

HALLOWEEN

It's been over twenty-six years ago that my youngest son Casey was born. It's been over twenty-six years ago that I not only broke his mother's heart but also her spirit.

In October of 1986, I had re-enlisted into the Marine Reserves. I was assigned to an Infantry company out of Danville, Illinois. At the end of drill that previous September, I was informed that we would be on stand-by during the month of October as a Reactionary Force for the Marine Corps. While assigned to the FMF (Fleet Marine Force) on active duty, such assignments were routine. It was rare that we were ever activated so I assumed the same for this one, especially since it was a reserve unit.

On October 29th 1986, at around 8:00 pm I received a call. The call was short and to the point...we were at bat (activated) and I was to report in the next day by 1600 hours for briefings and prep time. Company formation would be at 1800 hours.

Casey was due any day and Karen, his mother was toughing it out, raising our son Zachariah and putting up with me extended absences as a manager and reserve Marine.

Around 4:00 in the morning of the 30th (Halloween) Karen went into labor and Casey was on his way. Zachariah was picked up by one of Karen's family members (I think...that morning was pretty hectic). We arrived at the Humana Womens Hospital where Casey arrived around 8:00 am. Compared to the 36 hours of delivery time for Zachariah, the delivery was far less complicated.

Once Karen and Casey were taken care of...I left for the reserve center. Hard to imagine huh? I was at the center by 1400 hours and went through the briefings and getting my war-gear ready including my M-16 and 9mm pistol. Even at the Platoon Sergeant level I had no idea if the drill was real and could well assume neither did any of the senior noncoms or officers. Only once we were in the air would we find out our mission and destination.

At 1800 hours my Platoon fell in and all were accounted for. I directed the squad leaders to get their squads to their lockers to get their war-gear and the armory to get their weapons. By 1930 hours we were loading the buses to an undisclosed location where we would fly out. At this point, we still had no word on where our destination was to be nor what our objective would be once we landed.

As I entered the civilian jet, Gunnery Sergeant Page directed me toward the front with the other Platoon Commanders and Platoon Sergeants. Once the jet was in the air, we were called to gather around our Company Commander, Captain Travers.

Travers first thanked us for the professionalism and motivation he saw throughout the previous hours. I had informed Gunny Page of Casey's birth that morning. Captain Travers congratulated me and remarked his wife had just had their third child, a girl just last week. From that point, we were informed that we were flying into Camp Lejeune, North Carolina and that this was indeed a drill.

My Platoon Commander was a young First Lieutenant Shoemaker from Artillery and no infantry experience to speak of. In the entire company, only myself and Staff Sergeant Dilly had actual combat experience in Vietnam and other places as grunts and years of experience on active duty in the FMF (Fleet Marine Force). We were both relieved we were going to Lejeune...old humping grounds for both of us. We knew Lejeune, or Camp Swampy as we both called it. The Reservist would find out quickly why we called it that and not with any affection.

My platoon was assigned to do a predawn assault on a fortified position. We would have to cover roughly 2 to 3 clicks (2000 to 3000 meters) to get to our LOD (line of departure). Against my protest, Lt. Shoemaker had the platoon drop rain ponchos with our shelter-half's (tents). The ponchos created too much noise and he wanted us to be as tactical as possible. Although I explained that the weather here could change quickly this time of the year from wind, to wind and rain, to wind, freezing rain, and snow, the ponchos were left behind.

Approximately 45 minutes into a very slow movement through thick underbrush, the rains came. Since this was a tactical move, I had security teams out on our left and right flanks. I also had a team roughly 50 yards to our front on point. Once the rain started, it didn't stop, so I pulled the teams in. Loosing Marines in this could be easy. Part of my job was to get all of my Marines back home. Small meandering creeks became undulated with water and became small swift running flooded creeks. When crossing, the water would be up to your knees or higher. Movement slowed down to a crawl.

The underbrush created it's own set of problems. Because of the ongoing rain and underbrush, loosing Marines was compounded. Being tactical became secondary to getting to our LOD before the sun went down.

I assumed point and moved us toward our LOD. More than once I had to stop to check my compass bearing and my map to insure we didn't get lost. A few times, we were off course but I was able to correct and keep moving forward.

Due to the slow movement, we moved the last thirty to 45 minutes in the dark to the LOD. The rain had stopped. Our objective was about 100 meters to our left front. To get to it, we would have to cross a dirt road. The same road that we would follow that next morning back to our bivouac area where our dry poncho's were.

I now had a platoon of wet and tired Marines but worse, I had a platoon of very wet and cold Marines. The mission and tactics became secondary to hypothermia.

I instructed squad leaders to work on fires and brush shelters. As squad leaders and team leaders gathered firewood...a major task in it's self. I informed the Lieutenant of my decision and instructions. From what I recollect, he stared at me and agreed while in the middle of a tremendous shake.

While waiting on the fire, I remembered my days in the FMF and how crawling into thick brush or bush growing around trees could get you out of some of the rain but especially the wind. Once inside the brush or bush, you could sit in the kneeling position and lean up against the tree to, if not sleep, at least rest. I relayed that to team leaders as another means to get us through the rest of the night.

With the fire built and going, I remember sitting on my helmet in the mud by a tree and leaning back to feel the warmth. No thoughts of Karen or my sons...just exhaustion and the pain from my teeth chattering so much for so long.

The pre-dawn assault went well and the hump back to the bivouac area and dry clothes passed quickly. The flight and bus ride back to Danville was uneventful. A squad leader took my weapons and gear, per Gunny Page and Captain Travers, and I was released to go home to my family.

Arriving at the hospital, I walked in to see Karen weakly smiling at me. We kissed briefly and I sat down in a chair across from her. I promptly fell asleep. Whatever was left of Karen's spirit and love for me died that moment. We would stay married until Casey was six and his brother Zach was eight but I never got it. Got what you might ask? That love is a two way street and that it doesn't last forever unless you are constantly working on it. That you marry your best friend and should always remember that.

I've had friends and family defend my actions that day. "Well you had a responsibility to your men". I've even used that as an excuse, "If it had been an actual situation I could have saved some of my Marine's lives. I owed that to them and their families."

Was it worth what my family lost? In the end...no. So, Iv' raised my two sons and have maintained a semi-close friendship with their Mom, Karen. I owed the three of them that. They've forgiven me...maybe one day I'll learn to forgive myself.

C.V. EGAN

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