



By Danita Darby

On 25 May 2019, in Bagram, Afghanistan, I had reached the end of my rope. I was suspended from my command in February 2019, but [that single situation](#) is not why I am writing this. What I am writing about today is the fight I had internally during that time period. I am ready to tell my story, and I hope that it strengthens those who are struggling and informs others. I tried to kill myself.

From February until May, I fought with myself. I wanted to give up, and I did. I made a plan, found the right tools to exact my plan, and when the right triggers presented themselves, I acted. I let go. I let go of my life, my potential, my daughter, my family, my friends, and all

of the consequences my actions may have produced. How I embraced this decision is not as important as the people placed in my life to thankfully divert my plans. And now I am here. The permanent solution that I concocted to a temporary problem was thwarted because of the people in my life. I would not be here today without them.

In 2017, as a married woman with a young child, I applied to a professional military education program. I was accepted, meaning that in the fall of 2019 I would attend a graduate program and then take another assignment teaching history at the United States Military Academy. The next step was to get into a graduate program. In the meantime, I accepted a company command position in 2018 and would deploy soon after the change of command ceremony. A series of major milestones accumulated on the horizon, but I was excited for the endeavor. I had worked very hard up to this point, and this was just another challenge to overtake. I would have to work hard as a company commander in Afghanistan while also applying to school programs, but I was ready for it. I left Fort Bragg, North Carolina, with my company on a deployment to Kandahar, Afghanistan in September 2018 with a plan to support this dynamic and demanding time. I could not foresee how my life would change from this point on.

While in command, I spent hours working on applications for graduate programs. On top of my command responsibilities, by night I wrote numerous papers, researched a variety of topics, and conducted many interviews. By day, I planned missions, coordinated with the staff, mentored junior leaders, and tried to make my company better. At night, I worked towards my future — for a sense of personal accomplishment and the opportunities it would confer to my family.

In February 2019, I was accused of being a toxic leader, and from February until May, I was suspended from my position. My work on applications, though hampered by stress, did not stop. I could not stop thinking about how I would have to fight to win back my credibility as a leader. To add to this insecurity, I was uncertain that I would even have a career at the

end of this fight. Nevertheless, I pressed on. In March 2019, my husband told me that we would be getting a divorce; he told me he no longer loved me. In April 2019, my sister attempted suicide. I went home for a short time to be with her and love her. With this perspective, I caught a glimpse of the world I would leave behind if I went down the same path. Each of these troubles alone were difficult to overcome, and as they coalesced it was too much. I was distraught.

In Bagram, I was a shell of my former self. My hair fell out. I did not exercise. I did not sleep. I did not eat, and when I did, I threw up what I ate. I was disgusted with myself. I did not appreciate the life I had. I spent my nights journaling, trying to organize my thoughts and figure out how I arrived at my current state. What should I do? How could I fix it? I completely rejected and neglected the love I had from family members and friends. I was unreachable, unreliable, and untethered. I was in a blackhole, an abyss of my own making. I was alone, and I kept myself there.

While I was under investigation, I managed to get into five different graduate programs. The next step was to get home and go to school. One obstacle remained in my path: the investigation into my command was not yet complete. I could not take on another assignment until the investigation was complete and my name was cleared. I was “flagged.” I continued to hope that it would all work out and my name would be cleared, clearing the road to progress to the next career step. Still, I was confident this issue would eventually resolve itself.

Then, without warning, a single email broke me. I had been flagged for too long and could no longer pursue my planned follow-on assignment. The email sneered at me as if to say, “you lost, it’s over.” It terminated the possibility of continuing my career. It ended the possibility of co-parenting my daughter with my soon to be ex-husband. All of my hard work was for nothing. When I read that email, I understood that my career, along with life as I knew it, was over. It signaled the imminent finality behind an investigation that would not

just alter, but derail, my future.

When I read that email on 25 May 2019, I was in the office in Bagram early in the morning. I cried as if someone had died. I bawled. All I could think of was all I had lost. I saw an email from my battalion commander, as he was copied on that fateful email. My response to him was curt: "If you cannot help me, then I do not know what we have to talk about." It was completely unprofessional, but I did not care about being professional then. My world was ending. Between the day that I was suspended and the day that I made my decision to die, I tried very hard to keep myself together. I relied on my training, my spirituality, and my grit. I have had hard days, but none like these, and I alone was not enough to win this fight.

In the midst of my despair, my First Sergeant found me. She gathered me in her arms and hugged me, asking me what was wrong. All I could choke out was that "they took it away." I was already accepted to the graduate program that would start the next phase of my life and close my onerous command chapter. Now that opportunity was gone. I had done nothing wrong. I had tried my very best. I had given my everything. None of these statements provided solace at the time; they were empty and futile platitudes at that moment. I lost everything with that one email. That day, I found my edge.

During the time I was suspended, I had lost weight and began to look sickly. I was difficult to be around. I knew exactly how I appeared and how I affected those I was around. I did not care. I knew that people avoided me. I listened as colleagues remarked on my gaunt appearance and mood swings when they thought I could not hear them. I became more angry and hateful each day. I picked fights with people who did not deserve it. As my relationships became fraught with negativity, so did my relationship with my own body and mind. I picked up smoking. Ignoring the rigors of a war zone, I slept during the day as often as I could sneak away. My behaviors were erratic and they were not me. My First Sergeant and my first line supervisor were my saviors.

After I read the email I went “home” to my barracks room. I threw things around my room. I screamed. I cried. Eventually I got quiet and I thought. My life was over. My dreams and ambitions no longer meant anything. I did not matter. I knew I was ready. I sent a message to my First Sergeant: “Please tell my boss that I will not be in the office today.” She did tell him. She told him everything. His response was “go find her.” She did find me and just in time.

It still hurts me to acknowledge that I made a decision to end my life. I decided to throw away all that I had worked for and all the love others had poured into me. None of that mattered; I only wanted the stress of life to stop. I chose a permanent solution to a temporary problem. I decided then that I would not see my girl grow up, graduate school, marry, and become something greater than me. I decided then that I would no longer think of my company that put so much sweat, blood, and tears into the mission in Afghanistan. I decided then that I did not want to see what comes next, that I had seen all that there is to see at only twenty-nine years old. The conclusion I chose for myself was its own intrinsic statement: I did not have more worth than this kind of end.

My reason for writing this is to put this corrosive problem in perspective. We all feel it, leaders and Soldiers, or otherwise. I could not win this fight alone. My First Sergeant saved my life that day when I needed her most. I would not be here today if it was not for her. I would not be able to celebrate my daughter going to kindergarten, cherish the friendship of my ex-husband, love my family (my sister is thriving and doing well), find new love, and offer love to others. This is where I am meant to be. The person I was years ago could not have predicted this.

Leaders, hear me and understand me. Your Soldiers and civilians, rank immaterial, need you. They need you more than they know. Several leaders were witness to my near destruction and did nothing to help me. They neglected to do so not because they are bad people. They did not know the gravity of my problem, and neither did I. If not for the care of

those leaders closest to me, I would not be here. Be there for your people. Care for them. Care for their families. The weight of life — expectations, responsibilities, obligations — can suddenly become too great to bear alone. This can create a dangerous mirage, projecting an image that we can no longer continue. We must carry the weight together.

For those that struggle, you do not do so alone. We are here with you. We are Captains, Warrant Officers, and Staff Sergeants. We are you. Let those that reach out to you help you. Do not make my mistake. You are strong. You are capable. You are worthy. Do not allow your inner demons to tell you otherwise. There is more to life than what you are dealing with now. Stay with us.

The road may be imperfect, dark and tortuous when you least anticipate, but the journey is always worth continuing. To my little sister: I see you kiddo and I am glad that we both continued.

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