

## Have you Earned It?

When people ask me, "What's it like to be in combat," my answer is simple: it's an instant realignment of priorities.

Regardless if you've fought in the South Pacific, steppes of Europe, jungles of Southeast Asia, Central America or Caribbean, deserts of the Levant, or the mountains of Afghanistan- the basics have seldom change.

In any given formation, you'll have varying degrees of understanding. Some in the formation can tell you why they're here from the four-star level to why they man the small desolate outpost in the seemingly middle of nowhere. Others merely know what their team and squad leader tells them. All are ready to give all they have or ever will have to their fellow comrades when called upon.

Here's how it goes down. The word to execute is issued. It trickles down to the lowest level. Planning begins, back briefs are given, and rehearsals are completed. Yet still, there's varying degrees of understanding. Some know the whole picture, others only retain where they are supposed to go when the formation departs their secured area.

The environment takes its toll. The men are tired, hungry, scared, yet they still press forward under heavy load to the known unknown.

Crack. The sonic boom of a bullet breaking the sound barrier happens near one's head, quickly followed by a staccato of many more. The flash of green tracers is ever present. Still, the exact location of the contact is unclear. They know where we are, but we have still no clue where they are. Heart rates increase to near max. The radio breaks with frantic traffic from those in direct contact and is answered by a collected leader giving directions to press the attack in concert with managing the assets overhead and the calls for updates from the higher headquarters. The leader is not much older than those in contact, but knows he controls the outcome of this engagement with every key of his radio.

A call for a medic comes over the net. A young medic, who's only 24 years old but has seen things that will follow him forever, rushes forward with total disregard for his own safety. He's got but one concern-the man crying out for him. He gets to the young man. This one he cannot help-he's gone, and must move to the next, and then the next until he finds one he can save. All the while the fight rages. Ground is gained, the objective is secured, and the men know they've got seriously wounded but their leader keeps them focused on the task at hand.

The MEDEVAC fights its way to the HLZ. Door gunners are blazing away trying to get it to the hot LZ. The patients are loaded. The flight surgeon knows they're gone, but does what he can. The call is made-Fallen Angel. The fight rages as the enemy lash out like a wounded lion in a cage, but the boys have put themselves in a position of relative advantage thanks to their collected leader, and they quickly dismantle the counterattack. It's now time for exfil.

Back at the airfield, the men gather around a lone aircraft. Inside lies the fallen in body bags draped in the cloth of their country. They are never more, and the men who carry them to mortuary affairs will never more be the same.

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4000 miles away in small-town USA, the phone rings. A young wife, mother, or father is woken and answers to hear these words, "On behalf of the President of the United States, I regret to inform you that your spouse/son was killed in a combat operation targeting the enemies of our country-terribly sorry for your loss." They too will never be the same. Down the hall, a baby is woken by the late night call as well. A little girl walks into her guardian's bedroom dragging a teddy bear, and ask, "Was that daddy-can I speak to him?" She doesn't fully understand, she just knows daddy is not coming home. She too will never be the same.

Those that made it off the objective will mull over for years to come: what could I've done more, I wish I would have done X, or this would have never happen if Y was there. They'll clean their rifles, check their gear, and go at it again when called to-without hesitation. When they hold their kids back home, they think of the kids that no longer have a father. They'll never be the same. They left boys, came back men, and still just don't fully understand why it wasn't them.

What does all this matter to the CEO of IBM, the local car dealer, the contractor, nurse, or fill-in-the-blank "normal" job? There's nearly 5,000 service members who are not around to raise their children. They need you, and all of us, to step up to the plate and teach them right from wrong. They probably didn't die for you, they did that for the men next to them; but they were certainly in harm's way because of you-to ensure this war stays an away game. We've got to earn our good life. That means treating others with respect, going out of our way to do our best at our jobs to keep this country great, to go out of our way to help others in need, to appreciate where others are coming from. In short, to be the best citizens we can be. To accept nothing less than our damn best-they gave their damn best on the field of honor (honor has nothing to do with how they died, but how they lived). That's how we balance the debt paid for our good life. We've got to earn it not just today, but in the days to come, and teach our kids to earn it as well.