

After the Real Dragons

My son Casey has been back from Iraq twice now. His first tour was in the final battle for the city of Fallujha in Al Anbar Province and the second guarding the borders of Northern Iraq...a “cake-walk” as he so aptly put it. So I'll focus this little story on his first tour and the incidents that led up to Fallujha and his subsequent homecoming.

Having been raised around me all of his life, the medals and citations from my Marine time was always around him. Twelve hours after he was born, I was in-the-air with my reserve Marine Infantry Platoon going to an undisclosed location. It seemed that fate had planned it all along that he would be a Marine.

At the end of his junior year in high school, Casey announced that he was joining the Marines and wanted me to sign him in at seventeen. I had entered at seventeen and he wanted to have that as something we had in common. Even though the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan was at it's height, he was determined to join, so I signed him in. He had to graduate to join the Marines so he would have to wait until June of 2005 to leave for boot-camp.

He'd been enrolled in Marine ROTC in high school so he was better prepared than some when he hit the “yellow foot-steps” at MCRD-San Diego...yep, a Hollywood Marine as the Paris Island alumni would always tag us. The “yellow foot-steps”, well if you've been a Marine then no explanation is necessary.

His training actually started years before that. As he grew, I would teach him, at his request, on how to set up ambushes and to understand cover and concealment. The “high-ground” was always stressed. Making a shelter between trees and padding the inside of the shelter with leaves and other natural debris was stressed.

On drives in the country I would ask him and his big brother what direction we were going and to point out the other directions. What direction did the sun rise and set? To him it was games to play with dad...to me it was preparation for things that might come. The warrior's blood was in him. From his great-great Grandfather Michael Kelly who'd served with the Union Army and spent the last of the Civil War as a P.O.W. , to his great uncles and grandfathers who bore the brunt of battle in the island hopping of the Pacific to me and his two uncles and Vietnam, many real Dragons had been fought. I knew they were out there waiting for him.

While in boot-camp, I received a call from him. He had completed the “crucible”...a 72 hour test of pure endurance but had broken a bone in his foot so he wouldn't get to graduate with his platoon series. The call was very short and to the point. He would stay at “dago” until his foot was healed and he could pass the required physical fitness test of a three-mile run, sit-ups and pull-ups. Three weeks later he was home. Next up was the School of Infantry...6 weeks of “humping” the hills and sucking-up the fire-break dust of Camp Pendleton, California. From there... Camp Lejeune, North Carolina for six weeks of Combat Assault School.

After graduation from Combat Assault School, he came home. Since he was a reservist, he would get ready for college and train one week-end a month, or so I thought. Within six weeks, he was going to Iraq. The Michigan unit needed volunteers and he had signed up. I had volunteered for Vietnam as he so aptly reminded me. Yea, but even at 6'4” and 215 pounds, he was still my little boy and if given the chance I would have replaced him in a heart-beat. The real Dragons were waiting and hungry.

Prior to leaving for 29 Palms California, the Marine Combat base in the Mojave Desert for training, Casey had told me about his section leader Sergeant Brock Babb. He liked Babb and told me that in some ways he reminded him of me. Babb, he said, always stressed that taking care of your men was important. To always make sure the lowest ranks got hot chow first and that you as their leader did everything you could to train them right and bring them home...and still the real Dragons waited.

A few weeks into Casey's tour of duty, I came in from work and heard on the local news that a Fort Wayne, Indiana Marine had been killed along with another Marine. There were others wounded. The Marine was Sergeant Brock Babb. He left behind a wife and I believe they said three kids. The real Dragons were hungry and they came in the form of an L-shaped ambush in the alleys of the city of Fallujah in Al Anbar Province, Iraq. Al Anbar Province is the biggest province in western Iraq and sits on the borders of Syria, Jordan, and Saudi-Arabia. A natural conduit for terrorists coming into Iraq and onto Baghdad. Since I hadn't been informed of Casey being hurt, I knew he was alright for now.

A few weeks later I received a call from Casey that he was alright and not to worry too much. I told him I was sorry to hear about Sergeant Babb. He said "Yea that sucked" and then said he would call later sometime. Phone lines for Marine grunts were not readily accessible in their area of Al Anbar Province so contact was rare.

The second and final call from Casey was short. Just as we started to talk, he said "crap, dad I gotta go we're taking fire...see ya later". "See ya later", we'd been saying that to each other since he was six or seven. He explained to me that he didn't like saying goodbye. Goodbye could mean forever but "see ya later"... well that was a promise.

From this point on, I see no reason to relay the stories Casey told me after he came home. They're his and should be told by him. In the end, his unit suffered 24 KIA (killed in action) and over 90 WIA (wounded in action). It was now mid 2007 and Casey's unit was coming home. The real Dragons would wait...more little boys were coming and they would once again try to satisfy their hunger.

Weeks later, I received a call from Casey. He was back at Camp Pendleton and would be home in a few weeks. The homecoming finally came. I arrived at the Terre Haute, Indiana Reserve Center and waited for the buses to arrive. The area was packed with family members and well-wishers. I stayed back from the crowd and watched the buses unload. I didn't see Casey but I knew he was home.

After the initial prayer for those that didn't make it home, the Marines were given that most anticipated order every Marine loves to hear..."fall out"! As the wife's and girlfriends bolted to their Marines, I looked for Casey but couldn't find him. As I looked around in all the chaos, I saw a tall, lanky Marine standing in the shadows by the bulletin board. It was Casey and even though I couldn't see his face I knew it was my little boy and he was home.

And the imaginary Dragons ...smiled because both their little boys were finally home.

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