



by Bob Shelton

I failed ... my family, my unit, and my leaders.

As a teenager, I had a t-shirt that said “Eat, sleep, and go like hell.” I put a lot of stock in the latter part of that slogan...I believed it. Twenty-two years of military experience reinforced that I could not only sustain, but push the pace. Regardless, the new job demanded that I do more. Then, less than six months into a command tour, I hit the wall.

Welcome to burnout.

Every machine reaches a point of failure. Like them, we have our limits. It's maintenance that keeps the machines in service and running at peak performance. Humans are no different. We've all heard that we should maintain 'balance' in our busy lives, but how many of you have found that perfect ratio between work and home, physical and mental, social and spiritual?

Truthfully, the more disciplined our practices of physical, mental, social and spiritual maintenance are, the better our human machines run.

I thought I was pretty good at maintaining the illusive balance, but hindsight said I sucked at it. I was up by 0530, at the office until 1830, a quick dinner with the family, and back in the home office until about 0100. At best, I would get four to five hours of sleep routinely disturbed by calls from the command post.

Wash-Rinse-Repeat for five months.

The gym was almost nonexistent and a rare jog around the flight line was more about the frustrations of the day than exercise. If I ate, it wasn't the healthy option (other than my wife's amazing dinners). Travel with units dispersed all over Europe added more demand, and I still had to get my reps in the jet. My focus started to decline, and then my body literally shut down...injured, sick, exhausted, and mentally spent. Something had to change.

As I laid there, feeling worthless to all, I faced failure - physically present for my family and my Airmen, I was absent in every other way. It was time to evaluate, what just happened?! The clues were there - declining health, chronic injuries, reduced attention span, exhaustion - but I failed to pay attention to my body's flashing signals. I was out of gas, the tanks were empty!

Overcoming burnout was a significant undertaking, a focused effort to resolve my failure and to refill my tanks. Most say it takes a minimum of three months for recovery and at times over a year. I felt selfish for carving out 'me time' for exercise, medical appointments, sleep, reading, and family. The challenge was more rigorous than my previous schedule, but resulted in a better leader. I became more present, resilient, motivated, and mentally alert, physically healthier, and found much more personal joy throughout the day. I don't wish burnout on anyone, but I'm a better husband, father, and leader for it.

Learn from my mistake and take stock...how's your maintenance schedule?

Colonel Bob Shelton retired from the USAF as a command pilot with ~3000 hours in KC-135 and C-5 aircraft. He previously served as commander of the 100th Operations Group, RAF Mildenhall and the 99th Air Refueling Squadron, Birmingham AL. He holds two Master's Degrees and graduated from the NDU Joint Advanced Warfighting School. Colonel Shelton is currently a Faculty member at Virginia Tech in the role of Deputy Commandant, Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets. Connect with him via LinkedIn.

Editor's Note: In June, we asked our [From the Green Notebook](#) community a simple but profound question: What's the one thing you wish you would have known before you started your last assignment? This week, we are pleased to share the nuggets of wisdom leaders have learned with the hope that it doesn't have to be relearned by someone else the hard way.

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