Alumni

Shades of Green

A Marine in Afghanistan writes home.

By
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A memorial ceremony for a fallen Marine, Helmand Province, February 2013. Photo: Michael Christman

“How could it be that so few Ivy graduates shared in our country’s burden?” wrote Michael Christman ’00SEAS in a 2007 op-ed in the *Spectator*. “Why was it that we had sent so many of America’s youth to war and so few of its elite were there alongside them?”

In 2005, Christman, working as an engineer in Washington, DC, joined the Marines, wanting to experience what he calls “one of the most important events of my generation.”

“Back in ’05 there were plenty of people willing to complain or point out the flaws of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan,” Christman says. “But very few people were willing to put their money where their mouths were.”

Christman, now a captain, returned home in April from a seven-month deployment to Afghanistan, in which he served as an adviser to one of the two Republic of Georgia battalions working side by side with the Marine Corps in Helmand Province. The opium-producing area is the historical home of the Taliban and one of the most violent regions of the country. Christman had previously deployed to Afghanistan as the pilot of an AH-1W Cobra attack helicopter, and recently served as a forward air controller. As the most senior of the ten Americans on the base of more than 150 Georgians, he found that his role included much more than coordinating airstrikes.

The following edited excerpts are taken from Christman’s e-mails home from his third and final deployment.

November 8, 2012

I had always wondered if I would react appropriately the first time I was shot at. Other than six months at the Basic School seven years ago, I haven’t really had any formal infantry training. It turns out your brain has a pretty good idea of what to do all on its own. A millisecond after hearing the first crack as the round broke above my head, I was on the ground. Go figure: the get-the-fuck-down instinct is somehow hardwired into you.

We had headed out for the patrol just before 9 a.m., pushing just under a mile from the forward operating base. As the senior guy at the position, my job mostly keeps me inside the wire and off patrols, running the command operations center (COC). But being the senior guy also means that if I want to patrol with the boys from time to time, I can. Part of my deal with my Marines is that when I go out on patrol, I’m the pack mule and carry the heaviest radio (and the only radio with the power to talk back to the COC).

The first half of the patrol was uneventful. There were plenty of women and children around. A couple of the braver kids came up to the patrol asking for food and candy. Mothers all over the world, not just in Afghanistan, seem to have a sixth sense about when bad things are going to happen. If a mom senses that something’s up, she’ll bring her kids inside or take them somewhere safe. When children are present, it’s usually a sign that things are good and the Taliban is going to leave us alone for the day.

The author, at the end of his final deployment.

So you can imagine our surprise when the first rounds came in. Getting shot at for the first time is an emotional event as it is, but for the Taliban to shoot at us with women and children nearby seemed just wrong. Despite my overwhelming desire to return fire, your job as a forward air controller isn't to shoot back; it's to get on the radio and start coordinating with higher and see if you can't get some air on station

and, if possible, tell the aircraft where to drop a bomb so that 1) it makes the bad man stop shooting and 2) the bomb doesn't drop on *you*. However, with my face in the dirt I had lost line-of-sight communication with the COC. I needed to stand, or at least kneel, in order to talk with higher. I got up on one knee and was able to call back. "Wild Eagle 43, this is Wild Eagle 41. We just took a couple of pop shots." *Crack! Crack!* My face was back in the dirt as two more rounds snapped over my head.

We went back and forth with this. I got up, took a round, and got back down. Since World War II, one of the first rules of combat has been that the enemy will try to kill the guy with the radio. Turns out I had a big-ass bull's-eye on my back. That, and my American uniform. Johnny Taliban isn't stupid: he was targeting the Marines.

One of the biggest frustrations we have with the Georgians is that they, like many former Soviet militaries, don't empower their junior and midlevel leaders. Once the patrol leader decided that we were going to try to egress our end of the patrol, the Georgians should have immediately started bounding back, providing cover for each other. But they just sat there in the open, taking rounds. After spending what seemed like forever getting shot at, I finally got fed up and started directing traffic. The advantage of being a Marine is that these guys will listen to you. Be loud, be forceful, and they'll move. Give them some leadership and they will execute to a T.

As we bounded back, we took up a defensive position, waiting for the aircraft that I had requested. I noticed that some of the kids from earlier were crouched behind a berm (they must have been much smarter than us to find actual cover). Fifteen minutes earlier they had been playfully running a wheelbarrow with a bag of fertilizer across the fields. Now they were intently watching us, not scared or frightened but curious, like any eight-year-old boy would be.

We could see their heads poking out from behind the berm, and perhaps taking a cue from us (we were now kneeling rather than lying flat) the boys started to come out one by one, wheelbarrow in tow. I'll always remember the look that two of the older boys gave us. Their younger compatriots had already scurried off, but here they were with their wheelbarrow and us blocking the way. You could see the wheels turning in their heads. They had to get the wheelbarrow and its contents past us, but we blocked the path. They clearly didn't want to stay here, but they couldn't leave their parcel. What to do?

We shooed them through our formation, hoping to get them out of the crossfire before we took any more rounds. As the kids headed off, I couldn’t help but wonder what it must be like to grow up like that. Maybe they’ll see us as something better than the Taliban, but probably not. We don’t speak the language, don’t understand the culture. We might as well be space aliens.

The rest of the patrol was uneventful. There were a half dozen farmers around for the shooting whom we talked to, but of course none of them knew anything about who or where the Taliban might be. Such is life in the Helmand Valley.

February 24, 2013

The most dangerous times of any deployment are the first and last thirty days. In the first thirty days, you don’t have the experience to keep you from making stupid mistakes. Add to that the swagger that any young person might have when heading off to war for the first time, and you’ve got a potentially dangerous combination. In short, you’re too stupid to realize that your aggressiveness and confidence is what is most likely to get you killed.

During the last thirty days, you have the benefit of five to six months of combat experience, but you are tired and have convinced yourself that you have everything under control. You’ve patrolled the same roads and talked to the same people for half a year, and all you can think or talk about is going home. In short, you’ve become too cocky to realize that letting your guard down is what will get you killed. In both cases, it is our hubris that is our most dangerous enemy.

This base, belonging to the Georgian sister battalion, served as a logistics hub. A Russian-built helicopter can be seen in the landing zone. Photo: Michael Christman

Timing has it that the last thirty days of our deployment coincide with the start of the spring offensive, on February 22. That morning, an American-only convoy had just left our base, where they had dropped off some mail and people. As usual, we enjoyed the opportunity to speak with visitors, asking how so-and-so was doing at the main base to the north, poking fun at how they lived the privileged life with their fancy showers (Marines wear harsh conditions like a badge of honor), and hearing the latest rumor of who was going home early and who wasn't. We had had some violent weather over the last couple of days, but the storm had passed, and I was enjoying the crisp Afghanistan winter morning and company.

The convoy commander, Staff Sergeant Jones (not his real name), was a talkative man, confident to a degree that bordered on arrogant, but humorous enough to not be annoying or over-the-line. There was always a kernel of truth to his combat stories (he had scars from IED strikes to prove it), but he certainly took some liberties. Still, the Marines looked up to him, and he always had their best interests at heart, so I would patiently listen to his stories and take them for their entertainment value. I liked Staff Sergeant Jones and enjoyed his tales as a way to pass the time.

Less than twenty minutes after the convoy left our position, we received a semi-panicked call from the convoy. They had hit an IED, and there were casualties.

The next half hour was chaos. On the positive side, all the resources of the battalion and the regiment (regiments are made up of battalions, battalions of companies) were focused on us. Quick-reaction forces from two companies raced to the scene, medevac aircraft were launched, close air support (bomb-dropping aircraft) circled overhead.

On the negative side, this influx added to the chaos. They originally sent a large British medevac helicopter from Leatherneck that could carry all the patients at once. When that took too long, a second order was given to launch two smaller American aircraft from a nearby base. Every aircraft showed up at the same time, and it was on me to coordinate it all while at the same time trying to help the Marine running the show at the attack site to keep calm and focused enough that we could bring in the aircraft safely. At one point, we had six aircraft — two US UH-60 Blackhawk medevac helicopters, one British CH-47, two British Apache attack-helicopter escorts, and an armed aircraft — all trying to pick up the wounded Marines.

The Marine at the scene of the attack was so nervous and upset that he mistakenly threw the smoke to mark the landing zone twice before the aircraft were on station. Lucky for us, a team from another company arrived and was able to take charge of the situation.

With the patients away, the guys on scene were able to concentrate on the recovery effort. The same Marines, now with the blood of five of their brothers staining their uniforms, had to bring back the downed truck, which in Afghanistan is no small task. The entire process took several hours and involved a small gun battle and an unrelated IED find that required some of the security to be redirected.

As the hours went on, we began to receive reports from the medical facility where the patients had been taken. The driver of the vehicle was badly injured, with severe burns to his face and disfiguring wounds to his right arm. Other passengers, two Marines and a Georgian interpreter, would survive, but their recovery would be long and difficult. The fifth patient, Staff Sergeant Jones, had died of his wounds upon arrival.

The convoy made its way back up north. A freak storm whipped through the area, forcing the Marines to stop once again at our base. One of the hardest things I've had to do is to stand in front of them and tell them that Staff Sergeant Jones had died. They reacted as you would expect a group of Marines would. There was no immediate crying or outbursts of emotion, but you could read on their faces the torrent of emotion going through them: astonishment, disbelief, anger. Some would come to the realization that they were in fact mortal. One began to feel survivor's guilt after he realized that the person who took his spot on the convoy had been one of the men wounded.

A flyover during the memorial service for Staff Sergeant Jones. Photo: Michael Christman

Mental-health experts remind us that the most important thing for these guys to do is to take care of each other, and that talking is the best form of therapy, and they are right. Venting your anger, telling stories, taking a day or two off are all things that help.

Perhaps the hardest part about leadership is that you are a team of one. Being the solid rock for these boys is difficult. If I break down or go internal, the Marines will break down or go internal. If I blame the Georgians for all the problems, the boys will do the same, destroying the relationship we have worked so hard to forge. For now, my role is to remain the steady ship. To listen when the Marines want to talk, to rein them in if their attitudes become toxic, and to have the wisdom to tell the difference between the two. No amount of training or Ivy League education can prepare you for that.

And yet the fight goes on, whether we like it or not. This has been a trying few days, but the boys are doing as well as can be expected. They're not back to a hundred percent, but have started joking around again as only brothers can. Keeping them working and focused on the task at hand is the only therapy that I can provide.

I can't help but think of the wife and child Staff Sergeant Jones left behind, or his badly injured driver, a lance corporal not more than twenty years old who hadn't quite grown into his body. I think about what the rest of his life will be like. While his peers are starting their lives, dating girls, getting married, and starting families, he'll be spending the next months, if not years, in painful rehab. And when he does go out on the town, will his scars keep him from getting a date? These are the circumstances that these young men will have to live with for the rest of their lives. It's a sacrifice that they chose to make, volunteering to join the military during a time of war. America, whether or not she realizes it, is built on the backs of men like these. It is an honor to serve with them.

March 24, 2013

Of course, the most widely discussed topic is our impending return home. The first of our Marine replacements arrive in a week, and soon after that I'll be back in Leatherneck waiting on a flight home. At times I can almost taste the beer waiting for me in America. Those on their first deployment are jumping out of their skins with anticipation to get back.

I've done this a couple of times, and from my experience, the reintegration process is best described from the point of view of ordering a coffee at Starbucks.

Phase 1: You stand patiently in line, happy to be around people who have showered at least once in the last twenty-four hours. You order an Orange Mocha Frappuccino from the girl behind the counter, just glad to be talking to someone who doesn't have to shave.

Phase 2: You're standing in line behind a businessman and a soccer mom who are complaining that there isn't enough foam on their Orange Mocha Frappuccinos, and it takes all your willpower not to strangle them and scream about how you just spent seven months in the filth with a bunch of Georgians tiptoeing around IEDs so that they could enjoy their mornings with a five-dollar beverage made from the beans picked by some kid in Guatemala.

Phase 3: You're complaining that there's not enough foam in your Orange Mocha Frappuccino.

Everyone is different, and most people will end up at Phase 3 sooner or later. The experts estimate that somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of us come back with some sort of posttraumatic stress disorder. Some of those end up committing suicide. But it's important to recognize that this statistic also means that between 80 and 90 percent of us come back without PTSD.

It's great that we as a society recognize mental health as an important topic, but I worry that we may have swung too far and that the stigma of the veteran who "loses it" is a burden that we all have to carry.

A patrol walks in “Ranger file,” each member closely following the person in front of him to minimize the risk of stepping on an IED. Photo: Michael Christman

I’m concerned about the boys as they go back. The first ninety days can set the tone for their reintegration. These are young men who have stared death in the face and walked away unscathed. It can be hard to go back home and not become bored with the banality of modern life in America. Too many of these young men will try to recapture the thrill of combat by going home and driving fast cars, drinking heavily, self-medicating, or all three at once. Sometimes I wish that before we get home we could lock ourselves in a padded room with a couple of kegs of beer and some boxing gloves so that we could get most of the drinking and fighting out of our systems before we’re released back into the general public.

But overall it has been a great deployment, a life-changing event for the better. Nothing focuses a group of young men like preparing for and going into combat, and no other job will ever have as much excitement, meaning, or importance as the last year has had for me. There is a small part of me that would like to stay for another month, just to make sure that everything goes smoothly with the next unit, but in the end, it’s time to go home.

It’s funny what you crave after being gone for so long. For the last seven months everything I’ve eaten has come out of a bag (and all my poop has gone into one, so in a weird way it makes sense). I haven’t watched TV, seen a sporting event, had a face-to-face conversation with a girl, sent a text message, used running water, or flushed a toilet. I haven’t driven in a car that doesn’t require me to put on sixty pounds of body armor and ammunition, had a day off, or showered on a regular basis. I’ve been living in an open tent with nine other guys and little to no privacy, sleeping on a cot in a sleeping bag. I haven’t been without my pistol or handheld radio for months.

My first meal when I get back? A bowl of mussels and fries with a plate of oysters and a tall, cold Belgian beer sounds great right now. Don’t ask why that particular meal sounds so appealing. I don’t know, either.

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