



by **ML Cavanaugh**

Editor's Note: This article comes courtesy of our partnership with [StrategyNotes.co](https://www.strategynotes.co).

It's hard to admit as an Army officer, but I'd like to be more like a Marine.

LtCol Ben Middendorf—my roommate at West Point—was one of those odd ducks that cross-branched into another service at graduation. He was from a family of Marines and so, naturally, the [EGA](#)-tractor beam eventually pulled him into the Corps. He now [commands](#) 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines.

A military life means leaving friends behind. Aside from the occasional message or call, we've gone our separate ways. It's one of those sad aspects of service we just accept as part of the package.

While sifting through some old stuff the other day I came across this short award speech of Ben's (originally posted online and sent around in 2013, reproduced below). It got me thinking about Sam Damon, the protagonist in Anton Myrer's [*Once an Eagle*](#).

Now, Damon is fiction because Damon is too good to be true. Another writer has [pointed out](#) that "being like Sam Damon is impossible." I agree.

But there was one sentiment Myrer wrote into Sam Damon's last conversation that connects the fake character with my real friend. "If it comes to a choice between being a good soldier and a good human being," Damon says in *Once an Eagle* with his dying words, "try to be a good human being." Ben may be a good Marine, but he's a better person.

While perfection in fiction is good for our gaze once in a while, it doesn't do us much good in our flesh-and-bone world. We should look out for real-world Damons', even if they're flawed, even if they're short of perfect.

Which brings me to the speech.

Ben [received](#) the 2012 [Leftwich Award](#), an annual leadership award given to a Marine captain. He wrote the words below as a response to that award.

Read it. I have, several times. It's like being struck with a lightning bolt of humility. It's important that we illuminate humility like this, otherwise the humble go unnoticed. Second, note the distinct leadership philosophy—first among equals, always last to eat.

My final thoughts before passing the mic to the words of my younger, old friend are genuinely nostalgic. I wish I had more time around someone like this. Around Ben.

At least I still have this. That's something.

To everyone who has congratulated me on the Leftwich Trophy, I do greatly appreciate it, but I don't deserve it. This award is not about me. This is about the 157 Marines and Sailors of Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines and the other 40 Marines attached to us who fought the Taliban in 2012 in Northern Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

This is about Lance Corporal Colton Carlson who demonstrated extreme compassion while conducting humanitarian relief in Japan following the 2011 Tsunami. Twelve months later he put on his own tourniquet after losing both of his legs to an IED. On his way to the MEDEVAC bird he said to his fellow Marines, "guys, my life isn't over, it's just different." As we mourned I thought, where do we get such men?

This is about First Lieutenant Michael Rhoads, a Naval Academy graduate and outstanding artillery officer who was shot near the village of Lwar Jiljay during a gunfight with the Taliban. I was convinced he was going to die right in front of me on the field. Only due to the superlative actions of Sergeant Richard Elsie, and three outstanding Navy Corpsman: HM2 Nathan Bracey, HM3 Shane Datugan, and HM3 Eduardo Estrada, that Mike is still with us. He continues to serve the Corps today.

This is about Corporal Jeremy Correa and when he threw himself in the face of withering enemy fire multiple times to keep machine gunners resupplied with ammunition during one particular nasty gunfight, and the proper recognition that eludes him. We are trying to make it right.

This is about Corporal Douglas Corl, my radio operator who never left my side in my two and a half years of command. This is about the time we got stuck in cow pen covered in shit together during a firefight and laughed about it.

This is about Marine infantryman faking the funk in the hours before a helicopter assault,

pretending that you aren't scared as you try to keep your mind occupied because you know that you are going to be in a gunfight in a few hours. This is about the night movements in areas saturated with IED's, constantly thinking that your next step could be your last. This is about the sweepers, the point man for every patrol, day and night, who kept the Marines safe because they could read the terrain better than anyone else. This is about being in a gun fight and just having to take it, because the Taliban is trying to get you to take cover in an IED belt. This is about infantryman and tankers slugging it out during 15 days of straight combat in the little known village of Kesh Mesh Khan and getting out of there alive.

This is about my squad leaders, whose trust means more to me than I could ever explain; they were my center of gravity. This is about the platoon sergeants who did more behind the scenes than I will ever know to keep the company running. This is about Gunnery Sergeant Richard Charley whose heart is even bigger than his gunny's stash. This is about my officers, who know that it isn't about the officers. I would follow any of them into hell with a water pistol. This is about a Marine whom I will never be able to repay, First Sergeant James Treadwell, who is simply the best Marine I have ever met. Every Company Commander thinks his First Sergeant is the best in the Marine Corps; the problem is that I'm right.

This is about all the Lance Corporals and PFC's, they did all of the work.

This is about survival, overcoming the adversary of war, and the brotherhood that bonds a Marine Rifle Company in combat. The recognition mustn't go to me, it must go to the men I was privileged to serve. I was not always nice to them, in fact I was often brutally harsh in training. I had zero tolerance for negligent acts of commission, and demanded what I consider to be the highest standard - to act like something different, better. I demanded that they act like a United States Marine, nothing more, nothing less. I needed smart, tough, compassionate, professionals, and they gave me everything they had. If you could have seen them in action, their selflessness would bring you to tears. I know because I cried.

I am beyond humbled to have led such men in combat. This award goes to them.

Semper Fidelis,

Capt Ben Middendorf

[ML Cavanaugh](#) (@MLCavanaugh) is a US Army Strategist, senior fellow with the Modern War Institute at West Point, and professor of practice with Arizona State University. He writes a weekly newsletter at [StrategyNotes.co](#).

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)