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Image by Pat Dowden,  
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By Ryan Crosby

As a new 2nd Lieutenant, you've got a lot of questions. You come out of school and your Basic Course and you're green as hell. Then you're at this huge infantry Division with a storied history, and everyone just got back from The Invasion, and you're eating chow next to combat arms gods. There's a PFC with a CIB, and at the Class A inspection, the 2nd Squad leader has a Silver Star. They saw the real thing, and you're trying to figure out how to put your new rucksack together. You know you're all Going Back at the end of this year. It seems like you cannot prepare enough. You have no idea where to begin, really.

And yet, when the time came to go, somehow I was ready. At least as ready as possible, for something which no amount of preparation can prepare you. Looking back, the training that mattered most had been beaten into me by good Sergeants and angry Captains and jaded Majors, each with their own perspective.

But the crown jewel, the masterpiece that made it all come together, was the Battalion Command team: an old leathery CSM and a grizzled old LTC, the latter's perpetual frown still the stuff of my nightmares, almost two decades later. Mustard-stained master-rated parachutist, CIB with star- *who the hell had one of those, these days?*— he'd jumped into Panama, led a Pathfinder Company in Desert Storm, and then he'd spent nearly two decades

training and preparing for the day he would lead a Battalion in combat. He was grouchy and old and set in his ways, convinced he knew how to train Soldiers better than anyone.

His CSM felt the same way. Straight from Central Casting- an angry, grouchy, leathery piece of Noncommissioned human beef jerky, a landing strip of hair on top of his head, hands on hips, watching every piece of training, always there. "You will get it, through mindless repetition or blunt force trauma," he bellowed. "Your call."

Therefore we mindlessly repeated things, hundreds or thousands of times, until they were instinctive. These were basic things. Call a 9-line MEDEVAC. Call for fire support. React to near ambush. Combatives drills, line drills, how to take an opponent down and then snap his elbow or choke the living fuck out of him. Conduct a magazine change while running. Fall in on a "stack" of three other guys, and then enter a building, clear the room, shoot some motherfuckers in the face.

Call in a SITREP while moving under fire. Load and re-fill a radio with COMSEC in semi-darkness while your driver is hauling ass on a bumpy road and your gunner is wide open on his crew-served, pumping bursts into the treeline. Assess a casualty and put on a tourniquet while he's pouring blood all over you and pissing and shitting himself, and three other casualties are screaming in your ear.

Over and over and over. Until you had brass burns on your neck and big angry callouses on the inside edge of your thumb on your firing hand, from your selector switch. Until the outside left magazine pouch on your kit was fraying and the Velcro almost worn out, from hundreds of magazine changes. Until your helmet chinstrap on the left side was frayed and stretched from jamming a hand mic into your ear while moving.

Your feet and hands became hard, perpetually raw and splitting, dirty fingernails blacked with carbon and CLP that never seemed to come off, despite always scrubbing with Simple Green and an old plastic cleaning brush. Your shoulders broadened and stretched your uniform top, and your pants became baggy and loose. Your red, tired eyes perpetually oozed leftover green camo, with little wisps of shredded baby wipes stuck in your perpetual five-o'clock shadow, ingrown hairs bumpy and infected on your neck from rubbing against the dirty edge of your body armor.

So you head out to the field for two weeks, come home for a week, and go back out for two more. For seven months straight. Shooting and shooting and shooting. Clear, reduce stoppage, operate, disassemble and reassemble every weapon system in the inventory, no matter who you were, Private through Lieutenant Colonel, for time. Hit the target and kill it.

Then road march out to the OP, and live for a week up on that hill, calling for mortars, calling for artillery, calling for OH58s to shoot rockets and 50 cal all night long.

Ruck back in 95 degrees and 100% humidity, or through the pouring rain and mud and late-summer hail storm. Your platoon might quietly sing a song together, on the last mile on the way back, in the semi-darkness of a dusky ruck march, in the early spring. By June, no songs will be heard, only the shuffle of boots on sand and the creak of overloaded nylon webbing against sweat-soaked shoulders.

You become intimate with mosquitoes and ticks and leeches and snakes and ants and raccoons. Diagnose and learn to live with crotch rot, ingrown toenails, blisters inside blisters, cellulitis, dysentery, dehydration, rolled ankles, hacking cough. Your nutrition comes from Copenhagen and Red Bull and Gatorade and beef jerky and Vienna sausages and Chickin in a Biscuit and chili Mac MREs. Air assaults and fast ropes and slingloads and combatives and plain old running and gunning. Until you could do it in your sleep. Mindless repetition, to prepare you for the trauma to come.

That was the year before we went to The War, to see the elephant, to become blooded, to go forth into the breach once more- or for me, for the first. So we went- with the Army we had, not the Army we wanted, to use a phrase of that time- and it was more brutal and hellish than I could have imagined. But never once did I find myself in a place or situation where the training had not prepared me. Under fire, my hands moved and my mouth spoke into the microphone, even when other body parts elsewhere were straining just to do their job. That was the training, as promised by the Commander and his CSM.

Years later, I pulled into a gas station in Leavenworth, Kansas, and at the pump in front of me was an old F-150 with bumper stickers and unit logos from that time. I stepped out of my truck and there he was, the old commander, a little greyer and a few more wrinkles, but that same scowl and heavy eyes. He saw me and remembered me- not by name, but by my position- "FSO in Bravo Company, right?"

We played catch up for a minute, talking Army and subsequent assignments, and then the natural time to part ways arrived; I suspected this would be my last time seeing him. I wanted to tell him, "Sir, I hated your guts, and I hated your CSM. You guys were my nightmares. But the training we did, before we went Over There...well, now I appreciate what you did. I am alive because of the stuff you made me learn. Thank You." But instead I shook his hand, and we nodded at each other, and all of it remained unsaid.

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