

# What It is Like to Never Go to War

Will McGee

I am watching the war in Afghanistan sputter out with a strange sense of detachment. Congress is discussing the withdrawal and I'm watching the hearing on a T.V. hanging from a beige wall a few yards across from my desk. The paint is comfortably bland—like my service in the Marines—and the war will be over in the fall.

Like most of my friends, I decided to join the military on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Watching the planes crash into the World Trade Center, on a T.V. in elementary school, I knew that we were under attack. Later I watched Marines only a few years older than me patrolling the streets of Baghdad. I knew I needed to do something, and wanted to join them, so I applied to the Naval Academy.

During my first year as a Midshipman, I watched Marines fight in the Battle of Marjah from the T.V.s in the cafeteria. The next year, I chanted "USA, USA, USA" in the Academy's spontaneous rally celebrating Bin Laden's killing. I commissioned into the Marine Corps, hoping that the war wouldn't end before I had the chance to go.

The Islamic State exploded across the Levant as I began my training. The horrifying footage of the Yazidi massacre confirmed what I already knew: that I was going to fight against forces of evil. I cheered when President Obama authorized airstrikes and then sent troops back into Iraq.

At The Basic School, the introductory training course required of all Marine officers, I was taught by war veterans, men and women who supported the battles I had seen on T.V. They wore their decorations proudly on puffed-out chests and told me what I wanted to hear, that

our fight was right. I thought I would have the best chance to go to the war if I was a ground intelligence officer—a grunt with a map—and so I continued to advanced infantry and intelligence schools.

The later courses were more demanding as the training became more urgent. The instructors were Marines whose years fighting on the bleeding edge of the war had given them a subtly different perspective. Gone was the gauzy T.V. version of combat. These men had lived a dirty and dangerous war, with no easily drawn moral lines and no honor to be won or lost.

They taught us to kill, nothing more. We learned that fighting was unavoidable, losing unacceptable, and that protecting our Marines was our most sacred duty. Three of the instructors refused to wear their ribbons (and they had many) so we could not glorify them. I recognized that their attitude was different from what I had been exposed to thus far, but at the time I couldn't identify why. I wanted to go to war.

When we completed our final course, my friends and I went out for drinks to celebrate ending fourteen grueling months of training. One of the instructors met us at a bar and we sat crammed into a booth listening as he told us stories about his deployments. After a few beers, his speech slowed and he stared blankly at the space between us for a few seconds, remembering something. The silence grew awkward. His eyes slid back into focus and clicked over to mine. "You know, most of you won't ever go to combat. And you should be thankful for that."

I had spent fifteen years since elementary school preparing to fight. All I wanted to do was to go to war. I couldn't understand what he meant. How could I possibly be thankful to miss the war? The next morning, I drove down to North Carolina to report to my unit, eager to

deploy. But my timing was off. The war was winding down and when I arrived, east coast Marines weren't going to Afghanistan anymore.

Instead, I worked in a headquarters building, down a long hall lined with photographs of casualties from the wars. They stared at me on the walk to work each morning. So many faces. So young. We worked closely with a unit from the Royal Marines for a couple of months. By total chance, one of their officers was a friend from elementary school, and we went for coffee one afternoon.

I carried an extra cup back as we walked to my office afterward. As I turned to go inside, he paused at the door and gave one of the photos a haunting look, then tapped it with a finger. He said, "I gave him CPR as he died," and described the blood and the dust and the heat of that single infinite moment. I stood frozen in the air conditioning, hands trembling, looking back at the memorial, coffee dripping onto my clean uniform.

My Marines and I ran together every Monday morning. One week we gathered in the grassy field just as dawn's pastel fingers reached across the horizon. After a few minutes of sprints, our shirts clung to our heaving chests and we fought to keep running. In the seconds before our next sprint, Private Desrosiers, our self-appointed morale builder, looked around and broke out dancing, shattering the seriousness of the moment. We collapsed in laughter. When my unit did deploy, we provided emergency support to special operations units and stood ready to reinforce embassies if they were attacked. We sat on bases in Spain and East Africa for six months, waiting on a call that never came.

I asked to deploy to Afghanistan at the end of my tour, but I was told that the equipment acquisitions field was a higher priority. I've spent the last three years testing systems to ensure they are safe and effective. It is an important job—service certainly—but a far cry from what I

envisioned when I joined the Marines. I have volunteered to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan on six separate occasions. Someone turned me down each time. I've never fired my weapon in anger and I've never led a patrol. Most of my time has been spent sending emails and making PowerPoint presentations. Now I'm watching the war end from behind a desk.

Mine are not the stories that belong in an action film. I've never been shot at and, thank God, none of my Marines were injured or killed. I am by no means a pacifist: I joined the Marines to go to war. Instead, I did my part as best I could. I am proud that I have played an insignificant role in our nation's defense.

I just left the Marine Corps to start law school at Yale. I watched the President address the nation about the collapse of Afghanistan on a T.V. in the gym. I huddled against my locker after class as news of the Kabul bombing flickered across my screen, wondering if I knew any of the thirteen young men and women killed. Just like I have watched the rest of the war. There is no climax, no tidy conclusion here. I feel no sense of closure.

Is that a bad thing? In the coming years we will all hear a never-ending discussion about national interests, humanitarian considerations, and American credibility. The decision to leave may have appeared correct from the air conditioning of the White House, but they hopelessly bungled the withdrawal. What you will not hear, what you cannot hear, is the sweet swishing sound of Desrosiers' feet flicking through the blades of dewy grass. So young and so full of life. I hope everyone's service is as bland as mine.

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