to think that they weren't in someone's thoughts during the Thanksgiving holiday. In true Paratrooper fashion, he showed up unannounced to our area of operations, inspected the barracks, and shook hands with each of us. He then ate a not so traditional holiday meal with us. We all thought the world of General Keane, and how his intentional and purposeful leadership was one of his strongest qualities. He had evidently seen the fire helmet in my hooch that I'd found lying in the sand one day, and cornered it in his mind. When he was introduced to us, I was introduced as "Specialist Breland, the guy with the helmet." He returned my salute with a handshake saying, 'So what brings you over here, fireman?' I was somewhat taken back, however it did let me know that he had crawled up to the second floor of our home made 'studio apartments' that we'd recently finished. I was impressed.

That was my first of many holidays in a combat zone, and I'll never forget it. But he was a General Officer, right? Of course I wouldn't forget that day. I was a young Specialist (E-4) at the time, and it obviously made an indelible impression on me regarding what the leadership cast is supposed to do. But I was just Specialist Breland, one of over 500,000 Soldiers in the Army at the time. I knew that I'd remember him, but I doubted that he'd remember me.

Again, I was wrong.

Our next meeting would be in the Balkan Region in the winter of 1999. By the time I was in Kosovo, John Keane had pinned on two more stars, and was now the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army.....the *entire* United States Army. Once again, I had no idea that we were about to bump into each other. Surely this couldn't possibly happen twice in the same career. Oh yes, indeed it could.

I've mentioned before that I'm something of a night owl. These days were no different than my childhood, as a combat zone is a very dysfunctional place as well. Inconsistency is a constant, and after a while, you almost begin to act like a 'functional dysfunctional' person. It's difficult to explain, I know. Be that as it may, I found myself walking around the base camp one night. I missed my boys, and was almost fully accepting of the fact that I was divorced and alone, just me and my Army once again. The holidays were approaching fast, and I now knew the gloom of a single Soldier away for the holidays with nothing to really return home to. I had the men though, and I loved my team dearly. This is what would get me through this tour.

The camp was quiet that night, and no mortars fell during my lengthy walk over to the dining facility. Our chow hall was run by Americans; however the manual labor and cooking duties were tended to by local nationals. The food was not horrible, but it certainly wasn't home. The one thing that I particularly liked was the cookies and hot coffee that the staff would leave throughout the night. I would often take these walks in the wee hours to contemplate a lot of things. This was our last mission, and if our unit was going to be deactivated upon our return to Fort Bragg, I definitely wanted leave a positive memory in everyone's mind of the 89th Engineer Detachment (Firefighters).

So far, we'd handled the fire protection for three base camps in two countries, forged mutual-aid agreements with both Macedonia and Kosovo, responded to over fifty emergencies, and provided security and fire protection assets for Air Force One and Marine-One. My guys were absolutely loyal and hard working, and I couldn't have asked for better. That kind of loyalty and professionalism under fire cannot be bought, or sometimes even trained. It's either there or it isn't. As a leader in combat, I was the luckiest man in the world.

I even had one Soldier go home due to his wife having a miscarriage. After he begged to come back to be with us after only two weeks home, the first General Officer in the chain of command finally approved his bombardment of requests to come back into the fray with us. I'll never forget the day he arrived back at the 'House of Steel', our affectionate name for Camp Bondsteel. His name was Cox, and he swung open the door to the hooch yelling, 'Honey, I'm home!' Soldiers never cease to amaze me, and I felt truly blessed to have them in my charge. His mother and mother-in-law were home tending to his wife while he returned to the hostile environment that we called home for a while.

All of these thoughts kept creeping through my mind as I walked through the rocky terrain and up the hill to the dining facility. Typically, whatever cookies weren't eaten after the supper meal were put

out with an endless supply of coffee for those who worked a night shift or were out on missions at night ‘outside the wire.’ The fire department never truly shut down, and so, in turn I was never really off. We had working shifts with the additional manpower now, but I alone was accountable to General Sanchez and his staff for any and all issues related to the fire protection issues related to the force protection of Task Force Falcon. I didn’t mind though, as it helped me pass the time and keep my eyes open and focused on my mission.

For some reason on this particular night, I suppose that my situational awareness wasn’t the first thing on my mind. Like a plant leaning into the sun, I found myself just outside the chow hall. All of a sudden, this subliminal thought came to me to go in and get some cookies and coffee. I was like a moth to a flame.....a yuppie heading to Starbucks. As I entered the dining tent, I noticed an older gentleman out of the corner of my eye, his Army gray PT uniform fitting loosely over his tall frame. I didn’t pay much attention to him, as I was half delirious from sleep deprivation and focused on getting more caffeine into my veins. Subconsciously, I sat one table over from this elderly gentleman, and all of a sudden my ears heard what they never expected to hear this night. “So, are you a Fire Chief, yet, or what?” he asked. Stirring my coffee, and without blinking, I replied, ‘Yes, sir, I am the Task Force Fire Chief, what can I do for you this evening?’ By the time I got the words out of my mouth, I’d turned around and all at once recognized who I was speaking to.

I simply couldn’t believe it. This guy remembered me from a chance meeting in Somalia over six years before; his mind was like a steel trap. As my eyes met his, I stood up and snapped to attention anyway, even though it was uncommon to do so in a dining facility. Either way, he and I were the only two people in the tent. He invited me to join him, and so we talked for a short while. We shared our common plight of insomnia, and more than one cup of coffee. It was a wonderful opportunity to see him as more of a human being, and he was obviously okay with that. We spoke of our meeting in Mogadishu and he asked if I still had that old fire helmet that he’d seen in my hooch. I told him that against my spouses’ better judgment that it was hanging on my wall at home. We laughed about the helmet, and I thought he liked those cookies as much as I did.

I was desperately tired by now, and fought with everything inside me to stay awake and alert for this chance meeting. I did, and as we left for the evening I attempted to salute the man. He waved me off in mid-salute, and offered me his hand instead. I replied in kind, and when I did I felt the cold steel of his coin amidst our handshake. I would have never expected it, and it truly was the icing on the cake. I

thoroughly enjoyed the conversation and the coffee. It also taught me to keep my eyes open all the time, even during my late night cookie runs.

A TRANSFER OF COMMAND: SAME MISSION

Being surrounded by the Engineer community within the Army's structure was second nature to me after the first couple of years. I had seen Combat Engineers, Topographic Engineers, Well-Drillers, and even met an Army Diver once. All of these groups of individuals bring great diversity to the Engineer Branch, and all have their own idiosyncrasies about them. However, I don't think that I ever met such a *'different'* group of Engineers as the civilian-based U.S. Army's Corps of Engineers. They are a truly amazing group of individuals. They are a mass of experts from throughout the Engineering specialties. Some are structural engineers, while others are aqueduct, planning, environmental, or construction experts. This unique part of the Army community under a deployment setting is quite possibly the center line of a successful base camp. They take on the same inherent risks that most Soldiers do in a combat zone, and they do so willingly and without the benefit of being able to carry more than a pocket knife.

As a part of the Engineer community, I had certainly heard of the Corps of Engineers, but never gave them that much thought. I certainly never thought I'd be working hand in hand with them. This, my second combat tour would educate me in ways that I'd never dreamed of. I would also come to appreciate their expertise and sense of duty; something which I'd seen in only a handful of civilians in the past.

The first time that I was asked to report to the Corps of Engineers, I really didn't know what to expect. There was a Lieutenant Colonel that I was to report to directly, and that alone gave me a little bit of hope. As the Task Force Fire Chief, I would consult for and with this group over the course of our tour. We had strategically placed water blivots all over the base camp, planned for worst-case scenarios, and actually designed and emplaced the first fire hydrant on Camp Bondsteel. This alone was a minor miracle in seeing that the camp was at the top of a mountain with no water distribution system of any kind. It was a primitive beginning, but it worked.

When the initial list of major tasks was completed by the Baltimore Corps of Engineers, their replacements arrived. The New York Corps of Engineers was a group that definitely fit the stereotype. They were hard, aggressive, and obviously wanted to take on their fair share of the work. We continued working with them until our tour was over, and accomplished more than I ever dreamed. In the most primitive of conditions it's truly awesome how resourceful some people can become, even civilians.

I must admit that at first sight these civilians didn't appear to be much, but proved themselves more than competent and worthy of the task. And if given the opportunity, I would work with them anytime.

MORE THAN ONCE "OUTSIDE THE WIRE" TOGETHER

There is a commonly used term used throughout the military community when forces are deployed called 'outside the wire'. In the old days as I refer to them now, this term was mainly just that; a common term that most Soldiers used but few ever experienced. Now that the Global War on Terrorism has just about every Active Duty, National Guard and Reserve unit in the throes of war it is certainly more common than in the past.

I can tell you for free that I have spent more than my fair share of time outside the wire. It's a common mentality to achieve when clearly; so much time is spent like this. There is a fine line between comfort and complacency, and it is a truly thin line to tread. Complacency was never the case; however I do believe that we looked at everything in our daily lives just a little different from most others.

As the Task Force Fire Chief, I took it upon myself to leave the camp more often than my men. After all, this was the first combat experience for most of them, and their skills were needed at the airfield and around the camp. It's certainly not because I didn't trust them to go outside the wire, but moreover my own way of making sure that I didn't have to call anyone's mother or wife in the event something unconceivable happened. And so it went, day after day for months.

The Commander of our Quality of Life Assessment Team was a young Captain from Fort Bragg. As fellow Paratroopers, we fell right into the mission and leading a group of unarmed civilians around the countryside on dozens of missions while trying to keep the Commanding General's finger on the pulse of our region. I usually took the point position. This meant being in a vulnerable position most of the time.

One afternoon, while escorting a member of the Commanding General's Staff around from village to village, we chanced upon a tiny, and I do mean tiny, European looking car. I'd never seen such a thing, and it was disabled in the middle of the road. After taking several security precautions, we determined that this man was no threat, and that his car actually did break down. After about five minutes of trying to negotiate with him to help push it out of the way with no apparent results; I started to become more frustrated as the language barrier seemed to get bigger.

We had to get back to Camp Bondsteel before the sun fell on the horizon, and it was starting to get *really* dark outside. I picked up the rear bumper, and to my surprise the entire car moved with it. It couldn't have been more than a couple of hundred pounds, and I simply dragged it out of our way one end at a time. I think that I was in as much shock as the General's Staff Officer and the rest of our posse. The poor Albanian guy who owned the car simply stood out of our way, while we drove on past him and drove out of sight.

On our way back, that Staff Officer never spoke a word, however he really didn't seem to have a problem staring at me either. I just cast my gaze out the window of my vehicle, and aimed my rifle outward. If the truth be told, I really was laughing on the inside.

At the end of our tour, that young Captain and I swapped coins and promised to sit down and have a beer on the 'other side' after our return.

THE BIGGEST BIRD IN THE BUNCH

During our first meeting at our newly built airfield, I was engaged in a briefing to the senior staff of the aviation unit regarding what my team's capabilities could provide for them. The briefing went off without a hitch and I felt good about what we were there to do. The aviation unit, known as the "Fighting Eagles" was a proud bunch of hotshot pilots and exceptional crew chiefs who took great pride in having their aircraft in top shape.

Being an Army firefighter for so long, I've been exposed to the Army's aviation community from around the world. I have to say that although aviators share a common love of their chosen profession, however I can't say the same for some of the foreign crew members. The United States has sold some of our 'toys' and equipment to our allies over the years. This is a common diplomatic practice; although the first time I saw this first-hand was right there on that airfield in Kosovo.

It wasn't our first week in country that I witnessed what looked to be one of the most horrifying aviation disasters of my life, maybe even in history. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a coalition of Arab nations who provided a unique element within our allied deployment community. The UAE had apparently purchased some U.S. military equipment, and had chosen now to get familiar with it. Among the laundry list of items included Apache helicopters and American U.S. Army battle dress uniforms, and M-16 rifles. At the very least, this was an odd sight.

At this point, I have to mention a little bit about firefighters and response time. The Army regulation that dictates such things states that an announced response, such as for a planned drill for example, calls for a response time of up to one minute. An unannounced response, (such as for a house fire, aircraft crash, or vehicle accident) calls for no more than three minutes. After the bell at the fire station goes off, firefighters gear up, start the fire engine, and eventually get on the road; a significant amount of this time is already counted in as lost. At this point we get there as fast as we can. Typically this is how it works.

In this case, however, we were on the far side of the camp and probably couldn't get through that Balkan mud in anything less than ten minutes. This was a challenge to say the very least. As we rounded the corner of a barracks complex and a muddy road, I watched as an Apache helicopter being piloted by one of the UAE officers swung sharply upwards and in a nearly vertical position. I am not a pilot, but working on airfields across the Army as long as I have, even I know when something looks dreadfully wrong. The pilot didn't have enough power to push the aircraft vertically, and he obviously didn't see the power lines or the Aviation Headquarters building directly underneath him either.

My driver took off like a shot, spraying mud everywhere behind us. We were on site in about thirty seconds, and by some miracle didn't get us all killed in the process. Apparently, the American aviation crews on the ground and nearby were white as a ghost. I couldn't even begin to blame them. The UAE aircraft had somehow pulled it out, and barely missing landing into a building. It simply kept on flying out into the sector as if nothing had happened.

With our red lights flashing, suddenly a couple of Soldiers showed up at our truck. The aviation group Command Sergeant Major marched through the mud and right up to our truck. For a split second I actually thought he might be upset about our speeding over there and spraying mud everywhere. It didn't make sense with a life or death emergency at stake, but the Army doesn't always make sense. He climbed right up on the side step of our engine and shook our hands. Words could not accurately express the sincerity in that man's eyes.

About a week later, it was the aviation Regimental Commander's birthday. The Command Sergeant Major asked if my men and I would barge into the room during a flight briefing in full gear with a loaded hose to quench the fire from all the candles on his birthday cake. Command Sergeant Major or not, it was still a bit unnerving for me, even as a practical joke. The Commander took it well though, and we were slapped on the back and presented with their Regimental Aviation coins after the party.

A CONVINCING DISCUSSION

When my six-man detachment of firefighters deployed to Kosovo in the late summer of 1999; we knew that we were facing the working end of Army-wide budget shrinkages and that this would probably be our last mission before we were deactivated as a team. We'd already received word that we would probably face the end of our detachment's history sometime during the following year. For my men and me, we really considered this mission a privilege. At that time, The Army had reduced its compliment of worldwide deployable firefighting units from seven teams down to four. I suppose that in the grand scheme of things that we were lucky to have made it down to the final cut. The team's only consisted of six men each, and in reality it was a pretty elite society. There were only about two hundred firefighters in the Army at the time, and that included the Active duty forces, National Guard, and Reserves.

Firefighters belonged to the Engineer Branch of the Army. That being said, I don't think that there was a single full bird Colonel throughout the Engineer community that hadn't heard of us. Only a handful of these men would have a fire detachment under their command during their careers. And those that did never treated us like a 'novelty' as some might think. They actually considered it an honor. And as long as our fire engine was as shiny as our polished boots, they usually went out of their way to treat us right.

Operation Joint Guardian was going well in the Balkan region of Macedonia. In a period of six months or so, Skopje International Airport had become the busiest airport in the world. Most of it was military traffic, but nonetheless the constant flow of troops and equipment kept moving. As a team specializing in Crash and Rescue, we posted near the airport on most days. Camp Able Sentry was our home for the next six months and we began to set up shop. After about five weeks or so, we had every building and tent inspected and placed on our maps, saved the camp from a major brush fire, and forged a mutual-aid agreement with our host, and allied nation of Macedonia. We were smoking hot and our chain of command knew it.

In all honesty, Camp Able Sentry was a very small camp, and we had done just about everything that we could do there. My buddy from the team at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri was up north at Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo. They swung through the Balkans like a rogue unit on a whirlwind tour that landed them up north just prior to their rotation home. There were no replacements on the horizon, and we were the only firefighters in country. The solution was obvious, but we would have to get our Brigade

Commander to buy off on it. I was a young Sergeant, and my idea of fun was not delivering a sales pitch to a full bird Colonel.

I hitched a ride on a Blackhawk up north to talk to my buddy, Mike. I wanted to get a feel for the Command, get a tour of Camp Bondsteel, and try and get a grip on what I was getting my team into. Camp Bondsteel was a rough, mowed down wheat field that was full of mud. I loved it. Essentially, the Army had the construction Engineers cut off the top of a mountain and build a base camp on it. It was truly an engineering marvel and a feat of momentous proportion. If nothing else, you had to appreciate the sheer enormity of the vision, as well as the effort that it took to make it happen. It was truly incredible.

I arrived at Brigade Headquarters about 1900 hrs. and nervously opened the door. This facility was actually a hardened expando-van. Most would view it as a giant RV, with the sides that flare outward to create an expanded space. As I entered the room, the white lights instantly changed to a soft red glow while the door was open, and resumed to full iridescent light upon closing the door. It took my eyes just a second to adjust, but the Colonel sat there unflinching in his chair with a cup of steaming hot coffee in front of him.

He offered me a seat, and I proceeded to offer my logical solution to the manpower issues that we were facing. The Army, in its infinite wisdom decided to send my detachment home as well, leaving all three base camps without any fire protection. On Camp Bondsteel alone there were almost five dozen allied and Army aircraft with more weapons, ammunition and fuel than could be imagined. It just didn't make sense to me. We could go home early, and be safe and sound with all the comforts of home, but my men and I didn't want to end our detachment's history like that. This meeting with the Colonel was a resounding success, and even though I was awestruck by the meeting – I was pretty sure that I had his full support. Besides, we were from Fort Bragg, and Paratroopers never run and never hide. It is simply not in our nature.

At the end of briefing each slide, the Colonel would reply with not much more than “Mmm Hmmm”. I wasn't sure, but I didn't take this as a good sign. At the end of the presentation he thanked me for a well-presented discussion item, and agreed that we should not only move up to Camp Bondsteel, but that we should stay for the entire tour and I would then take the position of Task Force Falcon Fire Chief. My disbelief was immeasurable.

And so goes the story of my first major one-on-one briefing. He laid down his coffee cup on the table, and slid a coin across the table. “Congratulations, Sergeant.” were his last words of the evening. I silently accepted his gratuity and took his compliment to mean that he knew that this was a personal accomplishment for me. As I walked back to the Blackhawk to return to Camp Able Sentry that evening, I was ecstatic. I took the twenty minute flight back to Macedonia to attempt to untie the knots in my stomach that had wrenched themselves into ulcers during the long, slow minutes of my briefing.

When I stepped of the Blackhawk at the airfield, Specialist Jerry Mulcahey was waiting for me. I observed the glow of a long slow drag off of a cigarette at the edge of the tarmac, and I knew it was him. ‘Mick’, as we called him, was my right hand man and was one of the best fire apparatus drivers that I’d ever seen. When we got back to the hooch, the news by the men was well received, and they also took it as a victory. We would stay and fulfill our mission. In the end, it was not the Army’s planning and tactical expertise that provided a safer environment for those twelve thousand Soldiers; it was a few of us willing to make a difference.

A FOND FAREWELL

At the conclusion of our tour in the Balkans, the unit that we were attached to had planned a small get together for “The Magnificent Seven”, the nickname for our team that General Sanchez had dubbed us. There was a group of about thirty or so attendees, complete with a huge sheet cake which was decorated with our unit patches in brightly colored icing. It was a wonderful evening, and a nice farewell as our final mission came to an end. Someone had blown up a picture of the seven of us as a group to a life sized image and attached it to the wall. In most circles, firefighters are generally liked and this was certainly no different.

The next morning, we would board a military bus destined for Camp Able Sentry in Skopje, Macedonia to begin our redeployment. As we waited for our bus to arrive, a messenger showed up and hastily rushed us to the General’s briefing room. Even I had no idea what was happening, and I have to say that I was just a little concerned.

The Task Force Command Sergeant Major entered the room, and called the room to attention. The current Brigade Commander appeared shortly thereafter, and smiled as he walked down the line and shook each of our hands and presented us with the “Iron Brigade” coin. I was actually relieved that this was just a follow up from the farewell gathering the night prior. Following the Brigade Commander was

(then) Brigadier General Carlos Sanchez himself. Although he was my boss for the previous six months, we really didn't have much contact, other than the morning briefings and an occasional incident of significance. He shook our hands as well, and thanked us for keeping the Task Force of three camps and over twelve thousand Soldiers safe during our watch. As a former Airborne Commander from Fort Bragg, he offered us a hearty "Airborne!" and was gone. In mere minutes, we were on our way back to Macedonia to begin the long flight home.

I was a little sad that the tour had come to an end, but inevitably that time would come. We had already persuaded the Command to let us stay the full tour, as well as move up from the rear echelon area in Macedonia up north to Kosovo. I had supposed that it was now really over; and admittedly a small part of me was relieved. It was time to go home.

HANDING OVER THE REIGNS

In the past, I have described the elite nature of Army Firefighters, as well as their unique types and small numbers throughout the world. It is an unparalleled community of those who are willing to give, serve, and then give some more. When I'd heard that the budget for the Army firefighting teams was being handed over to the Engineer Branch, I was a bit skeptical; however being assigned to Fort Bragg gave me a sense of security. The order was already on the table to cut three of the remaining seven teams Army wide. I wasn't the least bit concerned, as our team had deployed regularly through the years and performed without flaw.

About a month or so before we redeployed back to Fort Bragg from Kosovo, we'd received the final word that out of the final four teams, we too were being deactivated. Deactivated; it's such a cold word. Regardless, I received it about as cold as it seemed. It was almost personal. My men and I were of the same opinion, only because we loved the team and the work so much.

Upon returning home to Bragg, we immediately took thirty days of leave, and came back to a somewhat unfamiliar set of circumstances. Our detachment was down to three men, and we would soon begin an inventory of our equipment to turn over to another unit. God only knows what they would use the truck for, so I devised a scheme to hang on to my engine for one more week. Engine 89 was my baby and I was very much attached to her. It was a long shot, but it worked and gave me a little piece of mind at the same time.

We were to turn our entire compliment of equipment and our fire engine over to another unit who had three firefighters assigned to it. These firefighters fell under a very unfortunate series of circumstances in that the unit didn't allow them to work at the fire station. The unit they belonged to handled ammunition, and therefore they were used to perform endless hours of guard duty at ammunition storage facilities.

This never made sense to me either, but a few phone calls to some key personnel that I was acquainted with proved a valuable move for them. Before we knew it, a General Officer from Post Headquarters called their Company Commander and *highly recommended* that the three of them would receive the required training and be moved to the fire station within the next twenty-four hours. I do love it when good things happen to good people.

I showed up at their unit on a Monday morning, and told them to hop on the truck. I had pre-staged a bunch of equipment at a concrete pad just a few hundred yards away, and drove them straight up to it. They were more than a little surprised to see bunker gear all lined up in a row as they dismounted the fire engine. I gave them a crash course over the next three or four days to get them licensed on the vehicle, and turn over the equipment. We held a miniature and very impromptu graduation ceremony on that same concrete pad.

I waited until those young guys drove off in their not-so-new shiny fire engine before I felt a tear roll down my cheek. I'd been to hell and back with Engine 89, and I would miss her dearly. I still do.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Paradise Found



After my second combat tour where I was appointed as the Task Force Fire Chief under then Brigadier General Carlos Sanchez; I had experienced the crown jewel of my career up to that point, and being a Paratrooper overseas only enhanced this experience. I was divorced and certainly not looking for anything in the way of a relationship. My career was riding a wave of success, and I was surviving the painful divorce well with the assistance of my Airborne leadership that worked me so hard that I often forgot that I had any problems at all. I was living the good life, so I thought. When you're Airborne, and somehow you befall a personal tragedy of any kind, your sacred brethren and command elements have a way of helping you work through your issues. I have seen it a million times, and though it may be an unconventional means to solve such problems it benefits both the Paratrooper and his unit as well. It is a beautiful thing.

Soon after our return to the United States, I met Helen, who eventually graced my life as my wife. I was not looking for anyone at the time, but she was an amazing woman who swept me off my feet. I could have chosen to not pursue a relationship with her, but to risk losing her was a fate worse than death and I could not risk it. It was the best decision that I had ever made, and we've been together ever since.

ALASKA

9-11-2001

It was one of the most turbulent moments in our nation's history, and I have yet to meet a single one of my countrymen who can't recall where they were or what they were doing when, for a moment, time actually stopped. It was one of the worst days that most of us can imagine. Indeed a tragedy, however our country showed its might in a single nationwide effort to unite. The fall of the Twin Towers in New York City will undoubtedly be a highlighted moments in our history. I only pray that no one ever forgets that with being the most powerful country in the world presents opportunities to those who would do us harm and see us as a target. Those who perished at the Pentagon and who did not survive Flight 93 are also brave souls who did not deserve to leave us all so soon.

Although no amount of memorials, flowers, good deeds or well wishing will bring back the over five thousand Americans that lost their lives that fateful day, our homage to them and to the future generations, as I see it should be to attack terrorism where it sleeps. I don't think that this makes us on par with our enemies, but protects our own future generations from such atrocities.

Here is my little piece of September 11, 2001.

I was on duty at the fire station at Fort Wainwright, Alaska when the bunkroom lights came on almost an hour early for some reason. One of the guys on the early morning radio watch was watching the news, and realizing that we were on an Army installation that this would soon affect us all. All of the firefighters made our way hastily to the common room where we were glued to the television. With every second of horror that ensued we were in sheer awe. I likened it to folks back during World War II hearing of Pearl Harbor over the radio for the first time. I simply couldn't believe it. I called my wife, Helen, and woke her up to see the news. She was pregnant with our daughter, Abigail, at the time and I remember being hesitant to wake her up. But then again, I was probably going to be really late getting home, and this was bigger than all of us.

Fort Wainwright used to be an open post. By this I mean that there were never any closed gates, not even a guard on the main post gate unless the MP's were checking for drunk drivers on a weekend. I recall my arrival in June of 2001. As I drove through the main gate about ten o'clock at night, the sun was high, and I remember thinking how nice it was to be on an open post. The threat of anything remotely

dangerous was obviously minimal. The open nature of the post itself would lend itself to the theory that the Army felt that this was one of the safest places on the planet.

Almost immediately after the planes hit the towers, Fort Wainwright went from a THREATCON (Threat Condition) 'A' to a THREATCON 'D'. There were guards on the gates, civilian contractors were positioning concrete barriers up to create serpentine entryways, and all gates but the main one were shut down completely. This of course presented some problems locally that no one had thought much about even as much as an hour before the tragedy.

With only the main gate open, both military and civilian workers were stuck in traffic all the way to North Pole. The town of North Pole, Alaska is 19 miles down the Richardson Highway, so delays were not only inevitable but unbelievably long.

Usually getting off work around 0800, I didn't see home until around 1030 that morning. We had a huge dry erase board in the common room, and by the time I had left the fire station we had written over a hundred names on it; all fallen firefighters who gave the ultimate sacrifice. By my next shift the following morning, the final tally would be 343.

When I walked through my front door, I really didn't know what to expect. Helen was sitting in her big comfy chair, sobbing uncontrollably with a box of Kleenex in hand. As I walked through the door, her eyes met mine in a reddened watery gaze. I hated seeing her like that, but I also knew that we were by no means the only ones touched by the day's events. It was the horrible sensation of being a small part of something so globally wrong. It was our country joining a fraternity of those already struck by terrorism. It was felt in my home and in our hearts. It was a singly catastrophic moment that was the beginning of a series of events in our lives.

ALASKAN GOLDRUSH 2002 – OUR WEDDING

I wasn't around for the original Alaskan Gold Rush of the late 19th Century, but Helen and I were getting married in Alaska at the Northern Lights Chapel. This may sound like a cheesy, Las Vegas style wedding, but it's actually a beautifully modern looking chapel on Fort Wainwright. We decided to relive some of the history of the area and have a themed wedding. We would have our own Gold Rush. It was exciting, and we tediously prepared everything down to the last detail.

We had tied shovels and picks with bows to the ends of the bench style seating, the pens were seated inside an original gold pan filled with little gold spray painted rocks and the attire was something to see. Denim and flannel were the order of the day. Helen and I had purchased matching shirts for us and another matching set in another pattern for the best man and maid of honor. I don't think I ever saw so much flannel in one place before, except on an episode of 'Home Improvement'.

We arrived at the chapel early that day, as did about a dozen dedicated and wonderful friends to help us set up our reception. In the Army family, everyone helps out with everything. There were kids everywhere, the kitchen was buzzing with activity, and being a Platoon Sergeant at the time, I assumed the role of overseeing virtually everything so Helen wouldn't have to.

Things seemed to be going well enough. That was, until we realized that we left Helen's shirt at home in the dryer. My best man and I jumped in my truck and broke virtually every land speed record known to man to get home and back in time. The planets must have been aligned because the wind was at our back and we hastened back to the chapel with time to spare.

Our son, Kevin, was the ring bearer. A very self-conscious child, Kevin did a great job presenting the rings inside an old fashioned gold pan. His excitement over being a part of the ceremony was undoubtedly one of the highlights of his young life. Our daughter Abby was only two months old, and was beautiful as a girlfriend of Helen's carried her down the aisle as our flower girl. She was draped in a century old baptismal gown that was handmade and absolutely gorgeous. We wouldn't have had it any other way. As beautiful as that little dress was, I still think that it was Abby that made *it* look good.

The Chaplain who performed the ceremony was an old Paratrooper buddy of mine. Back at Fort Bragg, just a few years before he was my battalion Chaplain. He was a good man, and due to the fact he knew us when we were dating permitted the wedding to go on as planned without the standard six months of marriage counseling classes. So there we are, waiting to get married. The guests are seated, Helen's ready, and I am for some strange reason a bit nervous. I wasn't nervous about the wedding, the commitment, or Helen. What was unnerving me at the last minute was that we were about five minutes from 'show time' and the Chaplain hadn't showed up yet. I was of course concerned, so my buddy who set up the whole thing for us, and a Chaplain's Assistant called to see if the Chaplain was on the way.

Apparently, he completely forgot about the wedding. In twenty minutes flat he was walking through the front door of the chapel, wearing a suit, with bells on. I told him that Helen and I would get

him a watch with a fresh battery the following Christmas. It was only a minor glitch, and actually took some of the tension off of our big day.

The Chaplain finally kicked off the ceremony with an apology to all the attendees along with a witty anecdote about how, like this ceremony; in life things don't always go as planned. It was absolutely perfect. As I peered out into the pews it was as though my future was flashing before me. I had looked forward to this day for so long; it was hardly believable. Rarely in lives do our dreams come to fruition, so when it does it should be truly savored. I had a buddy queue the music as she proceeded down the aisle; and she was absolutely beautiful. She had flowers in her hair and looked as though she was walking on air.

The reception hall inside the chapel overlooked the lake in the center of the post. We danced together, and then one with Abby and I and Helen and Kevin as well. It was so nice to be connected with my best friend, partner, lover, and wife in this way, and it really was a dream come true.

CHAPEL MORNINGS WITH DARRIN

About a year following September 11, 2001, I had turned the reigns over to a buddy who took over my platoon as the Platoon Sergeant. I was leaving Alaska in just a couple of months and really didn't have a job. I talked it over with my First Sergeant, and there was a chapel that needed a Noncommissioned Officer because there were a couple of troops down there with little to no supervision. It wasn't much of a job, but it served a purpose in the interim. The best part was that I got to work directly alongside my buddy, Darrin. Darrin was a fellow Paratrooper and a good man. He had come to us from Alaska from Fort Campbell where he had served with the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. He was a first class warrior, and I liked him immediately.

You see, Alaska is a garrison environment. At least it was before the Global War on Terrorism. No one ever really deployed from there, so you knew you were going to get some good fishing and hunting in over the three year tour. Again, that was all before the war. Our unit was a Headquarters element, and every section in our unit had something to do with running the post directly. We had the post fire department, air traffic controllers, range control personnel, and it also included the post command group. Our function was to run the post on a day-to-day basis, and then push out any units that were called to deploy. However, though it all, we stayed. For most of us it was a good break from the breakneck pace of the line units that we were used to.

My first day at the chapel was a Thursday, which was our training day. Every Thursday all the Chaplain's Assistants would assemble at the chapel for some training on tasks from hand to hand combat to the technical tasks associated with serving a Chaplain. Prior to training though, Darrin and I would cook up dozens of pancakes, eggs and sausages, and plenty of coffee for all those attending. This was by no means standard, but it really was a nice touch and a great way to start the day.

During the week, we'd have to report to work by nine o'clock in the morning. After physical training, we'd shower up and get to the chapel early. At this time in our careers, I had already completed two combat tours and Darrin had three. We were warriors in probably the most un-warlike posting in the whole Army. It was disheartening at times because the war was raging on and we were merely spectators. I suppose it just gets in your blood after a while. With as much experience as we both had at the time, we longed to be leading a squad of men, charging towards Baghdad. However this wasn't happening any time soon.

We'd show up early and put some coffee on, watching CNN. As we heard the reports of our fellow Soldiers charging into the cities, it truly pained us to be on the sidelines. In retrospect I am now appreciative for the break in the pace that I had for my twenty-two month tour in Alaska, however, I always liked to keep my edge. We were two 'lifers', sitting this one out. But every morning you could just about set your watch to the time when Darrin's truck would pull up.

Most of the time, I'd already be in the chapel when Darrin walked in. I'd hear the creaking of the old chapel door as it opened and just smile. It was very comforting to have such a good friend who had 'been there, done that' and understood exactly where I was coming from.

It's often been said that fellow combatants have a bond that can never be matched; a closeness that only they know. Many moons ago I had only heard about it, however, after living it a few times I can wholeheartedly agree that this fraternal bond is eternal. Although Darrin and I had never served together prior to now, it was clear to me that we were on the same page in many areas.

He's just one of those guys that; if you ever needed him in a pinch would be there for you. I now live in Arizona, and am retired. There's not a doubt in my mind that if I needed Darrin here with me that all it would take is a phone call, and vice versa.

Just seven months after I took that job at the chapel, I would find myself in a whirlwind caused by the war. Three weeks to the day after signing into my unit at Fort Riley, I would once again be wearing desert camouflage and boarding a plane for Iraq.

My second tour in Alaska was a quick one, however after being a platoon sergeant, getting married, having Abigail, 9-11, and driving out of there to Missouri to retrain and change my job after thirteen years I can say it was a good tour overall. Darrin was a big part of that time in my life, and made a lot of things more bearable than they could have been.

Even since I left Alaska our friendship has continued on. Aside from my wife and children, he's only one of a handful of people I ever called during those precious few phone calls I was allowed to make from Iraq. I hold his friendship as one of my true blessings, as true friends don't come around very often.

THE PRINCESS

After Helen and I started dating, we realized that we had four children between us already. I had three boys from my first marriage, and she had one son from hers. We compared notes, and after a while, I didn't think that I could actually learn anything else about kids, generally speaking. Children can surprise you, and they will every chance they get.

With my oldest, I could not have been more proud. He quite obviously looked like me, and deep inside the ego of a young father, the miracle of birth of a son that's your spitting image is just the icing on the cake. He was perfect in every way, and was my world. I can recall a fishing trip we took one day when he was about six years old. I was off from the fire station, and his mother was at work. It was in North Carolina down at a small pond. After buying a bucket of crickets for bait, about fifty; I thought that we might catch a few sunfish, and it would be a good day for him and me.

What I didn't know at the time, however, was that the fish were waiting for us and were they ever hungry. After his first fish, I considered it luck and proceeded to bait his hook once again. As I cast my own line out into the water, he started whooping and hollering again as we both watched the bend in his rod signify the tell tale sign of yet another fish on the line.

What I didn't know then was that this would continue for about the next two hours and when it was all said and done we had about forty white perch in our bucket; only about ten of which that I caught.

It was a great day, and in this surreal moment I recall thinking that it just doesn't ever get much better than this.

I had seen the bumps and bruises that little boys get just by being little boys. After all, I had done all this myself once upon a time; and in retrospect they were all good bonding moments between my sons and me. I had twin boys, a challenge to say the very least. I learned early on that whether you're serving food, getting them dressed, buying toys, or anything of that sort, what you do for one must be done for the other. The logic behind this of course is because by the very nature of being twins you have two very distinct personalities to take into consideration. It's a delicate balance, but it can be done.

It's clear that up to now I had experienced the whole gamut of emotions and experiences with my boys. When I met Helen, Kevin was about six at the time, so this wasn't unfamiliar territory for me. He was the young boy of a single mother, loved video games and Pokémon. I was in somewhat of a comfort zone as I'd been through this before, so to speak, and once again I really felt that I was in manageable territory.

Four years later, Helen and I would find ourselves in Alaska and one morning I was lying in bed when Helen called out to me from the bathroom. As I approached the door, she was sitting on the edge of the bathtub with a pregnancy test in her hand. By the miniature hieroglyphics in the tiny window and the directions on the box there was no doubt that she was in fact pregnant. We decided that we would go to the hospital the next morning to get a blood test and make sure. Of course the results were positive, and I was absolutely ecstatic. I suppose back then that I'd never even thought about the possibility of having a girl. Helen and I had all boys up to now, and it didn't even seem a remote possibility that a girl would ever be on our horizon.

Being that we never had a child together before, I explained to Helen about my experiences with the Army's Nurse Midwife program, and that if she was comfortable with that, I'd really like to work through those folks. This was due to the fact that as long as there were no complications then I could deliver our baby myself. I was really excited about the possibilities.

During one appointment, we were given a tour of the maternity ward of the hospital, and met several of the staff. To my surprise, we were introduced to the woman who would become our nurse midwife, Major Bristow, as well as the department head, who was by now a well-experienced nurse named Lt. Col. Graham. It was another surreal moment that just felt like destiny in the works. I explained

to Helen that the good Colonel was that same young captain many years before that assisted me with the birth of my oldest. She remembered me, and we joked that delivering babies together was becoming a habit. She asked if I had any others, and I told her since our first experience together I had delivered my twins at Fort Bragg, and was really looking forward to working with her and her people once again.

Life is funny sometimes. I often wonder what the odds were that the same nurse who delivered my oldest with me would be in the same duty station when we were entering our last collective pregnancy.

The months went by and Helen fell ill with a terrible case of morning sickness that lasted a very long time. My chain of command at the time was very supportive, and due to our needs at the time I was moved from the fire station over to the unit to work for the First Sergeant. With my new work schedule I could be home every night and this proved to be very beneficial for all.

One of our very good friends at the time came back from a three-month school in Alabama the night that Helen went into labor. It was Alaska in June, and when he returned from his trip he thanked us for ‘waiting’ for him to come home to have the baby. This was of course a huge coincidence, as he also thanked us in advance for not calling him that night so he and his wife could have a little ‘mom and dad’ time. With the tedious and busy shuffle that was our life at the time, I suppose the writing was on the wall. But nobody saw it.

After my buddy’s homecoming, Helen and I returned home and went to bed. Just a couple of hours later, Helen informed me that it was time to go to the hospital. We were both very tired, and I scoffed as I thought she was joking. Nope. Sure enough, her water had broken, and we were on the way to the hospital. When we arrived, Helen was made as comfortable as possible by the awesome staff in the maternity ward, and I hurriedly called everyone I could think of.

This mass ‘all call’ was a challenge. On Fort Wainwright, all of our friends lived within three blocks of each other, and we all lived within two minutes of the hospital so neither time nor distance was a problem. The issue was that a month before I decided to test everyone during a hospital visit where Helen was having false contractions. I made one phone call to a buddy who had never had children before. He and his wife had two children from her previous marriage and I knew I could throw a red herring his way without arousing suspicion. I called his cell phone and said, “Helen’s seven

centimeters...we're at the hospital...I gotta go." Our other friends had three children and she was a registered nurse, so they were definitely not an option for my practical joke.

By the time they all made it to the hospital, there were four parents and seven kids waiting for the latest news in contractions, centimeters, and labor. When they came down the hallway, I stood there staring at my watch. They all had that look on their face as if to say, "Well, what's going on?" Tapping on my watch I said, "This is a test, this has only been a test! How come it took you all twenty-eight minutes to get here?" Apparently the mothers had changed their children's clothes, taken a shower, and prepared for the long haul. I suddenly realized how much trouble I was about to be in. They walked past me and into the observation room where Helen was resting. I heard her tell them that it was a joke from the beginning, and she of course had no way of calling them from her hospital bed.

What I had not realized up to then was that when they showed up, the husbands were left with the children in the waiting room, and the buddy whom I called felt horribly out of place. I felt bad afterwards as I found out he was in tears after the emotional roller coaster that I put him on. Later on we all had a good laugh about it, and he has forever since been known as Mr. Sensitive. I still think it was a good practical joke.

When the big day came, and it was time to call everyone (again), the other wives told me that Helen herself would have to be the one to call because they wouldn't believe me. That was fair enough considering what I'd already put them through. Once again, they all made it and we hunkered down for our long journey.

Our nurse-midwife, Major Bristow was clearing post by now, heading off to her next assignment. We surely hated to lose her as she was possibly the most informative, comforting, and genuinely concerned nurse we'd both ever experienced. She had actually signed out of Fort Wainwright by a few hours at that time, but told us to call her anyway if 'anything' should happen. During our numerous appointments she told us that she loved taking care of expectant mothers but had never actually experienced a live birth herself, other than her own of course. I suppose there's somewhat of a sense of closure to it all seeing that newborn enter the world and cry for the first time.

Helen and I talked about it and decided that it would be a shame if we didn't invite her to Abby's birth, at the very least. All of the key positions were filled except one. Helen was in labor, Lt. Col. Graham and I were delivering, and one of Helens girlfriend's was cutting the cord while another

girlfriend manned the camcorder. We openly invited Major Bristow to be a participant, and she did a great job coaching Helen and comforting her when necessary.

Helen did a fantastic job as a laboring mother. We did our best to keep the ice chips flowing and the pillows fluffed. Her efforts were absolutely phenomenal and I couldn't have been more proud of her. Our baby girl was the culmination of the best of both of us. She was our miracle. I had hoped that she would be just like her mother. I would have different bonding moments with her than I had with my sons; different but special in their own right.

When Abby came out, it was an absolute shock to me. I'd never delivered a girl before and this one was *my* daughter. She was absolutely beautiful. I felt this wave come over me that to this day I still can't explain. My heart was filled with pure love, and my knees were weak in such a way that there are not even words to describe it.

Abby is now two and a half years old. She knows she's my princess because she tells me so. She also tells me that she'll never leave me. Helen's always saying that Abby is lucky to have such a sensible mother, and she's right. Although many people tell me that Abby obviously has her mother's looks, I disagree. Although I am either fortunate or unfortunate to have a beautiful daughter, I tell people that she doesn't have her mother's looks because Helen clearly still has hers. She is truly beautiful. I see Helen in her eyes, and her mannerisms and character are both her mother's as well. I just think I'll believe my daughter's promises a little bit longer.

CHAPTER NINE

My Lovely Ladies- Life Is A Dance

There was once a time when I wouldn't have called life a 'dance'. Not exactly. As many of us were at one time, I was young and foolish. But after many years and countless experiences both here at home and around the world I had been cultured in a sense, and was more accepting of a great many more things than I once had been. Once I had seen that there were so many more 'options' in the world, I was hungry to experience more. I had been to a ceremony in Macedonia prior to my Kosovo deployment and been offered a Lamb's eye ball as a show of respect and honor from my hosts. Begrudgingly, I ate it and to the chagrin of my hosts, I was now 'one of the boys', if you will.

I was a Soldier through and through. To some degree I still am, as my family and friends will willingly and sometimes with a roll of their eyes admit to you. I learned over the years the art of diplomacy, and that things are not always black and white. Once I learned this, there were a host of opportunities open to me, and I was ready.

When I first met my wife, Helen, I was on the mend from a nasty divorce and was working eighteen hours a day to get through the aftermath. Don't get me wrong; I was not sad about my actual divorce itself. My former spouse was intimately familiar with several other men besides myself. No, I was upset because when you have nearly a decade invested with someone, a home, and children it is amazing how fast things will spin out of control. Your comfort zone is no more.

I was not looking for anything remotely resembling a relationship at this time either. I poured my entire being into my career, and the Paratrooper community helped me stay busy. The one thing that I did find solace in was going to a local country dance club called the Palomino.

Every military town has its main entertainment hub which draws a huge crowd on a regular basis. In Fayetteville, North Carolina it was the Palomino. The club was huge, and stretched out over thirty-thousand square feet. And on Wednesday night it was 'dollar night'. One dollar got you in the door, and drinks were a dollar as well. Being that there were over sixty thousand troops on Fort Bragg at the time, Wednesday night was usually what you might call a 'meat market'. Guys and gals from every possible background, age, size, shape, and color showed up to test their abilities at drinking, dancing, and scoring with the opposite sex.

Personally, I found relative safety in numbers and stuck with a few regular friends that I hung out with, and we kept everything close to the vest. The guys and gals in our group had no romantic interest in each other, and we kept an eye out for one another. We never let each other go home with anyone we didn't know, and we had built-in dance partners. It was a good idea, and we all had fun and got home safe and sound every Wednesday night. Sometimes, we would even crash at each other's place to ensure we would all get to physical training on Thursday morning. Thursday mornings were always a big morning to go on a nice, long run with your unit. Virtually every unit followed this plan, and the streets were always full of yellow reflective belts, vibrant voices and motivating cadences.

If you stayed out too late on Wednesday nights, you certainly paid the price the next morning. The only down side to the unit running together was if you were near the back of the formation. The

alcohol finding its way out through the sweat of sixty thousand Paratroopers left an awful cloud that wafted unflinchingly towards the rear of the formation.

But Wednesday nights at the Palomino were never about chasing women and drinking for me and my friends. We just loved the music, and we danced. We danced so much that we would have to bring a 'back-up' shirt with us to change into around the midnight hour. The place was always crowded and with all the fun we were having, it was only a matter of time before my carefully tailored and starched shirt would be a faded memory. We always had fun though.

One night, I approached Helen hanging out with a couple of her friends. I wasn't sure if she remembered who I was, as we had met briefly six months before. I walked up to her and, speaking loudly above the music said, "Helen, how are you?" and embraced her in a big hug. As I found out later on that night, she didn't have a clue who I was and hugged me back apprehensively in an embrace that you would give your least favorite relative as a formality at a reunion.

I went back to my friends, and we all continued having a good time. While talking with one of my buddies, someone grabbed my hand and started pulling me towards the dance floor. It was a slow song starting to play, and as I hadn't asked anyone to dance I naturally assumed that a buddy was messing with me. I reluctantly turned around and, seeing that it was indeed Helen's hand that had grabbed mine; quickly handed off my drink to another buddy who was laughing hysterically by now at my expense. I had no time to laugh because I had a vision of loveliness that had actually grabbed *my* hand and wanted to dance with *me*. I was in shock, and truthfully some days go by now that I still am.

Well thank God Almighty for long slow songs and an unoriginal disc jockey. Not only was that first slow song a long one, but he followed it up with another long, slow song as well. There comes a time when you are dancing with someone, towards the end of the song that you mutually pause, separate, and finish the dance. This didn't happen that night, and I could not believe my good fortune. The end of the song came, and neither Helen nor I ever once loosened our hold on each other. It was a beautiful bonding moment and seemed truly magical at the time. During both songs we talked about everything from our children to our likes and dislikes and beyond. It really did seem like suspended animation; like time had stood still for us. I hold that among the cherished moments of my life, and I always will.

Not surprisingly, our wedding song was a country song; Martina McBride's "There You Are". I highly recommend it, and if you haven't heard it yet then you definitely should.

Only a couple years later, we would find ourselves expecting our first and only child together. We were in Alaska, and with Helen's marathon 'Ironman' pregnancy through a mind-numbingly and blisteringly cold winter we managed as best we could. When in Rome.

When Abigail, my daughter, was born, she became the highlight of our home. After collectively having four boys, we now had a little girl. The expertise that I assumed that I had was, in part, out the window. She had me wrapped around her tiny little finger from the moment she was born.

As the months passed by, she became increasingly closer to Helen, as she was breast fed. They had a miraculous and unbreakable bond that is still that way to this day. I on the other hand didn't have much in the way of a 'super bond' with my daughter, but she was young. I changed diapers, fed her breast milk from a bottle, bathed and dressed her as I had done with my other children, but we just didn't have that little spark that I knew was there, yet couldn't seem to find yet.

As both Helen and I have always been fans of music, I really cannot recall a time that we haven't had music around our home. Since even before our first dance together on that magical night on that hardwood dance floor, we have always made music a priority.

One night, while trying to rock Abigail to sleep, and not having much luck; I decided to break the typical silence of bedtime and play some music to see if that might help in lulling Abigail to sleep. Being a country music fan, I firmly believe that there is a song for every occasion. I only had to find one that not only worked to help our daughter sleep, but was also something that I could tolerate listening to countless times if that's what it took.

If you ever get a chance to listen to a country music artist by the name of Mark Wills, I highly recommend it. He has an awesome voice and is truly talented. As I loaded the CD player, I began forwarding through all the faster and louder songs; until I finally came to the one I knew would be 'the one'. If you have his album, entitled "Permanently", and you play song number eleven, 'In My Arms', you will see exactly what I am talking about. If you have a daughter, or know you are having one in the near future, I cannot stress enough how much this will help you at bedtime.

I must have played that song at least a couple of thousand times. Eventually, I simply set my CD player on 'repeat' in order to save time and for continuity. I never did like an interruption during a dance, and I still don't to this day. I believe if you're going to step it out, then you step it out until the very end.

At some point, rocking her to sleep turned into walking around the room with the music on. Not long from there did we graduate to a slow, father-daughter dance that would go on until she drifted off to sleep. I must confess that sometimes I let the song play a couple of more times so I could just stare at her and feel her trustful little soul lying comfortably in my arms. I can remember on more than one occasion that Helen had to remind me that it was time for all of us to head off to bed. After all, there was always tomorrow night.

After Abigail had grown to where she didn't need to be rocked to sleep anymore, it really didn't stop the need for our special dances together. I would often dance with Helen in our living room, inside a Wal-Mart, or even a Waffle House restaurant near the jukebox. When it comes to dancing with my wife, I have absolutely no shame, but I do have one rule: Anytime, anyplace. And so it has been during our entire relationship, both dating and marriage.

The only issue that I ever ran into with dancing with my wife was, as Abigail grew older, she also wanted a dance anytime that Helen and I were dancing. At first she would smile at us, but eventually her precious little jealous face would scrunch up and she would hide her face once I saw her. The only cure for this condition, I found, was eventually asking her for the next dance. Works every time.

My baby girl is now nine years old, and although she is not as jealous as she once was of my dancing with her mother; she still likes the occasional dance with her old man. I can't say that I will honestly ever look forward to it, but if she ever does get married then I have about ten different father-daughter dances picked out already. That way I can hold on to my little girl for just a little bit longer.

CHAPTER TEN

“Till duty do us part...”



In Memoriam

Whoever does not have the stomach for this fight, let him depart.

*Give him money to speed his departure since we wish
not to die in that man's company.*

*Whoever lives past today and comes home safely
will rouse himself every year on this day,
show his neighbors his scars, and tell embellished stories
of all their great feats of battle.*

*These stories he will teach his son, and from this day
until the end of the world,
we shall be remembered.*

*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
for whoever has shed his blood with me shall be my brother.
And those men afraid to go will think themselves as lesser men
as they hear how we fought and died together...*



*Major General William F. Garrison
October 6, 1993
Task Force Ranger
Mogadishu, Somalia*

The modern day translation and excerpt used to begin this chapter is derived from Shakespeare's great tragedy, Henry V. Prior to the Battle of Agincourt, King Henry V motivated his Army with these now famous words. Against overwhelming odds and on foreign soil, King Henry V rallied his men into battle with this powerful mantra on October 25, 1415.

On October 6, 1993, only three days after the Battle of Mogadishu, Major General William F. Garrison chose these same words to comfort his men as they mourned their dead in the largest single battle, at that time, since the Vietnam War. Nearly six centuries after the original St. Crispin's day speech, those words spoken at the Task Force Ranger memorial ceremony at the Mogadishu Airport were, I believe, as comforting as when they were originally spoken.

Our Commander had me and my buddies to serve as an armed escort to the Airfield that day for an unrelated mission; and we all found ourselves, upon our arrival in an informal formation at the outer perimeter of the ceremony. At that point in my short career, I had never seen so many General Officers in one place. I also know for a fact that there wasn't a dry eye on that entire airfield; including mine. It was the first time that I'd ever heard 'Taps' played by a live bugler, and to this day that shiver has never left my spine. In the midst of tragedy, such true words were never spoken than they were that day. It is truly amazing that the same words, spoken over half a millennium apart and under different circumstances could be equally poignant and penetrating, even on opposite ends of a battle.

In late 2001, I was in the United States Army, serving in Alaska as a Platoon Sergeant. At the time my unit wasn't a deployable one, and other than the day-to-day issues that come with the perils of leadership. It was a considerably easy tour by comparison, and I probably shouldn't have felt as stressed as I did at the time. Many folks; however, might be inclined to disagree with this. Soon after September 11, 2001, the operational tempo of my unit picked up due to increased and arduous taskings for Post defense.

I was also moved from shift work at the fire station to the unit some months earlier to alleviate the strain of my wife's stressful pregnancy. Helen was having a serious bout of morning sickness that didn't seem to want to give in. The Army by no means had to do this, but by the grace of God, and an awesome chain of command I was allowed this levity. My First Sergeant, Commander, and Operations Sergeant were all family men, and this helped both Helen and I considerably.

Although they were all my superiors, these were some of the finest men that I'd ever served with. John Belles, my Operations Sergeant was a genius as far as the Army and its inner workings were concerned. He had held a variety of positions throughout his career, and was a well-rounded Soldier. He was my senior in so many ways, however never had to pull rank with me as he was ever-willing to help with anything I asked. My First Sergeant, Rex Benedix, was a fiery red head with a shortly trimmed high and tight haircut. He was a former Drill Sergeant, and rumors in the firehouse ran rampant that he hated firefighters as he was coming in from a senior command staff position. I soon came to find that this could not have been further from the truth.

I found his 'no slack' approach to leading a unit this large comforting, and more like me than most others in the unit. Our leader and the man ultimately accountable for the unit was our Company Commander, Captain Paul Tappen. He was a father of five, like myself, and very approachable. As an officer he had a tough assignment, but as a man he was very kind. Like John and Rex he was very family oriented as well.

Now that I've painted a picture of how nice my professional life and environment were; in retrospect it doesn't seem that stressful at all. At the time, however, I was going through a lot personally. I had still been experiencing nightmares from my last two combat tours and justifying to myself that because I was a Soldier that this was merely an occupational hazard. I supposed that it was something that I'd just have to learn to live with. '*Suck it up and drive on!*', as they say.

This was eight years after my first combat tour, and the first time that I decided to talk to someone about all of this. I had promised Helen that I would, because I didn't like feeling the way I did all the time. This included bouts of deep seeded anger and lashing out at my wife and children unjustifiably. I know for sure that Helen was tired of it, and I didn't want to be the reason that made her and the children feel uneasy in our own home.

Under the same theory that I don't expect my wife to understand how I feel because she's never been there. I too am not going to pretend to comprehend her perspective either. Since PTSD has few positive effects, I can only liken it to a spouse living with an alcoholic or something of that nature. Having lived with two myself while growing up, I can honestly see the fundamental similarities.

There is one thing that I feel I must explain before I go on. For most, the military is an ego-driven society. Much like professional athletes, entertainers, and the like, Soldiers are very proud of who they are, what they are, and what they do. And in an era where so much scandal is raised in the fields of professional sports and entertainment, Soldiers are some of the last true American heroes. They are not pompous or self-centered.

On the contrary they are some of the most giving souls that I have ever had the pleasure of associating with. The following three stories – my personal three days in hell – are not meant to portray bravado and such. However, please try to imagine every detail, if you can. Only then will you have a small glimpse into three of the most memorable days of my entire life; ones that have burned so brightly in my past that they have left a permanent shadow on the wall of my soul. They are days of infamy that were my personal days in hell.

TWO SHOTS, TWO KILLS – SOMALIA 1993

“War is evil, but it is often the lesser evil.”

George Orwell

It was the morning of October 4, 1993. To be more precise, it was the ‘wee’ hours of October 4, 1993 and many of us were involved in an after action assessment of what had happened the night prior.

The night of the massive firefight of ‘Blackhawk Down’ fame was a busy one for many of our nation’s military members, as countless attacks were mounted throughout that night anywhere that there was an American presence. Small pockets of the warring clan factions; supporters of General Aideed to be sure, used the catastrophic events of downtown Mogadishu as a diversion and an excuse to exact their own personal forms of vengeance. It was as if the blood was in the water and the sharks were looking for any excuse to attack. And our base camp was no different.

After almost three months of constant guard duty, the 2-22 Infantry out of Fort Drum, New York was brought in to perform these tasks. After the first Blackhawk helicopter had fallen in combat on that ‘Black Sunday’ of October 3, 1993, the entire country was on full alert. The Quick Reaction Force was activated, and meandered through the base camp in a slithery and unpredictable pattern so as to close any gap within any of our stationary guard forces. I had volunteered earlier that morning, and was placed on the Quick Reaction Force. The QRF, which was comprised mainly of members of the 3rd Battalion, 75th

Ranger Regiment out of Fort Benning, Georgia was truly a sight to behold. These guys were the physical manifestation and embodiment of all things “HOOAH!”. They were rock solid professionals and they lived for the next mission.

During the night, four Somali ‘gunmen’, who were actually still in their teens climbed through the wire, slipped between the double stacked 20-foot shipping containers which made up our perimeter, and started shooting. This was obviously a suicide mission; having chewed *khat* all afternoon had given them a false and chemically induced sense of confidence. As they encircled our base camp in pairs, the four Somali’s squeezed off rounds consistently, but not very tactically; nor with any great success in precision or accuracy.

I was paired with a Ranger and we were told to post ourselves at the main gate of the camp. Two more young Somali’s had been captured already, and we were to keep them secured until the fight was over. When the shooting got louder, one of our detainees started to shout and attempted to give up our position. The young Ranger with me simply butt-stroked the Somali in the head with his rifle which immediately silenced our new friend. When the Somali in my charge started yelling as well, I shook my head in disappointment and followed suit. I’d never butt-stroked anyone up to that point with exception of a few in a training environment. I have to admit that it’s very effective.

The shooting was getting louder because apparently the two pairs of gunmen started at a certain point on the other side of the camp and ran around the perimeter in opposite directions. The front gate, which was our location at the time, was apparently where the four would meet again. Directly across from the main gate was a corner to a building; and a door which was the entrance to a barracks facility for the base camp Commander and his staff.

Right about this time, a young Lieutenant came walking out that door wearing his PT shorts and T-shirt, shower shoes, and a 9mm pistol in a shoulder holster. Very unaware of his surroundings, he finished yawning he yelled, “What the hell’s going on out here?” The four young Somali’s replied with a hail of AK-47 gunfire volleys that should have dropped that Lieutenant with little to no effort. The hand of God Himself must have been protecting that man, because not a single round struck his body.

When the young Ranger and I saw the Somali’s rounding the corner and heading straight for the Lieutenant, opening fire; we posted up on a pile of bricks, each of us with a knee on the neck of our silenced detainees. “You go left, and I’ll go right!” he told me. I was amazed later on that night at how

instinctive it is to put a man in your sights under the worst of conditions. I fired only two rounds at the two gunmen on my left. In what seemed to me to be a surreal frozen animation of time, I saw neither of the gunmen move their legs. The gunfire stopped sharply; their bodies moving lifeless through the air for a millisecond like a cartoon. Within the shooting community this is what's called a "photo finish" and I'd now seen it firsthand. I had placed two clean head shots, which killed the gunmen instantly and before their bodies hit the ground. I had never seen anything like that before, much less been a part of, or the cause of such a thing to happen.

I wasn't sure which shocked me more; the fact that I had just killed two men or that I had fired the two miracle shots of my life. I have always maintained that fear is a great motivator; and it certainly was that night for me. The young Ranger got off one clean head shot and the other was in the neck. That made me feel a little cocky for a split second, and then he spoke to me. As we looked over at the four dead Somali's in front of the barracks building, he stood up and said, "Nice shooting." Then he started laughing, and as I gazed over at his direction I saw that the young Lieutenant was still standing there, his PT shorts drenched in his own urine. He hadn't been shot, but he surely felt the fear of the moment and his reaction to the clear and present danger was obvious.

After a short time we were assembled for our After Action Assessment, and that Lieutenant (now in clean clothes), presented me with a 10th Mountain Division coin without ever saying a single word. I couldn't seem to decipher his expression as he stared blankly at the floor during the debriefing. On the way out of the meeting, he silently and quickly made his way over to me and with a quiet handshake, slipped the coin into my hand. I'm not sure whether or not his pride had been eroded, or if he was still in shock himself; deeply appreciative on the life that he still had to live. I thought that he seemed to be transfixed on the fact that he very nearly 'pierced the veil' earlier in the night. Clearly he was evaluating the events of the evening, his approach to his involvement, and perhaps the dullness of his situational awareness at the time. Either way, I was just glad that he was still with us.

A MINE STRIKES ONLY ONCE – KOSOVO, 1999

*Do you see a man skilled in his work?
He will serve before kings;
he will not serve before obscure men.*

Proverbs 22:29

As a firefighter, I had become accustomed to responding to all sorts of emergencies, including motor vehicle accidents. Back at Fort Bragg there were several each and every day. With a working military and civilian population of well over 250,000 people commuting every single morning, it was almost inevitable. But working a car wreck on a downtown street at the height of morning rush hour traffic is quite different than doing so in combat. In a combat zone, sometimes the only criterion for having a catastrophic incident involving a vehicle is driving in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Sometimes, all you have to do is drive over a land mine.

Unlike many other weapons, a mine only strikes once. But with the ‘one shot’ philosophy of this weapon usually has a huge price. The detonation of a land mine filled with twenty-two pounds of explosives is devastating. And for a single vehicle, it is almost always a fatal encounter.

My team and I had been dispatched to a grid coordinate where only the day prior some Special Operations Forces were dispatched to utilize their unquestionable diplomacy skills to quell a local village dispute. In the Balkan region, the culture permits and almost mandates that a dispute be decided with an incessant amount of arguing. This is where our Special Operations Forces come in pretty handy. The American troops arrived at the village in question the evening prior, whereby the driver backed his vehicle in to an open area which was used as a parking area. Apparently his right front tire had missed the land mine by only millimeters while backing up, and the front quarter panel of the vehicle shielded the mine from being stepped on by passersby.

The following morning, while pulling out to leave the area the driver turned his wheels in the opposite direction. When he pulled the vehicle forward the mine instantly detonated, killing everyone inside the vehicle. When this occurs, this is known as a ‘Catastrophic Kill’.

When my team and I arrived to the scene, I have to say that it was unlike any ‘standard car wreck’ that I’d ever seen. The top of a hard-shelled HMMWV (Humvee) is arched slightly at the top to

allow for a swiveling gun turret to be placed into operation during travel. Horizontally, at the elevation of the gun turret is approximately forty inches from the deck of the inside of the cab of the vehicle.

When we arrived, the gun turret was laying flat on the deck. The impact and sheer force of the explosion had crushed the vehicle beyond anything I'd ever seen. I'm not sure why, but I seem to recall thinking that the occupants couldn't possibly still be inside the vehicle. In reality, between the force of the blast and the material of the vehicle there was no way that they could have escaped. I had seen people ejected from vehicles in accidents of the past; but in this case this was truly too much to hope for.

We utilized hand tools to pry the passenger door open. When we managed to open the remnants of the door to a point where we didn't have to strain to see the inside, I knew instantly that this one particular Soldier was dead. As much as it pains me to say it, he died quickly, but violently. This man was a warrior. I wondered how many lives that he'd changed or saved during his service. In what seemed like a myriad of thoughts in just minutes, I snapped back to reality and maintained my composure. I urged my men to take great care in extricating the remains, and that every professional and personal effect would be placed in contact with the remains until we turned everything over to the mortuary affairs group.

Almost like a patient who is in a coma, but who receives the very best of care; we showed the utmost respect to those remains and effects. That day forced us all to take a long, hard look at our own mortality. In an instant any one of us, or all of us could be gone. The only solace that I could offer to my men or myself for that matter was that this man did not die alone. His fellow Soldiers, my men, had taken care of him to the very end in some respects. When I think about those moments, even to this day; that's still about as good as I can muster without welling up.

"AMBUSH!" – IRAQ, 2004

*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil
is for good men to do nothing."*

-Edmund Burke

As a seasoned firefighter and Soldier by now, I had experienced death a number of times and by the hand of God managed to assist in saving a few lives as well. Death is never easy, but to a combat Soldier it is a constant and silent companion who walks side by side with you until you both meet. There are a few moments that have come to me during my time in combat that I thought I could actually feel my

own death coming, though it thankfully never happened like that. There were close calls that brought the two of us closer than I had ever imagined, but somehow did not.

I will tell you this much. When death comes to you, you can actually feel its very presence. And it is at that very moment that something in our own psyche drives us to do things that we would probably never do; sometimes even things that we, up to that moment may have never even considered. I am certainly not a hero in my own eyes, but I have undoubtedly walked with many. The crew of the “Steel Horse”, my gun truck crew during our tour in Iraq is certainly among them. Their place of honor in my lifelong walk with heroes is sealed for eternity.

It was late March of 2004, and we were escorting a logistics convoy from Ar Ramadi to Al Asad. The Air Base at Al Asad, also known as Forward Operating Base (FOB) Anaconda was huge, and came complete with a middle-eastern style restaurant, a Chinese take-out place, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. It was a desert paradise as far as base camps are characterized. However, the looming cloud over our heads went unseen by all as the three previous attempts to reach Anaconda had failed and ended in either an ambush or a huge firefight requiring air support from allied gunships.

As we turned onto the main, long stretch of road that would take us the majority of the way to Al Asad, the sky was slightly overcast and the trip was uneventful thus far. As the trail end of the convoy made the turn, a bright, young Second Lieutenant offered an optimistic forecast. He mentioned that just before we departed our Base Camp, he talked to a fellow Lieutenant over in the Intelligence shop about how the road we were on was “green”, and that it should be smooth sailing all the way up north. This “green” status was determined by the early morning patrols that would go out and clear the roads of obvious Improvised Explosive Devices and other such hazards.

In what seemed like a span of about thirty seconds from the conclusion of the Lieutenant’s radio transmission, I heard the hail of AK-47 gunfire and the distinct ‘*whoosh*’ sound of incoming Rocket Propelled Grenades coming towards us. I immediately keyed the microphone on my radio and notified the convoy and our Command group that the road was no longer ‘green’.

When in doubt, state the obvious.

My partner and fellow Squad Leader, Nick Johnson was in the lead vehicle, and in a matter of about a minute the fire was so intense that our convoy had been sheared in half. My buddy Nick was in the lead vehicle and taking fire, as were we. The enemy had planned and executed a well-coordinated

attack. Logistically speaking, the insurgents had their stuff together with weapons stashed and ready to fire about every fifty meters or so. They would simply run from one stash to the next and continue firing. As it turned out, this gave the appearance of there being a larger opposing force than there actually was.

The convoy commander radioed over the net that those who hadn't passed the cutoff point should fall back and regroup. That included our vehicle, but I really didn't like the idea of separating us any further, or any longer than absolutely necessary.

The road was very narrow, and a three-point turn was out of the question. I detached my microphone from my chin strap, and got out of my armored gun truck. I didn't want my driver and friend, Jon Simmons to accidentally drive off the shoulder even a little bit for fear of detonating an IED and getting us all in worse shape than we already were. As I opened the door to get out of the truck, Jon looked at me like I was crazy, and I felt more vulnerable than ever before. I could hear the miniature sonic booms of AK-47 rounds cracking the air around my head, and I worked as quickly as possible to get us turned around and out of harm's way. This was one of those moments when death was close to me.....very close. For a moment Jon got out of the truck, and taking a stance on one knee fired a riveting shot which killed an insurgent instantly, dropping him to the ground. We were both very blessed as those miraculous moments passed by in what seemed to be an eternity.

I remember thinking instantaneously that if they killed me, then maybe Jon and the boys will get the truck turned around and get back to the rally point. I thought about the pre-addressed mint green envelope that was in my left breast pocket that Jon and my crew knew to mail to Helen in the event that I was killed. I could almost picture one of them unbuttoning my pocket to retrieve it, and prayed that I wasn't still alive to feel the tug on my pocket buttons. By that time, I would certainly be dead. At least I prayed for that, so that I wouldn't feel one minute of the heart-wrenching pain in knowing that the envelope would be in the mail to my darling Helen shortly. By the hand of God, we made it back into the truck and back to the rally point; all of us intact.

As we regrouped, I told the LT that we needed to go get Nick and the others whose vehicle was now disabled. They also had three wounded at this point, and were sitting ducks. The LT agreed, and our truck led the charge through the constant hail of incoming fire with returning volleys of fire ourselves. My M2 .50 caliber gunner lit up the 30-foot high dirt shoulder to our left so intensely that we literally 'paved the road' as they say. Every Soldier in my truck was firing at everything that moved. Conversely,

everything that moved was also shooting at us. I spied two figures off to my right. Our heavy machine gun was focused on our left, so I scanned our right side.

A very large Iraqi in a long white *dishdasha*, or ‘man dress’ as we called it was firing at our vehicle, so I took the shot. I nailed him squarely in the chest, and I instantly saw the white material of his gown turn to red. The figure next to him tried to flee, but could not escape the inevitable bullet from my rifle that followed. I was firing left-handed (I’m a righty) over bumpy terrain at about forty miles an hour. God himself guided those bullets, just as he did years before in Mogadishu. I felt more hopeful about the imminent outcome, and suddenly felt as though I had the faith of a Saint. We were now somewhat safe on our right side. At a road intersection I tossed a smoke grenade out the window to signal where we had contact on my side.

As the disabled vehicles came into sight, I keyed my microphone once again and told Nick that we were coming in hard and fast towards his position. All proper radio protocol was out the window as I told Nick “I’m coming for you brother!” I never would have imagined laughing at that moment, but I simply couldn’t help it as Nick responded with “I’ve never been so happy to see a white man in my entire life!” Nick was a stout black guy from Tampa, and had grown up pretty hard. He was a great guy; and as you can see even in the face of diversity and incredible odds he still maintained his sense of humor.

In the end, we quelled the attack, and repaired what we could on the vehicles there in the middle of the road. Our wounded were attended to, as everyone worked very quickly to get us back on the road and back to Ar Ramadi. There were moments during that battle that were absolutely surreal to me. Amidst the battle, as your heart rate and adrenaline levels push through the roof, your brain slows down some to see some things with absolute and perfect clarity. I would almost compare this to driving a stick shift. The precise amount of clutch and gas will keep things running properly; for without the right amount of either one you would be completely stalled.

Please allow me to explain a little bit about Murphy; in particular *Murphy’s Laws of Combat*. Murphy, the fictional character who delights in presenting with stinging clarity the irony of our daily lives has thirty-one Laws of Combat. Although these laws are intended to be humorous, you can easily see how realistically they sometimes come into play; especially during this ambush.

- Murphy’s Law of Combat # 4 – When in doubt, empty your magazine
- Murphy’s Law of Combat # 14 – The easy way is always mined (or at the least “Ambush-ready!”)

- Murphy's Law of Combat # 16 – When you have secured an objective, don't forget to let the enemy know about it!
- Murphy's Law of Combat # 17 – Incoming fire has the right of way.
- Murphy's Law of Combat # 18 – If the enemy is in range, so are YOU!

- Murphy's Law of Combat # 28 – If you take more than your fair share of objectives, you will surely have more than your fair share of objectives to take.

As we drove back to Ar Ramadi that afternoon, I thought about Murphy, and just how ironically right that son-of-a-bitch could be.

The events of the three stories that you've just read are very similar, yet have very major and distinct differences between them when it comes to the psyche of a Soldier. In the first story you received an inside look into the perspective of someone who had never killed another human being prior to those moments. For me, personally, I can't tell you the weight that this situation created in my life. For those who do not know, it might be thought that this is a simple solution: "You killed the enemy or they would have surely killed you." It's not exactly that easy. This may be logical, as an outside perception that has the benefit of being objective. However, when you're the one squeezing the trigger, this perspective dissolves and becomes nothing more than that outsider's perspective. Nothing more.

As I squeezed the trigger that night in Somalia, I felt the adrenaline of my enemies, of my allies, and my own all at once. In an instant, the hand of God himself guided my bullets to stop the heinous actions about to take place. It was a peak adrenaline rush, but not the one that I was looking for. Just like that shadow that gets lit up so bright that it becomes a frozen image on the wall, this highly charged and emotional event has 'burned' its place into the history of my mind.

In the second story you can clearly see that this involves the death of a fellow Soldier. I didn't know this man, nor did I ever serve with him; however the thought of recovering that massively mangled vehicle with his body still trapped inside is yet another mental image that I'll never forget. It matters not that this man was not in my unit. Nor is it of any great significance that he never knew me. I can tell you though that as a fellow American I handled his remains and effects with the utmost care; like that of a newborn baby.

In the years that I'd responded to car wrecks, plane crashes, house fires and the like; I was accustomed to presenting my level of care with a decent 'bedside manor', if you will. This of course was not necessary in this case due to the casualty being deceased. I suppose that I really think about it I just wanted to treat this young man like I would want to be treated under similar circumstances. Even though we'd never met, he was my brother and I'd never spoken so much as a single word to him until after his passing. Somehow, that didn't really matter.

In the last story, regarding the ambush in the Sunni Triangle of Iraq, we see that death walked with each and every one of us that day. And even though we only suffered minor casualties that day without a single fatality, it shows that the closeness of a tightly-woven team like ours shared many things, including our souls. It was a time for us to be ready to give it all or not at all. We all gave all.

It's been said many times that Soldiers will go to war for their country, but will die for their friends. I could not agree more. The circumstances and events that surround this ambush outline this perfectly. On that day, death was a shroud covering each and every one of us, separated only by an invisible layer of hope and prayer that could only be penetrated by a piercing bullet. And had the bullet struck, death would have become a part of us, and peripherally, each other in a sense. I can say this because as I first met my young troops, I loved them like my children; charged with their care. By the end of that year they were my brothers.

To this very day, they still are.

And for those who have loved and lost; whether a husband, wife, father, son, mother, daughter, brother, or sister, I can offer no better words than those so gracefully uttered by an outstanding American who also gave his life in the defense of righteousness.

NO FURTHER NEED

By the time that the 'Devil Brigade', the 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Infantry Division had arrived to serve our tour in Iraq for our portion of Operation Iraqi Freedom there was no real threat from Iraqi Paratroopers, Republican Guard, or any semblance of an organized Navy whatsoever. The enemy as it were was not an outspoken force, but a hidden insurgency that we would become all too familiar with.

Our arrival in Ar Ramadi was by no means a welcome one; however we never forgot the unfortunate reality that a human life can be erased in an instant. Every second of our lives from that moment forward was a cherished moment not to be taken for granted. Our surroundings were something to be considered as well. Our camp was an old Republican Guard camp which housed two entire Brigades of these elite fighters. When our arrival became imminent, the entire population of this camp dissolved into the local communities of Ramadi and Fallujah. We would set up shop in their barracks, and find them a formidable enemy in their own backyard. I could only wonder what conversations and plans had transpired between those very same walls regarding Iraqi Soldiers and their plans for us only weeks before. They were familiar with every back alley in the Al Anbar Province, and over the coming year they would take full measure of their home court advantage. Our only allies were those who bore the same patch; the “Big Red One”, or the ‘blood patch’ as the insurgency came to call it over the course of our tour. Our Brigade was aggressive, well trained, and ready to do what we had to in order to get home in the end.

Allow me to tell you about a gentleman that I met one day after we were engaged in combat operations for some time. His name was Sam. Sam was an average looking fellow who was a very self conscious dresser by Iraqi standards. He wore a sports coat and pressed shirt every day. He also smoked like a chimney. The Iraqi people are social smokers, and are ever -willing to offer up a smoke just to engage in conversation.

After three combat tours of facing Muslim fundamentalists, I had come to be very skeptical of even the most subtle social kindness. Even at the risk of insulting anyone, I would never accept even the smallest offering. After all, I had my convictions and I had learned a lesson or two along the way which had kept me alive for this long.

Sam had been “checked out” as it were by the Intelligence community, and was hired as a Category I Interpreter. This meant that Sam was allowed to work with the gate guard force as an interpreter for twelve hours a day, six days a week and for a mere \$60 a month. This may sound rough, but to an out of work Iraqi, the prospect of sixty American dollars a month looked pretty good.

As time passed, we all learned of Sam’s family. He had a wife and five children whom he loved very much. Sam used to be a school teacher while Saddam was in power, but after the invasion there was a short time when civilized functions such as public schooling were shut down until things were more stable. He spoke English very well, and to hear him speak of the past was almost heart wrenching. As a

Soldier, a leader, I stood firm and tried not to feel at all. After all, at least he was able to see his family every night even though hitchhiking from Baghdad to Ramadi every day was a potentially life-threatening event. Still, as I could not see my family at all I felt nothing for his plight. It was all perspective, you see.

One afternoon while working at the gate, I reached for my wallet to buy some trinket from a local kid. This was common as they'd sell anything that they could. I had dropped my wallet, and a photo of my daughter fell onto the ground. Before I could do anything, Sam reached down and retrieved my daughter's photo.

In a somewhat surreal moment, I watched this simple act of kindness and I was intrigued. "You will have much trouble" Sam said. When I inquired as to why, he told me that because my daughter was so beautiful that I would have a lot of trouble in her later years, primarily with boys. He handed the photo back to me, and reached for his wallet. Like me, Sam had five children as well including a young daughter.

Over the months, I had come to grips with the fact that I had shut down my own abilities to feel much of anything. Sam and I continued to share photos throughout our tour, and I found an inherent value in social smoking with my new Iraqi acquaintance. I had told Helen of my conversations with Sam, and not long after that she and my daughter, Abby sent a small bracelet that they had made out of beads together. It was an interesting trinket, and I knew immediately where it should go.

On our last day of duty at the camp's main gate, I took Sam aside for a few moments. We exchanged the typical Iraqi 'double hug' that is the standard greeting. And of course we smoked. I retrieved the small multi-colored bracelet from my pocket and placed it in his hand. "This is from my daughter to yours" I told him. He told me that it was the will of Allah that we should cross each others paths during this time, and that he too had something for me.

As a U.S. Paratrooper, I of course have developed and still maintain a huge respect for the Airborne community. This, you may already know. However, what I didn't know at the time is that Sam recognized me as a fellow Paratrooper without ever having let me know that he was ever aware of that fact. Before becoming a school teacher, Sam was a Paratrooper in the Iraqi Army. This again was a huge risk. Things like safety and knowledge of tactics, conventional or otherwise were completely unbeknownst to him. He handed me his Iraqi Paratrooper wings and asked me to remember him as a father and a fellow Paratrooper when I left his country. I still do to this day.

I don't recall what happened to Sam in the latter days of our tour, but I do keep him and his family in my thoughts and prayers. He was a good *man*; not just a good *Iraqi* in my eyes. He was a good father, and I can't seem to imagine him to have been anything less one hell of a Paratrooper.

The 'Last Letter'

*Through the words of those who serve
come those final thoughts eternal
that will pin themselves to the hearts of loved ones
until their last breath.*

There is an age old tradition among Soldiers. For generations upon generations, members of the Armed Forces at all levels of rank, station, and from every corner of the globe throughout history have partaken of this time honored and very personal ritual. I do not want, in any form or fashion to make light of this rite of passage. For many of us, it is so much more than a ritual; it is a responsibility. I wholeheartedly believe this with every fiber of my being, and take this task very seriously. This letter is perhaps the last marching order of a combat Veteran; a daunting last effort that will hopefully share our innermost being with those we love when we can no longer speak ourselves.

I distinctly recall writing my "death letter", as it were. I have written one for each of my three combat tours, and with each one comes somewhat of a bittersweet moment. I describe this moment as bittersweet because the letter itself provides a sense of closure to a degree; yet, for my wife it will give only a narrow sliver of light through a keyhole of my last moments. This is the letter that I wrote for my darling Helen and our children.

The following words were never so personal; however I felt the need to share them as it provides a glimpse of our mentality when we most felt that we were most likely to pierce the veil. This ultimate sharing of things intimately personal has not even been read by my wife before now. We share everything in our lives, but I wanted to allow her the opportunity to read this letter in her own time and by her own choice. I can only hope that these words come to shed some light on what may have been my final thoughts half a world away.

My Darling Helen,

Although it pains me somewhat to put pen to paper on this occasion, I feel that I must in that you will truly know that I was thinking of you until the very end. Yes, my love; if you are reading this, then I am gone now. I need you to know that I feel that dying for a cause well founded is not a crime, nor a shame. Know that I fell giving it my all, and that this letter has only reached your hands by one of my brethren in whom I have trained and have well placed a sacred trust.

First, allow me to say that I feel that I owe my life to you. My life changed considerably for the better when you came into my life. You have not only enriched the quality of my life overall, but the thirst for which I lived. Please do not be too sad, my love. Life is so very short, and although we have lived many lifetimes in our years together; it is truly not over. You are my life, and although we are not together in a physical sense, know that I am ever-watchful, and will still do my best to protect and watch over you and our children as God permits me.

You are the very core of me, and the reason that I not only lived, but lived with the fervor with which I did. You are God's greatest gift to both our children and I, and I could never begin to show my gratitude. Throughout my life I have loved many things, but I have never been truly in love before you. You have taught me so many things, and made me a better man in the process. You have shown me what true and unconditional love is, and again, I am forever grateful. When I think of the times that I have truly looked into your eyes, I believe that I have seen the face of God. You have told me many times not to place you on a pedestal, but in my heart and mind there is no other place for you, my love. Quite simply, you are what love is to me.

Much like our time apart with the war, you will continue on with our children. Your strength is an example to them, and you will gain it from them as well. Please do not allow them to weep forever for me. Ask them to be thankful for the time that we had. I only hope and pray that I could impart some worldly wisdom on them when we were together. Please impress upon them that their young lives were, are, and always will be among my life's most cherished moments and blessings that are, without a doubt, some of the major highlights of my life. Through all of life's accomplishments, none are as great as God's gift that we are able to leave our mark and our legacy on the world through our children. And what wonderful children that we've been blessed with.

Please know that through our conversations and letters in the recent past I have relayed to you that the level of evil in this place is unlike anything that I've ever seen. As we are considered the enemy here in this land, it is somewhat expected that we should be viewed and attacked as we are. However, I have seen and heard of things that are truly evil that these people are willing to do to each other. It is truly sad, and I only hope and pray that my brothers carry on and continue to fight on the side of God, that we may be truly victorious not only in the battle among men, but in the battle of good against evil that truly exists here. May God bless the good people of this land and touch their hearts with the wisdom that they so desperately need.

I pray for our own, and respect our enemies. I say respect because these people will one day be accountable to God, and I only pray that their souls are saved as well. I know that it will be hard for you and the children to understand this for quite some time, but please try. There is enough hatred in the world today, and although I am gone from this world, I am not gone forever. I will patiently wait for you my love, as one day I know that I will be able to hold you again. On that day, I will truly never let go as we will be together in eternity. You have known me to be impatient over many things throughout my life; however, you are, as always, worth waiting for my darling. And you always will be.

I always thought that I couldn't possibly love you more than I had, however in death my love for you is truly boundless and without end. Rest your heart, my darling. I know that this time is rough beyond words for you. Know that my love is never-ending for you, and that Almighty God is watching over you in my stead now. I always have loved you, even before I knew you. The thought of you was an impossible dream, a miracle for me. And when you came true my life was truly fulfilled. Anything after the day we met was just a bonus for me. There are not words to describe what an enriched and blessed life you gave me. I only hope and pray that I could have given you a fraction of the wonderful life that you gave me.

Please go now, and focus on yourself and our children. They adore you, and will watch you intently to see how to get through these times. Please be as strong as you can, my love. Know that I am still with you and the children as well, and that one day we will be together again.

Always,

Ron



For our Children:

Gary,

My number one son! What can I say? What words can I utter that will offer you some slight bit of comfort during these days? You were my first child; my son, my dream come true to carry on our family name as I have been so proud to do.

You have grown into a fine young man, and although life rarely hands us the situation that is ideal to us you have to realize that God is never going to give you more than you can handle. You must be thinking that it sure is easy for me to be able to say this now, after I am gone. You're right, of course.

Many of the blessings that I've had during my life are still coming your way. The day that you were born was truly a miraculous one for me. I was so unsure about having a child, and my ability to take care of you. But, over the years as I watched you grow you taught me as much as I ever did you. You are an incredible young man, and you have so much to offer the world. You are intelligent, handsome, and have a good head on your shoulders. Please do not ever waste the precious gifts that God has given you.

You are a leader for your brothers; Austin and Bailey. I regret that your mother and I did not handle our marriage better, and that ultimately you and your brothers paid the most costly price. I cannot go back in time, however I want you to know that I have never stopped learning, gaining experiences, and enjoying life for all it's worth. If I can offer you a bit of sound advice at this time, it would be to do the same.

Please don't take a single minute of your life for granted. That is the only true regret that I have over the course of my life. Taking anything for granted means losing something; time, a relationship, or even the love of your life. When they are of age, please share this with your little brothers as it is so very important.

Know that even though we had much less time together than either of us would have preferred; I have loved and cared for you as strongly as if we had lived together every minute. You are my son, my

blood, my legacy. Always pray when you are in doubt, as well as to give thanks. God will never guide you down the wrong path, or give you more than you can handle. I love you my son. God bless you!

Love,

Dad



Kevin,

My buddy Kevin. I truly hate that this moment has come, and that I will not get to see you become a man. I have faith in you, your mother, and your sister to get through these times together. I know that they may seem overwhelming now, but in time things will be better. This too shall pass.

Since your mother and I met when you were seven years old, I have always believed that I have accepted a charge from God that I had another son. The son that I have in you is special, and over the past few years I have come to love you and care for you like no other. I have never viewed you as my stepson, or anything else that would place a barrier between you and I. You are my son. I think that this is an important point, and I don't want you to ever forget that.

I cannot count the times that we have been in a restaurant, a store, or somewhere in public and someone would comment on how much you look like me. They'd say, "He looks just like you.", or "You look just like your Dad." I could not be more proud during those moments. I still contend that it's a blessing that you look more like your mother than me, but I would surely never complain about that either.

In the days to come, your mother and sister will go through some rough times. Knowing your mother, there will be much sadness over me not coming home again; however, you are now the little man of the house. I know that this seems like the impossible, but God will guide you as you go along. You are strong willed like your mother, and your big heart will carry you through these times as well.

Please know that I have always loved you like my own. Regardless of what happened in your past with your mother's marriage to your father, and the subsequent hard times that followed that; know that I would never have married your mother if I wasn't willing and able to take you on as my son as well.

Thank you for being our ring bearer at our wedding. An act of faith and dedication such as that is rare for someone of your age, but you have always had what it takes. Very few people in your life will seem to 'march to the beat of their own drum'. You are one of these people, and your life will one day bear the fruits of this character. Be proud of who you are, and always be true to your God, your family, and yourself.

I may have never told you this before, but I truly admire you, son. I admire your heart and your ability to love as you do. Years of war and hard times in life have made me jaded and callous in some ways. Please don't let this happen to you. I have learned over time that it is very easy to love from afar; but why when you don't have to? Trust your heart, and remember the things that I have tried to teach and impress upon you. I always did so with your best interests at heart, and in trying to prepare you for manhood.

I know that you will turn out to become a fine young man. Regardless of where life's path takes you, be true to your family, yourself, and your heart. If you do this, you cannot go wrong. In times of confusion or doubt, do not be afraid to turn to God for the guidance that you will no doubt one day need. No one knows everything, and you never need to be afraid to ask for help.

I love you son. You have enriched my life beyond what I can describe to you. You have taught me more than I have ever taught you, and although I haven't always recognized those times as a blessing; they truly have been. Remember to pray each night, and love your mother and sister with everything that you are. God bless you son!

Love,

Dad



My Princess Abigail,

I cannot put into mere words what I would like to say to you right now. You are the true blessing that I have always hoped and prayed for. You are Daddy's little girl. I have had sons for years now, and although they have enriched my life beyond my wildest imagination, I was not ready for what you would do to my heart.

In the short time that I have had with you, I have come to know a side of myself that I didn't even know existed. You are the gentile spirit that has tamed your Soldier father into a Daddy. As a baby, you and I took naps together on our couch, and I would just watch you sleeping for hours. Cradled in my arms, I remember you catching your breath in your sleep, and your pink cheeks glowing and begging to be kissed. There is nothing like the unconditional trust of a little girl in your arms, nestled and peacefully asleep in her Daddy's arms. You are the miracle that only your mother could have given me, and the world. I can only dream of what awaits you in your life. I have not only the highest hopes for your happiness, but pray that all of your dreams come true, my angel.

Some might look at you as a little girl that is growing up without her Daddy. To that I want to say that you will never be without me. I will always have an eye on you. Whenever you think of me, just know that all you have to do is call for me, and I'll soon be there. The last thing that any of us wanted is for us to be apart. Nothing could keep me from you, my little Princess.

When your mother and I first met, it didn't take me long to know that if we ever had a child together, that that child (you) would have the best Mommy in the whole world. Your Mommy is a very strong woman, and she loves you with all of her heart, as do I. She will help you grow into a fine young lady, and one day you will look back on your early years as a precious time with her. I did the best I could to find you the best Mommy in the world, and I believe that I've succeeded.

You are my little Princess, and you always will be. Know that I have always loved you and I always will. Follow your heart, and you can do anything that you want to! I love you my darling daughter. God bless you!

Love,

Daddy

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The End of an Era ... and Beyond!

Still in the Game, and taking it to the next level

Living the American Dream

In July of 2005 I was facing leaving the military as a disabled Veteran. My career, United States Army family, and troops which I had the blessing and privilege to lead for fifteen years would soon be in my rear-view mirror as I was thrust into an entirely new set of circumstances. Everything I had known had come to an abrupt halt, and I was duly informed that although it would be somewhat of a transition, my life as a retiree would prove to be a new adventure.

I was not necessarily happy about the circumstances, but I had gained a wealth of knowledge, contacts, and experience from my military service and felt confident about putting it to good use. My wife Helen was extremely supportive and with her love and motivation I soon found a job as a sub-contractor with the Department of Homeland Security. I was not ready for a lot of what I was to experience next. The civilian workforce in the United States is certainly a privileged bunch. In drastic contrast to the daily rigors and lifestyle of the military, I felt now that I was on easy street. I had never worked *just* forty hours in a week in my entire adult working life.

I had so much time on my hands that I truly did not know what to do with myself. It may not seem like a very big deal to most people, but the hour that I had for lunch everyday was almost killing me and I would up working most of the time anyway. My work ethic was strong, and I was viewed as a go-getter with a lot of energy.

In less than six months from being hired, the company I worked for lost their contract with Homeland Security for padding their bills. This was really sad to me, as it was a multi-million dollar contract and with even the slightest effort towards professionalism, honor, and a true dedication to the purpose of the job they could have retained a steady stream of revenue for years to come. This was my first major disappointment regarding the private sector work force on a company-wide level. Soldiers don't ever really take very much, if anything, for granted; and here was a huge company basically getting fired for being too greedy with the government. It was truly unbelievable.

We decided to move to New Mexico to be near Helen's family. They are originally from California, but had migrated east in search of jobs and roots for the next generation. We arrived in early January of 2006. The day that we crossed the border into New Mexico coming from Arkansas was a tiresome one as we had been on the road for a day and a half already. Helen was driving our van with the kids, and I had our dogs in the cab of the U-Haul truck with me. Twenty minutes into the Land of Enchantment we received a phone call that our most recent great-nephew of only five months had passed away. As we arrived in Albuquerque later that afternoon, we hit the ground running and immediately started to plan the funeral.

Although our arrival alleviated the stress and burdens that the family had been experiencing, however it was definitely a dark time for all of us. After all, our young niece and nephew were going to have to bury their child who had never so much as left the hospital since his birth only five months before. It was a truly sad day for all of us.

After receiving a lump sum from the Army for my newly-established disabilities, we had enough to live on for a while, but I would eventually have to find work. It was a difficult path to choose, because I had an epic career with a host of experiences in the Army. I had been trained to save lives, assist in childbirth, shoot exceptionally well and hunt men down where they lived in the most austere conditions imaginable. But I wanted to be home at night, finally. I enjoyed having my head on my own pillow and being next to Helen each and every night, and I vowed to her that I would do everything in my power to keep it that way.

While looking for a 'real job'; something that was even remotely near to my skill set and career choice, both Helen and I found an opportunity that would allow us to not only be home every night but work together as well. The pay was somewhat decent for one of us, but doubling our salaries by working together would ensure that we had the cushion that I was dearly concerned about losing with the military. And so, we both began working at a call center for America Online, or AOL. The training session lasted two months, and our instructor Donnie Wilson became a great mentor and friend. Both Donnie and his wife worked there as well, and so we had something in common with them that we all could relate to.

I have to explain something here. I am a Soldier; always have been, always will. I have very little tolerance for any sort of laziness or anything remotely resembling a less than outstanding work ethic. This, I would fall victim to on any number of occasions over time. I became jaded towards others who did not appreciate the opportunity to actually have a decent paying job or simply felt like sleeping in on a regular basis. Donnie was very patient with me, and is cut from a similar moral and professional cloth as I. As he was a few years my senior, I took his counsel in stride, and his guidance rang true on a regular basis. This is where I began to learn patience for the private sector; patience that I had the luxury up to now to not give a second thought towards.

Not long after a brief stint at America Online did I receive a call on one of the dozens of resumes that I had sent out in an effort to seek a job that would at least try to pay me what I was worth. The New Mexico Office of Emergency Management was on the other end of the phone and offered me an interview. I could not have been more ecstatic. The base salary was \$42,000.00 per year, and I was beginning to feel slightly *back in the saddle* again. I never made nearly that much in the Army, but knew that opportunities beyond the military and due to my training could not elude me for long. I was hungry for not only success but job satisfaction and the chance to help folks by making a true difference. I understand that this is a tall order for any job, but I had the drive and patience to wait for it. Fortunately, I did not have to wait much longer.

I wore my best suit, and headed up I-25 North towards Santa Fe. I knew that the agency was located on the State National Guard Headquarters compound, so it gave me a warm feeling knowing that I wouldn't be too far from my own natural environment. I loved being around Soldiers. I was asked to introduce myself, which I did, and then wait for either one of the two interviewers to respond. As it turned out, both gentlemen were retired Lieutenant Colonels from the Army, and one of them was a Chemical Officer of which I served in the same branch. I could not have been any more fortunate.

As you may have guessed, the interview in its entirety consisted of about three or four questions regarding the position that I was realistically overqualified for. The remainder of the hour was a probe into my character, military service, and family information. We told stories back and forth for forty-five minutes, and I walked out of there confident that I hit a home run. Two weeks later, I started as the New Mexico State Hazardous Materials / Weapons of Mass Destruction Coordinator and loved every minute of it.

As they were huge military fans, I gave each of my interviewers a copy of my first book which was published by now. We got along very well, and I was glad to be there. About a month into the job, I was approached by the agency director to take a brief respite from my position, as he offered me the opportunity to help the agency and assume a leadership role in assuming a Program Director spot for one of FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue Teams. There were only twenty-eight of these teams in the nation, and I was having it handed to me on a silver platter. The job that I had been hired for placed me in a group of one out of fifty in the country. This new position narrowed the field down even more to one in twenty-eight nationwide. I definitely needed to catch my breath.

I would hold the Interim Program Director position for only six months, but in that time I made several contacts throughout the nation and was able to deploy the Task Force for the first time ever during an in-state emergency. It was a stressful yet rewarding experience, but I wouldn't do anything to change any of it.

In 2008, I was evaluated and deemed 100% disabled by the Department of Veterans Affairs. This of course created another tumultuous turn in my lifelong career path. I literally had to stop working, and was done. Once the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Social Security Administration began compensating me for a lifetime of work, I was now, at least officially semi-retired. We were being taken care of, however I still had a lot of energy.

I decided to go out on a limb. I told Helen that she should start her own company, and that I would show her support in any way that I could. In May of 2008 she was incorporated and started Southwest Homeland Solutions, Inc. (www.shsnm.com). She would go on to lead a small cadre of instructors to train the military community, First Responders such as firefighters and law enforcement, and eventually conduct the first full-scale exercise between the United States and Mexico during the Swing Flu (H1N1) outbreak of 2009. It was wildly successful at first, and we had clients from school districts, Intel Corporation, Tribal entities, and County Emergency Managers to serve with our years of experience and skills. This was truly the American Dream!

After moving to Arizona, she still took on the occasional client, however her mother suffered two heart attacks in a single year, and as we were home-schooling our children we didn't have time for much else. The true blessing was that we had an enormous amount of time together as a family. I never realized until that point what a luxury time actually was. Our friends and relatives barely had any to call their own, and were tied up on a daily basis with the rat race. The best part was that we all were well aware of how blessed we were, and still are.

You never really know how these major changes in your path will affect you. The key is, I have learned, that you should not make an instant judgment regarding what you don't have. Inevitably you just might see how much you really do have. The good Lord must have a sense of humor, and is probably still laughing at me for making such elaborate plans with my life. I wouldn't have said this ten years ago, but now I am laughing too and enjoying every minute of it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Resurrection!

At this point, you may recall me mentioning “The Four Horsemen”; no not the original Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, but a tight knit group of my buddies and me who earned that moniker on our tour of combat in Somalia in 1993. We were inseparable, and there wasn’t anything that we wouldn’t do for, or to each other for that matter.

Though we were all closer than brothers, I was especially close to Bobby. Bobby was an Army truck driver, and though I didn’t think much of this when we met, my respect and admiration for him would grow over time to the point where he became my best friend. I was very young in my Army career when we first became acquainted, and although I knew a great deal about the Army Fire Service and life inside a firehouse, I would soon find out that the fire station was but one small cog in the wheel of the “Big Green Machine” that was the United States Army. I was in for one hell of a ride, and Bobby was driving.

Though patriotism coursed through my veins from birth, I never really met someone who felt the same way, even in the Army up to that point. I had been disappointed many times by then by people who joined for the college money, or to avoid jail. It was wartime though, and we were past a huge moral high of our successes of Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

A mere two years later, the United States would find itself entering into a potential public relations nightmare in the horn of Africa. Mogadishu, Somalia was a hotbed of activity between different clans battling for scraps of power that were inevitably temporary, meaningless, and very bloody. The most powerful clan, headed by General Mohamed Farrah Aideed, was known to be ruthless and unsympathetic even towards their own starving and diseased people. Suffice it to say he was without a soul when it came to dealing with rival clans. The General’s lust for power, greed, and a complete control of the country’s weapon and food supplies was unrelenting. It was time for the United States to put on her humanitarian face and intervene.

When we left Fort Campbell, Kentucky in early August of 1993, we were embarking on a journey which would become an epic part of our military’s history. What would begin as a somewhat ‘routine’ logistical labyrinth to provide aid to a starving people would eventually explode into an international incident that would never be declared a war by the U.S. Congress. But those of us who were there knew exactly what it was. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, then it’s most likely a duck; and you don’t have to be a tactics or strategy expert to figure that one out.

By now you have read some of the humorous and heartwarming stories about the Four Horsemen and no doubt realize how close we all were. Bobby and I were especially close. We had the most in common, and though we had different jobs in the Army, we were both married, were very patriotic, and generally loved what we did. We didn’t ask why; we just did whatever needed to be done.

In late November of 1993, Thanksgiving Day to be exact, the Command Group was trying to lift our spirits by providing a traditional holiday meal for the troops. Our Commanding General from Fort Campbell, Kentucky came over to visit us as well. This was remarkable in and of itself in that he was charged with leading over twelve thousand troops of the 101st Airborne Division. The truly remarkable part is that most of the troops were home for the holiday season and there we were; a sixty-eight man contingent on the horn of Africa and he deemed us worth the trip. It is no surprise that Major General John M. Keane truly loved the troops under his charge. He would later attain the rank of General (four-star), and be appointed as the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army. This was a beautifully delivered token gesture on what could have been just another holiday away from home under less than desirable circumstances. Thank you General.

Although this was a lighter moment for most of us, Bobby was in a confusing place. We were safe, we had each other, and there was our first and only decent meal of the tour ahead of us. For Bobby though, this was the day that his son, Cody was born. We were ten thousand miles from home, and due to the instability of the region there was no way to get Bobby home for this once-in-a-lifetime event. I often told him about my oldest son Gary at length. Gary was six months old when we left for Africa. I had pictures of my son all over my hooch, but somehow I now felt a bit guilty in light of Cody's arrival.

I have to say though, that Bobby took it all in and rode it out like a champion. I dare say he did a lot better than I would have under the same circumstances. He held it together for the remainder of the tour, which would only be another month. At the time however, we had no idea how long the tour would last. After going through hell and back together, it was finally time to start getting ready to go home. His wife, Melissa had even dedicated a song to him over the Armed Forces Network Radio Station. The song was "*I Wish I Could Have Been There*" by country music superstar John Anderson. All of the Four Horsemen were in tears, but Bobby held strong in his resolve to get home and see his family.

As we arrived that freezing cold Christmas morning, we were hastily gathered up to turn in weapons and then be released for a few days. There were no debriefings, no formalities, or otherwise. We were cut loose to be with our families on Christmas. Bobby shot straight as an arrow towards the Nashville airport to catch a flight to Phoenix where his wife and newborn son were awaiting his arrival. I had found out while still on Somalia that I was on orders to go to Alaska, so things were about to get really busy for me.

My marriage was heading south very quickly, and though we went off to Alaska together, I was never really "there", so to speak. I was never unfaithful, however I was emotionally unavailable towards my now ex-wife, and I found little interest in spending time with her. All the 'little things' that tend to add up to even a decent marriage were non-existent, and she eventually felt the need to drive herself into the arms of several other men. My emotional Richter scale was untainted even by that. I was devoid of love, hate, feelings of rejection, and the like. I simply didn't care. My combat tour had done a lot to me, and would eventually take even more from the quality of my life to come. I never got to see Bobby again before I left for the frozen north.

After leaving Alaska two years later, I would end up at Fort Bragg, where I finally got divorced. Fort Greely, Alaska was a rough tour for me, and I was glad to leave such a desolate post. The cold never really got to me, but the isolation and lack of comradeship from my combat buddies left me in a very dark and lonely place. I was only home for two months before I shipped out to Alaska, and my time there was very limiting career-wise. I started to plummet further into a very dark place.

My former father-in-law was a retired First Sergeant. While stationed in Hawaii, he developed several young Lieutenants, many of which were now Captains. Ironically, most of those young Officers were also stationed at Fort Campbell as well. The Company that Bobby was attached to was commanded by one of these men. Being that Bobby was on leave and away from the unit for over a month, there was an opportunity to mess with me, the guy who married the First Sergeant's daughter. Though now retired, he still had his own network of people that he knew around the post. He cooked up a little story and got one of his old buddies to back it up.

As the story goes, Bobby was in Phoenix on leave with his new family, where he was sideswiped by a drunk driver and killed. He knew that this news would destroy me. I know that our marriage was going down the drain, but this form of vengeance was particularly cruel. I was desperately alone in Alaska, and sunk deeper into a depression as the news of my combat brother's death sunk me deeper and deeper into a depression. With that being the case, I lost interest in most everything else, and nothing much mattered. This of course was a total lie; one that I would not figure out until sixteen years later in 2010.

While on the computer one night, I received an instant message on my Facebook account. It was from Melissa, Bobby's wife. I immediately felt awkward and wasn't sure how to respond. I immediately informed my wife Helen of what was happening and she assured me that I could get through this. Here was my dead best friend's widow contacting me, and for once in my life I was at a total loss for words. Her profile picture showed her standing there with what appeared to be two teenage boys. I knew that the oldest must be Cody, the child who was born on the fateful Thanksgiving while we were so very far away.

I wasn't sure about the other child, but I recall assuming instantly that she must have remarried and had another child. After all, that scenario wasn't all that uncommon, and I would muster up the confidence to be cordial, yet kind and understanding. I became very excited, and asked Melissa to call me. Now, you have to remember that I have not talked to Melissa in sixteen years, and I am still under the impression that Bobby was killed in a violent accident sixteen years before. Looking back now, the conversation had to be somewhat comical, but of course it turned out for the best.

Ron: "Hello?"

Melissa: "Breland?"

Ron: "Hey Melissa, how are you?"

Melissa: "I'm good. How are things with you?"

Ron: “Great here. I’m so glad that you found me!” (In truth, it was awkward as hell and I wasn’t sure how to talk to a widow.)

Melissa: “Where are you now?”

Ron: “I’m retired now, and living in New Mexico.”

Melissa: “We’re living in Phoenix, as always.” (Ouch. Phoenix. The place where Bobby died; this is getting difficult.)

Ron: “Great, how is Cody? He has to be getting big now.” (Duh, Ron; he’s almost seventeen years old)

Melissa: “He’s great, and so is Casey, our other son.” (Crap, there’s another one that I never even knew about!)

Ron: “That’s great; I didn’t recognize your other boy from the picture. God, I sure miss Bobby.” (Here goes nothing.)

Melissa: “Yeah, he’s resting now.” (Really! She’s resolved to refer to her dead husband as ‘resting’ after all these years? In reality, as Bobby wasn’t really dead, he was asleep next to her as he works the graveyard shift as a truck driver. Little did I know.)

Ron: “Yeah.” I said, nodding silently on the other end of the phone, reminded of the fact that he was resting in eternal peace.

Melissa: “Yeah, he’s right here next to me.”, she said. What the heck is going on here; does she have his urn on the nightstand next to her bed. I thought this to be a bit odd, but then again everyone mourns in their own way. I mourned his death sixteen years before, but this was her husband.

As we talked, it eventually came out that Bobby was of course not dead, and apparently she meant that he was in fact laying next to her in bed resting up for his next shift at work. He was tired, but when he heard it was me he sprang into consciousness and anxiously got on the phone. I was shaking, and now in tears. The range of feelings that coursed through my mind during those moments fluctuated between elation and extreme anger.

On the one hand I was angry at those who had deceived me years before, thus causing me to lose nearly two decades with my best friend. On the other hand I was elated beyond belief that he was in fact alive and well. It was an emotionally exhausting night, but one that I will never forget. Three days later Bobby drove out to New Mexico, a mere six-hour trip to see me and meet my family. It was a slightly tear-filled reunion that was met with open arms. Three months later my family and I moved to Arizona to a nice home within two miles of Bobby’s. Our wives now joke about how we talk every day like giddy little school girls; well, because we do. We spend time together every chance we get and take absolutely nothing for granted.

Recently I told Bobby that he can't ever die. His reply was "How do you figure?" I told him that I already spent so much time mourning his death once and I wasn't about to do it again. We are both still laughing about that.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Sword and the Lamb

When the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it.

Deuteronomy 20:13

And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Revelation 7:10

In the beginning...

I chose to conclude this book with a few personal stories about my life, as well as some of my findings of wisdom in my walk with Christ. They are deliberate and unquestionable examples of how I have witnessed both the sword, and the Lamb. I have found that over time, and through a host of different experiences that I have seen the facets of my life in varying and even opposing perspectives. I have spent most of my life in service to others in one form or another, and would have never had it any other way.

In accordance with the divine will and intentional workings of God, I have found myself on His path somewhat unknowingly. I should say, instead, that my being lead down His path was unintentional at the time...at least on my account. This may sound a little confusing and perhaps warrants some background information.

Please understand that in sharing these very highly cherished and personal moments with you now is not a show of pride, but a true testament to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and His Father our God in allowing me to experience the mystical and marvelous moments in my life that I have been so richly blessed with.

When I was sixteen years old, my stepfather initiated an altercation with me one night which set me on a path of which I was truly ill prepared. As a teenager growing up in an abusive and alcoholic home, I was full of anger, and my life was shaped like a pretzel to some degree. My angst, lack of self-esteem, and inner rage were coming to a head.

On this particular evening, and as unusual as it may have been for the time, I was actually sitting in my bedroom and doing my homework. As strange as this may sound, I was actually very quiet and did not provoke what would soon follow. When my stepfather walked into my room, drunk as usual; I simply looked at him in silence. My mother was away for three days at a conference and unavailable at the time. He told me that he was going to teach me a lesson, and some other nonsense about respecting him no matter how he acted. I may have failed to mention this previously; however, at that age I was over six feet tall, and my stepfather was about five and a half feet tall and about sixty pounds heavier than I.

When he started swinging at me with the hand that wasn't holding a beer can in it, he missed several times. Punch after punch, I dodged his drunken swings repeatedly, and never spoke a word during the entire fight. At one point, he looked right at me a hazy, drunken stare. That's when I decided that this was only going to end when one of us was on the ground. I launched years of anger and disdain for this abusive man in a solitary punch that should have shattered his jaw, but did not. I simultaneously recalled the countless times of standing at the position of attention while chewing dried chili peppers and chunks of soap over nothing more than minor infractions. It was surely abusive treatment, and I wasn't going to take it anymore.

The next thing that I remember is watching him on the floor picking up his teeth and looking for others underneath my bed. He was very angry now, and told me that it wasn't over yet. In a stroke of genius, I assumed that infamous pose from the "Karate Kid" movie. As I stood there wondering if the 'crane stance' would actually work, I was full of confidence. I advised him in a stern but quiet tone to stay on the floor. As he began to stand I pressed down, then upward with my right foot and rocketed my foot into his jaw, putting him down for good. As I stepped over his body to leave the bedroom, he told me to leave the house and not return. At the time, I left victorious and had no intentions of ever coming back.

As I walked out of the house with nowhere to go, I saw two traffic lights glowing solid red about a half mile down the road that I was walking on. I recall thinking that I was staring into the eyes of the devil, even though I was pretty sure that I did that very thing only a few minutes before. As I walked down that road full of adrenaline from the activities of the night, I had only the clothes on my back, a small fishing rod, and a pocket-sized tackle box. I figured that if I was going to be homeless then I had better be prepared to forage for and provide food on my own. Things were looking rough, and this was only the beginning.

I had no idea where to go. And, as the only other solid facet of my life was high school, I thought I would just walk the three-mile trip down to school. This was a Friday night, and I figured that I'd at the very least be safe for the weekend. As I approached the first major intersection at this late hour, I saw the traffic lights fixed on red. They looked ominous to me, as if the eyes of the Devil were staring me down still. I vowed that my faith would not be deterred in any way from that point forward in my life, and even though my faith was 'light'; I would definitely make an effort to keep and expound upon what little I had.

As I slept on the bleachers as well as the bench inside the media booth at the football field at my high school for over a year; I often found solace in staring back at those lights in the wee hours of the morning in defiance. I recall thinking to myself, 'You haven't got me yet!' During that year, my faith in mankind didn't grow by leaps and bounds by any means. However there was one man that truly did make a difference. The following segments are examples of both the Sword and the Lamb of God as they have applied to my life. The first one here is for him.

The Lamb

He was a very old man, and the janitor at our school. He was also very kind. To this day, I'm not really sure but I really do believe that he lived at the school as well, but I could never be sure. At one point, shortly after I initially became homeless, the old man was outside smoking a cigarette early one morning. I approached him cautiously, to feel out the environment.

He offered me a cup of coffee. This would be the beginning of a lifelong relationship; more like love affair, with coffee that I have become famous (or infamous) for. We sat down in the school cafeteria for a short while, drinking our coffee in silence. He, seemingly very easily, segued from a steaming cup of coffee into letting me know that he was aware of my presence on the bleachers at night. I later came to find that he would have an evening cigarette on the roof of the gymnasium prior to turning in for the night himself.

Regardless, he gave me a tour of my high school like I'd never seen it before. The school had a stash of toiletry items for the athletic department and I was made aware of them as well as the "old" school showers which still worked yet were no longer used. Each morning thereafter the old man would leave a door at the edge of the gym cracked open. I would proceed to shower and shave, and then sip some coffee with my newfound friend. After a while, I could no longer continue with a daily school routine. But he was there for me, so to speak, until my final day at that school.

I never knew his name, nor did he know mine. We shared a short period of time each morning in almost pure silence. There wasn't really much to say; but I could never find the words to express my gratitude. At this point in my life, I had felt the warmth of the Lamb in the form of this kind soul.

The Sword

A few years later I would begin my career in the United States Army. My service there would carry me overseas multiple times, teach me how to soar through the sky and own the night with the elite Paratrooper community of Fort Bragg, and learn to survive in the deserts of Somalia and Iraq as well as the frozen tundra of Alaska. A year and a half into my first tour, I volunteered for the humanitarian turned combat mission in Somalia, East Africa. It is there that I would take a life for the first time. My convictions were strong, and I knew that the most important thing to me was going to be the man standing next to me.

When I squeezed the trigger that night, I felt many things. I knew that the young men that were shooting at my fellow Soldiers were members of General Mohammad Aideded's militia, and obviously had to be stopped. Fairly confident in my faith at this point, I felt for the first time the full weight of wielding the sword. It certainly is a weight to bear. It is not prideful or boastful, but a responsibility to live with. From a humanistic perspective, the grief and internal struggle caused by these events can only be assuaged by the hand of God.

The Lamb

AN UNFORGETTABLE FIRESIDE CHAT

On the way back from one of our many missions out into the countryside, I remember pulling off to the side of the road so that we could take a break from the long road trip. I remember standing there talking with my buddies. It was absolutely freezing outside, but the call to stretch our legs, and the need for a cigarette was a driving force. We decided to make a public relations call to a nearby farmhouse just to assure the locals that we were indeed there in good faith with our overall mission. It was really a dual purpose mission in that while we were mingling with the locals we could also conduct a presence patrol and perhaps give them a sense of comfort knowing that KFOR troops, Americans in particular were taking a vested interest in their safety and perhaps ward away any KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) members who may be nearby and intent on any wrongdoing.

As we neared the house, we approached what appeared to be the backside of the dwelling. It looked to be a sturdy house made of stone and mortar, and complete with a large chimney that topped out at about forty feet or so. The smell of the smoke billowing out of that chimney gave me warmer thoughts than I'd had in months.

The area of Kosovo where the American sector resided was primarily an agricultural area. The simple people of this region were merely trying to survive the genocidal dictatorship that was predominant in the region, and avoid the intimidation of our enemies which was ever-present.

As we came upon the house, we admired the obviously tedious work put into this home that was undoubtedly built by hand. As we rounded the corner of the house, the smell of the fire was more noticeable and just the thought of it was enough to warm up my mind a few degrees. What we saw next would leave me somewhat speechless.

From the path that we used to approach this old farmhouse I never would have suspected that the chimney that warmed our thoughts was supported by the only remaining standing wall. As we turned the corner, we found a family of four sitting on a small bench in front of the hearth. The warmth of the fire in my mind was instantly gone. The sight of the house in rubble and the smell of smoke jerked me back into reality in an instant as this war torn home was reminiscent of old black and white World War II footage.

At this point, I believe that this disheveled family and I were equally startled in seeing each other. In my Americanized mind, I suppose that I never dreamed that I would see such a sight up close. Each member of this family was scantily clad in tattered clothing, and I observed that the fuel for the fire in the fireplace consisted of books, sticks, and rags as well. The older boy stayed with his parents; however the little girl was more curious than any of the others. She was a dirty-faced cutie with bright blue eyes and was absolutely adorable. Wearing an ensemble that would make you cry, she was a little trooper as her culture and environment had forced her to become.

I had lowered my weapon by now, and offered a large gloved hand to her small, dirty, bare hand. She accepted, and as I saw my own children flash through my mind I couldn't help but smile. Her pureness of heart and smile were enough for this warrior to smile back and recognize this unexpected optimism in the form of a small child. If the meek would inherit the earth, then surely this child would one day be a princess. I removed my ballistic helmet and slipped off the black wool watch cap underneath. As I motioned to place it on her head, she just smiled and stood there, semi-paralyzed. I don't think that she was expecting more than a handshake from this tall, battle-clad stranger. I gently slipped the wool cap over her head, waved a matted bunch of hair from her eyes, and tucked the edge of the hat snugly over her cold and wind chapped ears.

Her father immediately got up and headed my way. As a Soldier I didn't feel threatened by this man, however thought that I may have committed a faux pas as a parent to another's child. His smile reeled me back in, and the hurried gait that I mistook for anger just a second before was clearly now an excited appreciation. He outreached his hand to me far before he reached me, and hugged me tightly when he did. I didn't understand his words, but as a father I could read his heart. To this day I can still see that little smile. As a father of a daughter myself now; had the roles been reversed I could most assuredly say that I don't think that I'd have been any different from the man I met that day. The lesson that I took away from that night is that regardless of our circumstances or geography; we are all children of God, and must do what we can for each other. Ultimately, we are all the same. The strength in her little arms as she hugged me was full of warmth and in a true appreciation that only a child could convey. Surrounded by bombed buildings in a very unstable land, I had the opportunity to set the sword aside momentarily and act as I believe the Lamb would have done under similar circumstances. In all my life, this was perhaps my crowning achievement. Up to this point in my life, I probably had never felt better about any single decision that I'd made in my life.

On one other occasion, during my time in the Balkan Region of Kosovo, there was another experience that allowed me to feel the gentle nature of the Lamb, and pass it on to another. One day, an American patrol was out in the village of Urosevic. This was standard as it was a daily occurrence; however this particular day was like no other. On this day, they found, laying in a ditch a newborn baby only a few days old. In a country stricken with genocide, poverty, and starvation, it is extremely difficult to tell how the baby, still alive, came to be there in that muddy ditch.

Perhaps the newborn's life was valued so little that she was simply discarded or thrown away for dead. I would be naïve if I did not think of this first possibility; however there is another option that is a little more optimistic. I would like to think that perhaps some young mother or impoverished family knew of the kind nature of the American Soldier, and placed the baby in that ditch prior to a patrol in the hopes that she would be taken care of. The child was

wrapped in a thin blanket, and very cold. Balkan winters are merciless, and not known to be kind to anyone much less a newborn baby.

The baby was transported to our Mobile Army Surgical Hospital at Camp Bondsteel where she was thoroughly examined and given the best of care. As Christmas approached, I was just returning from Germany where I had been sent by MEDEVAC for a severe illness. When I returned, one of my Soldier's and I purchased a handmade glass Christmas ornament with the words "Baby's First Christmas" etched into the glass. It was absolutely beautiful, as was the intended recipient. When we arrived at the hospital, we requested to see the baby, who by now was named Rose by the hospital staff. We were allowed to see her, hold her for a short while, and hang her first Christmas present on her crib. It was an absolutely beautiful moment in an otherwise untamed and uncaring land that she was born into. Again, I felt truly blessed to not only wield the sword for the greater good, but to also lay it down for a moment to offer on God's behalf a display of the gentle nature of the Lamb once again.

The Sword and the Lamb

The following is an excerpt from another collection of stories I have written, however I believe that this example depicts the true nature of the Lamb as it pertains to protecting us. Many of us have had very harrowing, or even near death experiences. In this one, you will see that some, or perhaps many of us should have surely died. In the book of Daniel, the story is told regarding Daniel's devout belief in God and his desire to pray to the Lord even under threat of death. When he was thrown into the lion's den, the Lord closed the lion's mouth and saved him. I have no doubt that His everlasting love for us and hand of protection swayed the bullets of our enemies on this day to spare our lives. This one is but one shining example of God's desire to protect us, which can be miraculous, yet inevitable even under the worst of circumstances.

As a seasoned firefighter and Soldier by now, I had experienced death a number of times and by the hand of God managed to assist in saving a few lives as well. Death is never easy, but to a combat Soldier it is a constant and silent companion who walks side by side with you until you both meet. There are a few moments that have come to me during my time in combat that I

thought I could actually feel my own death coming, though it thankfully never happened like that. There were close calls that brought the two of us closer than I had ever imagined, but somehow did not ‘seal the deal’ as it were.

I will tell you this much. When death comes to you, you can feel its very presence. And it is at that very moment that something in our own psyche drives us to do things that we would probably never do; sometimes even things that we, up to that moment may have never even considered. I am certainly not a hero in my own eyes, but I have undoubtedly walked with many. The crew of the “Steel Horse”, my gun truck crew during our tour in Iraq is certainly among them. On this day, they were truly legendary.

It was late March of 2004, and we were escorting a logistics convoy from Ar Ramadi to Al Asad. The Air Base at Al Asad, also known as Forward Operating Base (FOB) Anaconda was huge, and came complete with a middle-eastern style restaurant, a Chinese take-out place, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. It was a desert paradise as far as base camps are characterized. However, the looming cloud over our heads went unseen by all as the three previous attempts to reach Anaconda had failed and ended in either an ambush or a huge firefight requiring air support from allied gunships.

As we turned onto the main, long stretch of road that would take us the majority of the way to Al Asad, the sky was slightly overcast and the trip was uneventful thus far. As the trail end of the convoy made the turn, a bright, young Second Lieutenant offered an optimistic forecast. He mentioned that he talked just before we departed to a fellow Lieutenant over in the Intelligence shop about how the road we were on was “green”, and that it should be smooth sailing all the way up north. This “green” status was determined by the early morning patrols that would go out and clear the roads of obvious Improvised Explosive Devices and other such hazards.

In what seemed like a span of about thirty seconds from the conclusion of the Lieutenant’s radio transmission, I heard the hail of AK-47 gunfire and the distinct ‘*whoosh*’ sound of incoming Rocket Propelled Grenades coming towards us. I immediately keyed the

microphone on my radio and notified the convoy and our Command group that the road was no longer 'green'. When in doubt, state the obvious.

My partner and fellow Squad Leader Nick Johnson was in the lead vehicle, and in a matter of about a minute the fire was so intense that our convoy had been sheared in half. My buddy Nick was in the lead vehicle and taking fire, as were we. The enemy had planned and executed a well-coordinated attack. Logistically speaking, the insurgents had their stuff together with weapons stashed and ready to fire about every fifty meters or so. They would simply run from one stash to the next and continue firing. As it turned out, this gave the appearance of there being a larger opposing force than there actually was.

The convoy commander radioed over the net that those who hadn't passed the cutoff point should fall back and regroup. That included our vehicle, but I really didn't like the idea of separating us any further, or any longer than absolutely necessary.

The road was very narrow, and a three-point turn was out of the question. I detached my microphone from my chin strap, and got out of my armored gun truck. I didn't want my driver and friend, Jon Simmons to accidentally drive off the shoulder even a little bit for fear of detonating an IED and getting us all in worse shape than we were already in. As I opened the door to get out of the truck, Jon looked at me like I was crazy, and I felt more vulnerable than ever before. I could hear the miniature sonic booms of AK-47 rounds cracking the air around my head, and I worked as quickly as possible to get us turned around and out of harms way. This was one of those moments when death was close to me.....very close. For a moment Jon got out of the truck, and taking a stance on one knee fired a riveting shot which killed an insurgent instantly, dropping him to the ground.

I remember thinking instantaneously that if they killed me, then maybe Jon and the boys will get the truck turned around and get back to the rally point. I thought about the pre-addressed mint green envelope that was in my left breast pocket that Jon and my crew knew to mail to Helen in the event that I was killed. I could almost picture one of them unbuttoning my pocket to retrieve it, and prayed that I wasn't still alive to feel the tug on my pocket buttons. By that time, I

would certainly be dead. At least I prayed for that, so that I wouldn't feel one minute of the heart-wrenching pain in knowing that the envelope would be in the mail to my darling Helen shortly. By the hand of God, we made it back into the truck and back to the rally point; all of us physically intact.

As we regrouped, I told the Lieutenant that we needed to go get Nick and the others whose vehicle was now disabled. They also had three wounded at this point, and were sitting ducks. The LT agreed, and our truck led the charge through the constant hail of incoming fire with returning volleys of fire ourselves. My M2 .50 caliber gunner lit up the 30-foot high dirt shoulder to our left so intensely that we literally 'paved the road' as they say. Every Soldier in my truck was firing at anything that moved. Conversely, everything that moved was also shooting at us. I spied two figures off to my right. Our heavy machine gun was focused on our left, so I scanned our right side.

A very large Iraqi in a long white *dishdasha*, or 'man dress' as it was called, was firing at our vehicle. So I took the shot. I nailed him squarely in the chest, and I instantly saw the white material of his gown turn to red. The figure next to him tried to flee, but could not escape the inevitable bullet from my rifle that followed. I was firing left-handed (I'm a righty) over bumpy terrain at about forty miles an hour. God himself guided those bullets, just as he did years before in Mogadishu. I felt more hopeful about the imminent outcome, and suddenly felt as though I had the faith of a Saint. We were now somewhat safe on our right side. At a road intersection I tossed a red smoke grenade out the window to signal where we had contact on my side.

As the disabled vehicles came into sight, I keyed my microphone once again and told Nick that we were coming in hard and fast towards his position. All proper radio protocol was out the window as I told Nick "I'm coming for you brother!" I never would have imagined laughing at that moment, but I simply couldn't help it as Nick responded with "I've never been so happy to see a white guy in my entire life!" Nick was a stout black guy from Tampa, and had grown up pretty hard. He was a great guy; and as you can see even in the face of diversity and incredible odds he still maintained his sense of humor.

In the end, we quelled the attack, and repaired what we could on the vehicles on the spot there in the middle of the road. Our wounded were attended to, as everyone worked very quickly to get us back on the road and back to Ar Ramadi. There were moments during that battle that were absolutely surreal to me. Amidst the battle, as your heart rate and adrenaline levels push through the roof, your brain slows down some to see some things with absolute and perfect clarity. I would almost compare this to driving a stick shift. The precise amount of clutch and gas will keep things running properly; for without the right amount of either one you would be completely stalled.

The Lamb

With regard to this story, I have to mention at this point that I used to believe in coincidence. No only do I wholeheartedly not believe in it now, but to the core of my very being believe that everything happens for a reason. In this example I wanted to illustrate that even though a fatality had already occurred, it is still possible for the gentle and loving nature of the Lamb to show itself. After one of our brethren is already dead, what have we to do but to do the best we can to ensure that he still receives our very best. The Lord wishes us to give our best to everyone; to love every one. I can only say that my men and I did the best that we could. Again, the true heroes of this world are those that I have had the privilege to serve with.

As a firefighter, I had become accustomed to responding to all sorts of emergencies, including motor vehicle accidents. Back at Fort Bragg there were several each and every day. With a working military and civilian population of well over 250,000 people commuting every single morning, it was almost inevitable. But working a car wreck on a downtown street at the height of morning rush hour traffic is quite different than doing so in combat. In a combat zone, sometimes the only criterion for having a catastrophic incident involving a vehicle is driving in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Sometimes, all you have to do is drive over a land mine.

Unlike many other weapons, a mine only strikes once. But the ‘one shot’ philosophy of this weapon usually has a huge price. The detonation of a land mine filled with twenty-two pounds of explosives is devastating. And for a single vehicle, it is almost always and inevitably a fatal encounter.

My team and I had been dispatched to a grid coordinate where only the day prior Special Operations forces were sent to utilize their unquestionable diplomacy skills to quell a local dispute. In the Balkan region, the culture permits and almost mandates that a dispute be decided with an incessant amount of arguing. This is where our Special Operations forces come in pretty handy. The American troops arrived at the village in question the evening prior, whereby the driver backed his vehicle in to an open area which was used as a parking area. Apparently his right front tire had missed the land mine by only millimeters while backing up, and the front quarter panel of the vehicle shielded the mine from being stepped on by passersby.

The following morning, while pulling out to leave the area the driver turned his wheels in the opposite direction. When he pulled the vehicle forward the mine instantly detonated, killing all those inside.

When my team and I arrived to the scene, I have to say that it was unlike any ‘standard car wreck’ that I’d ever seen. The top of a hard-shelled HMMWV (Humvee) is arched slightly at the top to allow for a swiveling gun turret to be placed into operation during travel. Horizontally, at the elevation of the gun turret is approximately forty inches from the deck of the inside of the cab of the vehicle. When we arrived, the gun turret was laying flat on the deck.

The impact and sheer force of the explosion had crushed the vehicle beyond anything I’d ever seen. I’m not sure why, but I seem to recall thinking that the occupants couldn’t possibly still be inside the vehicle. In reality, between the force of the blast and the material of the vehicle there was no way that they could have escaped. I had seen people ejected from vehicles in accidents of the past; but in this case this was truly too much to hope for.

We utilized hand tools to pry the passenger door open. When we managed to open the remnants of the door to a point where we didn’t have to strain to see the inside, I knew instantly

that this Soldier was dead. As much as it pains me to say it, he died quickly, but violently. This man was a warrior. I wondered how many lives that he'd changed or saved during his service. In what seemed like a myriad of thoughts in just mere seconds, I snapped back to reality and maintained my composure. I urged my men to take great care in extricating the remains, and that every professional and personal effect would be placed in contact with the remains until we turned everything over to the Mortuary Affairs group.

Almost like a patient who is in a coma, but who receives the very best of care; we showed the utmost respect to those remains and effects. That day forced us all to take a long, hard look at our own mortality. In an instant, any one of us, or all of us could be gone. The only solace that I could offer to my men or myself for that matter was that this man did not die alone, and his fellow Soldiers had taken care of him, in some respects, even to the very end. When I think about those moments, even to this day; that's still about as good as I can muster.

It has been said that there are *'no atheists in foxholes'*. I can personally attest to this as I have been in more than my fair share of foxholes and have yet to meet one. I have had the privilege of holding a fellow Soldier as he took his last breath, only to pray to God one last time in this world. I have responded to car wrecks and helicopter crashes where seemingly no one should have lived, only to pick up a small child completely unscathed or a pilot with only minor injuries.

These moments in my life cannot be attributed solely to the skills of men. As well trained as my men and I were, there is no other explanation for the gifted experiences and opportunities to serve the Lord, as both the Sword and the Lamb, than divine intervention and will. I thank God each and every day for the blessing of having walked with heroes and other men of faith.

The Lamb

This last example is an example of a miraculous event that had absolutely nothing to do with any human interaction or skilled professionals. This story is a tribute to nothing less than the grace and glory of God himself. It is proof that there is no such thing as coincidence. It is also

proof that when the good Lord wants something done, it certainly will be done whether we have anything to say about it or not.

I truly believe that I witnessed a miracle that day, and consider it a blessing to be able to pass this on to you now. We had responded to a head on collision on a rural road that lead to the post airfield at Fort Bragg. We had been notified that we had injuries on site, and I prepared for the worst. I put on two sets of latex gloves, as I expected to see a lot of blood.

Upon our arrival, there was a collision, although some parts of one of the vehicles were indiscernible from what an automobile should look like. Two men were travelling at well over one hundred miles per hour down this country back road; passing four to six cars at a time. When they approached the final turn on this road prior to reaching the main post area, they crashed head on with another vehicle. The passengers in the second vehicle included two women and an infant about seven months old.

When we arrived, the two men were dead on arrival, and the engine of their vehicle was approximately three hundred feet deep in the forested area. The two female passengers had minor injuries, but the baby was nowhere to be found. I searched through the vehicle desperately, as I had seen human beings and their perspective appendages *uniquely* scattered through an accident scene before. I walked in the direction of the engine in the wooded area to look for debris and to preserve any evidence. North Carolina, as many of you know, is thickly populated with pine trees. At the base of the trees typically lies a ring of discarded pine needles. Depending on how old the tree is, and other factors; determines how wide and deep the ring of pine needles.

About fifty feet from the second vehicle was one such pine tree. The ring of pine needles was both deep and wide. Nestled neatly among the bed of needles was the baby. I was shocked that this infant would be so far from the vehicle; however I quickly called for assistance and began examining the baby. The child's skin was as smooth as the day he was born, regardless of being ejected from a moving vehicle, thrown fifty feet, and landing in a bed of pine needles. The child was simply unscathed, and it was truly a miracle.

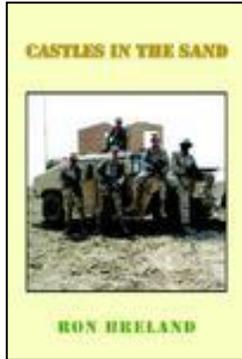
CONCLUSION

As you can see, I have certainly had my share of blessings throughout my life. I am now much more open-minded than I once was, and extremely grateful in so many ways. I have been as candid with you as I possibly could regarding the stories of my life, and sincerely hope and pray that one or more of the stories contained herein will perhaps prod you to think about those little moments in your own lives where either you, or someone else made a world of difference.

I almost hesitated to place a dedication in this book at all, as there are countless souls who I truly do owe my thanks to; however, I chose to publicly thank the ones that I did as they have felt like kindred spirits helping to guide me along the rocky path of life during the time that we were on the same path together. They range from childhood to high school and beyond. Their backgrounds are distinctly different, and they are all as diverse in personality as they are in any other facet of their lives. Some are male, some are female. Some are from Chicago, while others are from Florida, New York, or even California.

The point here is that no matter what our background, race, creed, religion, or ethnic background that we can all be the people that always wanted to be. They all refused to compromise with their ideals, morals, and courage throughout their lives, and so can you. Their dreams came to fruition, and you would be blessed and privileged to know any one of them. In God's infinite wisdom I have been shown grace, guidance, and oh so much kindness from all of them. May God bless them all. And may God richly bless all of you!

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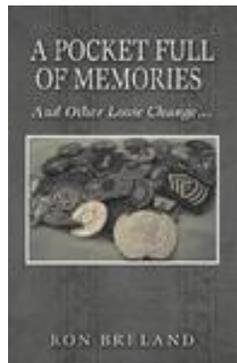


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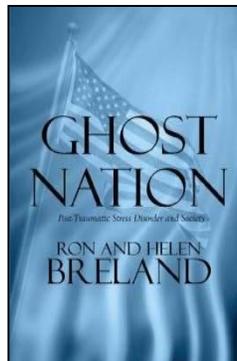


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