

The Terrible Moment that Defines Me

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As we turned the corner on the narrow dirt road in northern Iraq, I saw a dazed middle-aged man walking in the road, oblivious to wounds on his head and all of the blood running down his face, which showed stark terror. My infantry platoon was among the first elements to arrive at the site of the suicide bombing. Though I was the platoon commander, we had less than four soldiers who could dismount their vehicles, so I grabbed a combat lifesaving kit of basic medical supplies and went out to help whoever I could. The first man I came to, his clothing blood-soaked and charred, was the most significantly wounded human being I could ever imagine. At first I thought his injuries were limited to a severed leg, but when I tried to lift him his torso gave in ways that it should not have. Gravity rather than the sinews of his body held him together, an image and sensation so horrible that I could not even remember it in therapy; I had blocked it out until I wrote this account.

Even with the damage to his abdomen, I hoped that maybe he could be saved. I struggled to find a place to put a tourniquet. But his left hip more resembled ground beef than human flesh, and it

was hard to tell where his wound began. I didn't know what part of his body was intact and what had liquefied. His leg was still technically connected, but it resembled a bloody and dirty gelatin warmed by the sun into a substance that was slightly between liquid and solid.

My years of training at a senior military college, infantry officer basic course, ranger school, jumpmaster school, and my first tour of duty kept me focused. Though my head was swimming in the chaos and abject horror, my hands were steady as if I were back at Fort Benning being tested on my leadership under pressure.

You can never forget the smell of charred human flesh and hair. I had never smelled it before, but it couldn't be mistaken for anything else. The smell combined with the shrieking despair of the wounded who all wore the same look of horror.

I was outside of myself as I tried to help this man. No place for a tourniquet and the wound was far too large for an occlusive dressing. This poor man was going to die and there was nothing I could do. Worse, in that moment and despite all of the carnage around me, I noticed that there were multiple supporting elements coming to help and that the security was getting disorganized. I was a platoon leader, and though every fiber of my body just wanted to comfort this man, I had other responsibilities. I could not save him and now he would die alone on a street corner in Tal A'Far, Iraq.

I will never forget the look on his face when I left him. He did not know I was leaving to keep others alive and that we were all threatened by the lapsed security. That poor man just thought I

had given up on him. It was like watching a man's soul die along with his body. I cannot fathom a greater amount of grief that has ever existed than what I saw on his face as I left to take charge of the perimeter.

As a historian, I know events on the Russian Front of WWII, the bloody battlefield of the American Civil War, the trenches of WWI, and even the sectarian violence in Iraq in 2006 were far worse, but I cannot grasp these facts emotionally. I know that I did the right thing, but he did not understand. He died alone and abandoned. I had abandoned these sorts of hopeless casualties many times in training, but the emotional gravity of such decisions became real only when actual lives were at stake. I wanted to curse the world that made me look a man in his eyes, realize that he was beyond help, and move on to things that I could affect. I wanted to say *fuck the universe* that made me have to be so callous and so methodical to witness another man's suffering, recognize the tragedy, and not be able to do anything for him. If I, or someone I loved, were lying there wounded and dying, all I would wish was that someone could offer comfort. But I had a platoon to manage and the area was less than secure. *I can feel this later but I have a job to do right now*, I thought to myself, but I would not be able to feel anything but anger for many years.

That moment will never leave me. I will possess that man's humanity and the sorrow and empathy that I gained from that man's terrible injuries to my last breath. Yet, I have no idea who he was, what he did for a living, or even his name. Though he had no hope for survival, watching him die made me feel like I let him

down. It broke down cultural barriers. No worldview justifies the brutal killing of civilians. I just cannot fathom what it took to commit such a terrible atrocity. I hope to never believe so passionately about a cause that any actions are justified. Because when “the ends justify the means,” where does it stop before another innocent man is lying on the ground bleeding to death?

I came home from that deployment broken. I thought home was going to be easy because there were never going to be days like those from Tal A’Far again. That may be true but that day and hundreds of other terrible days changed my emotional outlook permanently. I wanted the memories to fade into oblivion, to wash away with time and energy. I wanted to study pop culture history, maybe write a thesis on *Beavis and Butthead*, and do something without stress. I wanted war and tragedy to fall away from my life forever. But I couldn’t let it go. Everything in my life felt like it was life or death. I became more obsessed with Iraq and Afghanistan when I came home. I read more and more. I had serious PTSD, but I still had to play a part in the war. I got a job offer teaching ROTC in Maine and took it regardless of whether that was a good fit for someone with PTSD.

I was as old as my cadets’ company commanders would be, so I wanted to play that role with them. I was absolutely in charge but on the same team. I wanted to prepare them for what they would face overseas. War was shitty. I would point down to the bloodstains on my boots during lectures. I talked about killing insurgents, losing soldiers, and watching massacres. They had to

know, and I wanted those who weren't ready for it to self-select out. Some did, but the ones that stayed were the best in the country. Their performance singled me out for awards, but I was wearing down. Almost all my male cadets went infantry. What would I do if one of those kids died because I messed up or missed something?

I had worked myself so hard I was breaking down, feeling suicidal and homicidal, though I would never act on it. I never should have been doing the job in the first place and after three years I was all used up. I had already been an inpatient for PTSD and mild Traumatic Brain Injury because I stayed on the line for a third tour knowing I had serious PTSD. I was blaming myself and I couldn't let go of the war. I loved my students, but all the bureaucracy made me angry. I hated violence, but it was my job. I found release in exercise. I would leave to lift weights, swim, and run up to three times a day in addition to morning PT, which I skipped all the time because I had vertigo every morning. I was using work to compensate for what war had done to me. Every day contained the intensity of the suicide bombing in Tal A'Far. If I didn't start putting the same passion and drive into caring for myself, then I would completely break down and succumb.

I finally quit my job. When I came to clear out my desk, a letter from the Commanding General of ROTC was delivered that congratulated me for being the top instructor. I was suicidal, on the edge of a cliff, but my non-stop pace had made me the best. Now I had to focus on me, then figure out how to help others again.

At first, I thought I would move past it, and in time it would go away. I would do everything right. I would manage my demons, even if they would not be gone forever. This would work for a week and then the demons would turn back on, totally unmanaged.

But then I started blogging. The first part of this essay was the most successful post, and it amazed me to see how much writing about my life was helping others. For the blog to be successful I needed to post regularly, so I started pulling a heavier writing load. I would deal with something over and over again. Writing two posts a month was as effective for me as ten hours of therapy a week.

Writing has been the most therapeutic aspect of my homecoming. I would get the words out, but then it took more and more drafts to get the language right. This is probably the thousandth time I have looked at this particular essay. Maybe because I am not naturally good at writing, I have to revise, and revise, and revise. All the while, I am managing my issues. Somewhere along the line I started to understand that succeeding with PTSD—the horrors and difficulties—was a lifetime condition. I couldn't allow myself to give up on my dreams because of it. I have had to be more pragmatic.

I started studying veterans' issues so that everything I was doing both helped me and scratched my deep longing to make the world a better place. The memory of leaving an innocent man to die alone on a street corner is never going away, but I can accept how that has changed me. I study PTSD as a field now because it

helps me understand myself, including telling the stories of people who were sick in the early American National period and had no idea why. It is meaningful and self-affirming work that breaks me down crying for the plight of these soldiers more than it brings me joy. But war celebrators have dominated military history too long. People like me who have seen war first hand should play a bigger role in how it is remembered.

When my lieutenants went to war, I saw the greatest proof of my growth. The strongest cadet I taught lost four soldiers to a complex chain of six improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Afghanistan that wounded six other soldiers and many civilians. He had survived the worst situation imaginable with such courage, character, and empathy for his soldiers. I have not been more proud of the performance of a student. He wanted to thank me for teaching him the right way and he thanked me for being honest about PTSD. All I wanted to do was cry and blame myself for not violating operational security and being more specific about complex IED attacks, but he had lost only four so he must have done all he could. *Sometimes you do everything the right way and people still die.* As we talked, he was second-guessing himself and his tactics; I was doing the same about my instructing.

I hit the brakes and did my best to tell him that we all do this. I told him that to this day I second-guess myself on irrelevant details that I cannot change. Until I wrote the first draft of this essay, I had remembered the day in Tal A'Far as if I had frozen up because I felt guilty for surviving. I had done everything I could,

but the man died anyway. It is worse for empathetic soldiers and leaders who lose subordinates. What my former student was going through was normal but awful.

Somehow, the difficult process of telling my own story and choosing to study PTSD as a field in graduate school was helping one of my students. I would have died to prevent the loss of his men, but knowing that what I had experienced in the past was somehow helping my lieutenant manage his own terrible moment validated my experiences in ways that I did not anticipate. I cared about him and his cohort enough to try and mourn with them, so most of the time that effort was enough. He and his platoon deserve all the credit for their courage, but I was so happy that I was still a resource.

I am sure I'll have a few more breakdowns in my life because I will never be able to turn down my new sense of right and wrong. I am sure to go so hard I crash again, but in the end I have decided to believe that homecoming with PTSD is more of a gift than a curse. I have chosen to accept that I have been through some abjectly and inalterably terrible experiences while also believing that there is some purpose for my experiences. I believe in the divine, but I take extreme issues with people blaming God for all the bullshit I experienced in war.

People were to blame—people who did it proudly and left a paper trail. Choosing to accept the terrible moments for what they are and still finding an appropriate take away is not easy, and it is only the start of a never-ending and treacherous path. But if I don't do it, then I will lose those extremely costly lessons.

I struggle every day to never forget what hatred brings to our world and that beyond all the misery of that moment, which will never go away or be made better, I am so beyond lucky to have survived it. Better to have my moral compass still intact. However, taking the time and effort to care for myself as well has been the hardest battle I have ever fought.

I am proud to have faced hundreds of days like the one in Tal A'Far, but I am also ashamed to live in a world that required it. I can't live a life where those deaths mean nothing, and if all I ever achieve is helping one lieutenant mourn his lost soldiers, then that is enough for me. My growth has been awful and magnificent: a paradoxical path of stubborn attachment to goals and pragmatic acceptance of what will never be the same. It has been gruff, stark, gritty, and dirty—like war itself. Ultimately, it is less about my ideals and more about getting up every day, accepting what war has done to me and still finding the way on my path.

When I have shared my experiences, other people have thanked me, but even the parts of my story too rough to become readable have helped me process and feel my emotions. I have begun to abandon the results-based approach to life and instead have tried to stay present and focus on my daily tasks over my larger goals. Failure is too acutely connected to life and death, and long-term success has more to do with consistent daily effort than anything else.

Grinding out daily effort makes me a little better at every aspect of my life. It is a relentless slog that is just like a piece of writing: even when it wears me down and I have to take a break, it is just

waiting for me in precisely the way I left it there. Even when I fall down, when I think I cannot do anymore, it's open on my desktop. The more time I take, the better it gets; the more others interact with it, the more the writing improves. Over time, it is transformed into something so different from when it began. A thousand times in the process I could have given up, but I did not. I put in that daily grind and it got a little better each time until it was something that exceeded my expectations. I would not have chosen to experience that terrible day and Tal A'Far, but the stark results of that day and the difficulty of carrying it forward every day have created something in me that I would never have had the courage to imagine.

My take away is simple: Do something tangible that helps others every day. That is all I could do then and it is all I can do now. But that is not a burden; rather, it is a hard-earned privilege that I am lucky and better to have gained. I owe that nameless man who taught me this terrible but valuable lesson, and I owe myself to have the courage to face it and apply it. I can't let his death be for nothing. It was ultimately my choice to make that terrible day meaningful.

I still wish I knew that poor man's name, but I hope he somehow knows that I will carry his memory forever and that every day he is motivating me to get up in the morning and leave the world a little better than the way I found it. I wish I could have shown him what that awful moment means to me now and that his knowing such would have brought him a little comfort. I wish I

could have told him that I will forever mourn the pain he felt that awful day.