

## **WHY I STAYED**

- Colonel Lloyd Miles

***“I will not disgrace the soldier’s arms, nor abandon the comrade who stands at my side; but whether alone or with many, I will fight to defend things sacred and profane. I will hand down my country not lessened, but larger and better than I have received it.”***

***Ancient Athenian Oath***

### **Into the Darkness**

I still remember that day, 6 August 1996. I guess I will always remember it. I was a young battalion commander with the 1-187 Infantry, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Air Assault), at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Commanding a battalion in the “Rakkasans” was a dream come true. The battalion was conducting a series of live-fire maneuvers using all of the weapons an infantry soldier could expect to use on some future battlefield, including grenades, claymore mines, and bangalore torpedoes. It never made much sense to me to avoid using a weapon in peacetime training simply because of the risk involved. You have to train the way you are going to fight. The risk of injury or death will be greater in combat if a soldier is unfamiliar with the weapons he is expected to fight with once the bullets start flying.

On that fateful day, the battalion scout platoon was conducting a maneuver live-fire using their automatic weapons and grenades. During one of the exercises, the platoon leader conducted a reconnaissance through very thick brush with two grenades attached to his LBE (load bearing equipment). After returning from his reconnaissance, he discovered that he was missing a grenade, but the grenade pin was still attached to his LBE. The incident was reported to the brigade headquarters, range control, and EOD (explosive ordinance disposal). The general assumption was that the grenade was a dud or it would have detonated a few seconds after the pin was pulled. Nonetheless, range control recommended that we shut down the range until September or October, at which time they would burn the dry brush to detonate or expose the grenade. I agreed. The division staff had other plans, and we were directed to find the

grenade. EOD refused to look for the grenade. Mine detectors were brought to the site, but were not effective because the brush was too thick.

The directive from the division commander was a legal order, but it was a bad decision. In the end, the soldiers of the scout platoon were used to conduct a very slow and deliberate search for the grenade. The platoon leader and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) of the platoon decided to limit the search party to just the platoon leader and NCOs. The junior enlisted soldiers would not be exposed to the danger. I decided to join the search team, in spite of the objections from the leaders of the scout platoon. I was moved by the fact that they did not want to expose me to the danger they faced, but I knew in my heart that I needed to stand beside them. Everything that I believed in as a leader, such as leading by example and sharing in the hardships of your soldiers, would have been a lie if I simply watched them go into harm's way. It was a bad deal, and everyone knew it. It is during those times when the true character of a leader is tested. It is easy to lead when the risk is low. It is another story when the threat of injury or death is real, and men are scared, tired, hungry, and dirty. It is during those times that the leader must step forward and speak those simple words known to every infantryman, "follow me."

We found the grenade that day, but not by the preferred method. I don't know how it happened, but it detonated right beneath my feet and threw me a distance of about ten feet through the air. After hitting the ground on my left shoulder, I rolled over on my back. My vision was blurred, but I could see. I was having trouble breathing, and my ears were ringing. I could hear the screams and cries of wounded men, my men, and I tried mightily to get up, but my body felt like it was nailed to the ground and on fire. I can remember conducting a "systems check" as I laid on the ground. I tried to move my fingers, and I was successful. I tried to wiggle my toes, and I thought I was successful there too. Next, I opened my flack vest to increase the oxygen flow into my lungs. I felt like I had a mouth full of pebbles, so I tried to spit the objects out. I learned later that the "pebbles" were my teeth that were shattered in the blast. I could not see my legs, but I could see blood pouring out of my left thigh. I took my hands and tried to stop the bleeding, and then told myself to "hold on...hold on..."

Within seconds, I was surrounded by soldiers of the scout platoon who immediately began first aid. I knew I must have been in bad shape because they were working frantically to stop the bleeding from every part of my body, using their T-shirts, belts, and anything else they could get their hands on. I was so proud of them. They recovered from the initial shock (many of them wounded themselves), and responded the way they had been trained. I also knew I was in bad shape because another officer in the battalion began to reassure me that I was going to be alright. I had been in the Army long enough to know that it probably meant that my condition was serious.

Fourteen soldiers were injured that day; one died and three were in critical condition. I was one of the critical soldiers. I would learn later, that the grenade blew off my left foot; severely damaged my right foot and leg; destroyed my right elbow; damaged my left shoulder; damaged my right ear; and lodged dozens of pieces of shrapnel throughout my face, chest, stomach, and legs. All of the critical soldiers were evacuated by helicopter to the hospital on Fort Campbell, treated and stabilized by doctors, and then flown for about 30 minutes to a trauma hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. From the time of the blast, until I went into emergency surgery at the Vanderbilt Trauma Center, I was awake. The pain was excruciating, but the pain meant that I was alive. I am told that on three different occasions at Vanderbilt, my parents were brought into my room with a chaplain when the doctors thought that I had lost the fight. But on three different occasions, they were wrong. After multiple surgeries and three weeks in the intensive care unit, I was medically evacuated to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. I would remain at Walter Reed as an in-patient for almost a year.

I have been asked on many occasions by friends and strangers, why did I stay in the military? Why not accept a medical retirement, start a second career, and earn a lot of money? Why not work in a profession that is “safe” and is not physically demanding on my damaged body? The short answer I give them is that it is not about the money or a life of leisure. So, what is it about? The answer to that question is a little more difficult and harder to understand unless you have ever been a soldier. In the remainder of this paper, I will attempt to answer the question, “Why I stayed?” But in order to do so, I must go back to the beginning, back to West Point.

## **Duty, Honor, Country**

I have always wanted to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point and become a soldier. I can remember my third grade teacher asking the students what they wanted to be when they grew up. Most of the children said they wanted to be astronauts because the Apollo space program was in full gear and mankind was racing to set foot on the moon. Other kids wanted to be doctors and firemen, but I said I wanted to be a cadet. As a child, I never wavered from that dream. So you can imagine the pride I felt standing on the Plain at West Point, reciting the oath on our very first day as cadets. All I could think about was my family and how that moment was a part of their dreams too. I wished my parents could be there, but they could not afford the plane tickets from Colorado. Nonetheless, I knew that their thoughts and prayers were with me on that day and at that moment. It is still one of the proudest moments of my entire life.

A few hours later my idyllic world would come crashing down. In my platoon was an upperclassman (for the purpose of this paper, I will call him Cadet Smith) who disliked minorities. Cadet Smith was the son of the Deep South, and I was a multiracial cadet that was intruding upon “his world.” He told me directly to my face that “my kind” did not belong there, and he was going to make it his personal goal to get rid of me. The racial insults were constant from Cadet Smith. He never referred to me by my name. Instead, he would call me Cadet Oreo, or Half-breed, or Mongrel. As a child growing up in Colorado, I had never experienced such blatant racism. I would learn later, that it didn’t matter that Cadet Smith was a son of the South. In fact, he was not even typical. I would learn later in life that no section of the country has a monopoly on racism, and that minorities can be racists too.

So why did I stay? I stayed because I couldn’t quit. I could not let the Cadet Smiths of this world win through intimidation and injustice. I stayed because hatred cannot be allowed to steal the dignity of a man. I stayed because sometimes you have to stand in the storm, even if you are alone and afraid. I stayed because I believed all of those words, in all of those books that I read as a child...the unalienable rights of man and the promise of America. I stayed because I believed in the ideals of West Point and

its timeless motto of “Duty, Honor, Country.” The values I learned at West Point would serve me well in my first duty station as a lieutenant.

### **Learning the Ropes**

The quality of soldiers in the Army at Fort Carson, Colorado, in the early 1980’s was not good. Most of my soldiers would not be able to serve in today’s Army. Only two soldiers in the platoon had a high school diploma. Many of the soldiers had problems with drugs, or alcohol, or the legal system. It was extremely hard to discharge a soldier from the Army because the military was having a difficult time recruiting young men and women to serve their country. The military was a low priority for the United States for several years after Vietnam, and consequently, the budget did not support requirements. At Fort Carson, it was difficult to get spare parts for vehicles, so at least half of the company’s vehicles could not drive out of the motor pool. Training ammunition was not available, so soldiers were not qualified on their basic weapon. Race riots were a common occurrence, and SDOs (Staff Duty Officer) carried a loaded .45 caliber pistol on duty. We were truly a “hollow army.”

I can remember the first time I served as the battalion SDO. I was nervous because of the responsibility and the consequences of standing before the battalion commander if something went wrong. Before serving as the SDO, I asked a few of the “old” lieutenants in the battalion about the duty. All of them reviewed the checklist with me and provided similar advice. Additionally, all of them told me not to go into the enlisted club located in the brigade area even though the checklist required you to do so. Their advice was to walk around the outside of the club and estimate the number of soldiers inside. When I asked why, their reply was that officers get assaulted when they go into the club.

During my tour of duty as the SDO, I wrestled with the advice from the “experienced” lieutenants and what I knew in my heart to be the right answer. The instructions were clear. The SDO was required to walk into the club, insure that it was orderly, and get an approximate count of the number of personnel inside. Walking around the outside of the building would not meet the requirement and the officer would have no idea about the number of soldiers in the club. In fact, he would have to lie and

make up a number. I decided to follow my conscience and chose the harder right, instead of the easier wrong.

The inside of the club was like a scene out of a B-rated Hollywood movie. It was dark and smoky and very crowded. The place reeked of beer, urine, sweat, and marijuana. As soon as I stepped in, conversation stopped and I could feel the stares through the darkness. I began to walk around the club to get an approximate headcount. I could hear the insults being hurled out of the darkness at officers in general and me specifically. I conducted my business, and then I left. By the time I returned to the battalion headquarters, I realized that I had been sweating, but I felt good that I had done the right thing.

I loved being a platoon leader. My soldiers were not smart, but they were savvy. In spite of their shortcomings, if they were properly led and motivated, they could accomplish some amazing things. I loved the challenge of taking a marginal or substandard performer, and turning him into a decent soldier. I loved to watch the cohesion build between soldiers in a unit as they accomplished a difficult task, and then sat around and bragged about it over a beer. I loved taking an unmotivated soldier and watch him develop into a soldier who was proud of the organization he belonged to. After a while, my troops would prove through inspections and competitions that they were the best platoon in the battalion. After I became one of the “experienced” lieutenants, I looked forward to going into the enlisted club to conduct an inspection. The place still smelled of beer, urine, and sweat, but now when I walked in, soldiers in my platoon would shout out my name, or “LT,” or the platoon motto. If soldiers from other units yelled something derogatory out of the darkness, my soldiers would yell back and challenge that soldier to a fight.

So why did I stay? I stayed because I realized that leadership is not about spare parts and training ammunition. It’s not about the amount of education a soldier has. It’s not about his race or his economic background. It’s about his heart and his commitment to his fellow man. It’s about developing the hand that you are dealt. It’s about giving back to society a better citizen than society gave to you when that soldier enlisted in the military. It doesn’t matter if a soldier stays for three years or thirty. If he leaves the military feeling a little bit better about his fellow man; if he begins to question some of

the prejudices that he grew up with; if he feels moved when he hears the national anthem being played and stands a little straighter, then staying in the military is worth all of the pain and sweat and hardship.

### **Blessed are the Peacekeepers**

I would re-learn the truth of those statements over and over again as a company commander with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division (Forward) in Germany and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Air Assault) in Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The Army had changed dramatically during the mid-1980's. It was more professional; the soldiers better educated and trained. The standards of discipline were much higher, but soldiers still responded to leadership the same way they did when I was a platoon leader.

In 1986, my company was deployed to the Sinai Peninsula as part of the multinational peacekeeping forces. The multinational forces and observers (MFO) had been in the Sinai since 1982, as a result of the Camp David peace agreement signed between Egypt and Israel in 1979. In December of 1985, 283 peacekeepers from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division died in a plane crash at Gander, Newfoundland, while they were returning from peacekeeping duties in the Sinai. We were the first unit from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to deploy to the Sinai after the Gander tragedy, so you can imagine the unspoken words that were on everyone's mind as we deployed to the region. The goodbye kisses were longer, and the tears flowed more freely. It takes a community a long time to recover from the loss of so many lives at one time.

The unit deployed to the region without incident and immediately began our duties as peacekeepers. As the first anniversary of the Gander crash approached, some soldiers in my company decided that they wanted to do something to honor the Screaming Eagles that had died at Gander. The idea caught on like a wild fire, and pretty soon a full blown "event" was planned. At one of my squad observation posts, the soldiers began to construct a monument out of sand, rock, a homemade mixture of cement, and paint that they mixed by hand. It took several weeks to build the monument, and the soldiers worked on it during their "free" time. Their self-imposed deadline was December 12th, one year to the day after the Gander tragedy. When it was completed, it was one of the most beautiful and memorable monuments I have ever

seen. The fact that it was built by soldiers to honor soldiers, made it more impressive than all of the grand monuments in our nation's capital.

As the company commander, I organized a simple ceremony to be conducted at the monument. The ceremony would begin upon the arrival of my first sergeant, Alton Grice, and a few other senior NCOs in the battalion. The observation post where the monument was built was located 101 miles from the battalion headquarters. In order to honor our fallen comrades from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, 1SG Grice decided that he would road march from the battalion headquarters to the monument site in three days. 1SG Grice was the best first sergeant I had ever served with. He used to say that there were three things that he loved in life: His family; his soldiers; and Alabama football. Roll Tide! He was a big man, with a big booming voice, and a big, bald head. He liked to do things in a big way, and the road march was his way of contributing to the event.

The senior NCOs arrived about 1000 hours on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December to the cheers of soldiers from all over the battalion and several allied nations. The Sinai desert is extremely hot, so the NCOs marched during the night and cooler hours of the day, and tried to sleep and tend to their aches during the hot part of the day. During the ceremony, the battalion chaplain led us in a few prayers, the battalion commander made some brief remarks, and then the National Anthem and a tape of Lee Greenwood's "I Am Proud to be an American" was played over a soldier's boom box. By the conclusion of the song, there was not a dry eye in the audience. Even the allied soldiers had tears in their eyes. After the official end of the ceremony, individual soldiers would go up to the monument and kneel to pray. Soon after, groups of soldiers in two's or three's would go to the monument to pray, and toward the end, entire squads of soldiers would stand before the monument to pray together. It was an amazing sight.

So why did I stay? I stayed because I feel privileged to serve beside men and women who would endure hardship simply because their country asked them to. I admire the fact that they choose to do so, even when their service is not always appreciated or adequately compensated by their country. They are not warmongers or would-be heroes. They are ordinary "Joes" from every part of the country, who are sometimes called upon to do extraordinary things. I stayed because I am continually amazed at the capability and ingenuity of the American soldier, and how they choose to

honor one of their own. I stayed because of the faith of soldiers I saw exhibited in that desolate place so many years ago, and have seen exhibited time and time again, in the lonely, forgotten places of this world. I stayed because I realized that those men, that band of brothers, are what the Army is about. It is what it has always been about. It is not about the weapons or the latest technology. It is about sacrifice and honor and loyalty. It's about belonging to something bigger than oneself, and maybe...just maybe, doing some good in the process.

### **We'll Be Alright**

As a young field grade officer, I was sent to Egypt to serve as a liaison officer with the Egyptian military for one year. After my tour of duty in Cairo, I was assigned back to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to serve as a brigade operations officer (S3). I loved serving as an operations officer. After serving as a battalion operations officer during my previous tour at Fort Campbell, I jumped at the chance to serve in that capacity again. At that time, the brigade's rotation to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) was the priority for the brigade commander. We did our homework, trained hard, and felt confident that we were ready to face the "world class" opposing force (OPFOR) at JRTC. I was wrong.

From the moment we arrived, the OPFOR taught us some tough lessons. They were professional, relentless, and unforgiving. During one unfortunate event, the entire brigade tactical operations center (TOC) was destroyed during an OPFOR attack. The brigade commander and staff were also "killed" in the air attack. I was not a casualty because I was at one of the subordinate battalion locations during the event. When I returned to the TOC, I discovered that in addition to the personnel that were lost in the attack, all of the physical aspects of the TOC were also destroyed (tents, lights, equipment, radios, vehicles, etc.). The only person around was the brigade command sergeant major who had just arrived at the TOC moments before I did. We did not have a lot of time to lament our unfortunate circumstance because the battalions were still engaged in combat, and I had a brigade operations order to write and issue to the battalions. CSM Nichols managed to procure a tent to work in, and I proceeded to get

to work. Since there were no lights, someone held a flashlight over my shoulder as I wrote the brigade operations order.

I was exhausted. I had been up for almost 36 hours, and now it looked like it was going to be another long day before I could lay my head down. I have to admit that I was feeling sorry for myself...tired, sitting in the dark, and writing an order by hand without a staff. And then, out of the darkness, I felt this firm hand on my shoulder. It was CSM Nichols. He took one look at my face and he knew. He knew what I was feeling and thinking without saying a word. In a clear, quiet voice he said, "I'm with you, sir. You can do it. We will be alright. We'll be alright." I heard those words and felt ashamed; ashamed because I had felt sorry for myself; ashamed because this confident, reassuring man had to remind me with just his look that young soldiers out there in the dark, engaged with the enemy, were depending upon us to do our job. After that, I sat up a little straighter, and got on with the task at hand.

During the course of the evening, CSM Nichols scrounged a T-ration tray of pork patties. The T-ration meal was not very edible, but it is amazing what you will eat when you are hungry. The tray was passed from one person to another standing in the dark. Each man would reach into the tray with his grubby hands, and then pass it to the next man. When the tray was passed to the officer standing next to me, he did not grab the tray (he could not see it), before the soldier standing next to him released it (assuming incorrectly that the young officer had grabbed it). The tray went crashing to the ground, spilling its contents. A flashlight was used to survey the damage, and immediately, the small group gathered in the dark began to laugh. The tray of food had tipped over as it fell, emptying its contents into the Kevlar helmet of the young officer, filling it up with patties and a lot of sauce. It was a perfect shot, and just what we needed to cut through the gloom. We had recovered our sense of humor, and after that, everything was alright.

So why did I stay? I stayed because I like being around people who can find humor in the smallest things to keep from going insane. I stayed because of great noncommissioned officers who endure the deprivations and hardships every single day because they believe in what they are doing; men who epitomize the Army value of selfless service. I stayed because a big, rock of a man had faith in me so many years

ago, even when I did not believe in myself. Years later, CSM Nichols would discover that he had an illness that would force him to retire from the military. At his retirement ceremony, we shared a moment together, and he recalled that JRTC experience many years ago. I wanted him to know that because of leaders like him, the Army was in better shape than when he first enlisted. I wanted him to know that when he reviewed the troops for the last time, he could feel at ease knowing that “we will be alright” because of his service and dedication.

### **Heart and Honor**

After my service as the brigade S3, I would be assigned as a political-military affairs officer in J5 on the Joint Staff in Washington. It was a tough assignment with long hours, but it was very rewarding. As the North Korea desk officer, I served as the military representative to the U.S. government team negotiating with the North Koreans in different capitals around the world. The negotiations led to the signing of the nuclear agreement between the United States and North Korea in 1994. After completing my joint tour of duty in 1996, I reported to Fort Campbell to take command of the 1-187<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion “Rakkasans” in 1996. Shortly after taking command, I was injured by the grenade.

I spent the next year of my life in Walter Reed, undergoing at least a dozen major surgeries and several minor surgeries. The expert medical team at the hospital worked hard to repair portions of the residual limb of my amputated left leg; made an extra effort to save my severely damaged right leg from amputation by conducting a series of bone grafts; and worked to repair my damaged right arm so that I might be able to feed myself someday. During my first three months, I felt helpless and humiliated because I could not do anything for myself. I was flat on my back like a turtle. I needed assistance to eat. I needed assistance to bathe; assistance to go to the bathroom (in bed); and assistance to get anything in the room. I should have been extremely depressed, but I was not. I was never really depressed because of the incredible support that I had from family, friends, and the military throughout my stay at Walter Reed.

They say that a man can accomplish a lot in this world if he has the love and support of a family. I know that saying is true in my case. I come from a large family; the fifth of eight children. One of my sisters is a nurse in Colorado. After my accident, Susie, spent the next three months of her life in my room at Walter Reed, sleeping in a chair. It was not the physical care that she provided me that was important. It was the fact that I was not alone, that I had someone to talk to about life outside of my hospital room, and that I could cry and not feel ashamed. My parents also sacrificed a lot during my recovery. In spite of their own failing health, my parents flew out to Washington every month from Colorado to visit with me for a week. They also coordinated the visits of my other siblings so that one of them was visiting for a few days every week during the early months of my recovery. I always knew that no matter what the future held, I had a family that would take care of me. Finally, my fiancée, Betsy, came to the hospital everyday after work and stayed with me until visiting hours were over. She helped me to believe in myself again. We were engaged to be married while I was serving on the Joint Staff in Washington. During my hospitalization, I told her that I would not blame her if she wanted to back out of the marriage proposal. I knew I would never be the same man that she agreed to marry several months before. But she never gave up on me and remained by my side when other women would have run. She gave me hope for the future, and hope is what I needed. I would never be where I am today without the love and support of my wife.

The visits I received from friends and strangers during my year at Walter Reed were constant, and I continued to receive a steady stream of cards and letters throughout my stay. The most memorable visits I received, however, were from old veterans who had amputated limbs. I did not know any of them before the accident, but I am proud to know these men now. Most of them were from the generation that fought in World War II. A few were amputees from the Korean War. Sometimes, they would come by my room to encourage me and to give me advice, mixed in with a war story or two. Usually, I saw them down in the physical therapy clinic. They would sit in their wheel chairs and cheer me on from the sidelines..."Do one more, Colonel." "We're behind you, Colonel." The funny thing is that they never did any physical therapy themselves. For them, I think the physical therapy clinic was just a place to meet with

other veterans who shared their condition. Regardless of why they were there, I deeply appreciated the fact that they were there encouraging me everyday. I would push myself, perhaps harder than I should have, because I did not want to let these men down.

Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to the senior leaders of the Army. I can remember a visit while I was at the trauma center in Vanderbilt by MG Robert Clark. He had flown on a helicopter from California, hopping his way across the country all night to appear at my bedside. And when he finally made it, he was speechless and moved to tears. The emotional silence spoke volumes. It spoke volumes about his character and his compassion. Other senior leaders displayed a similar characteristic while I was at Walter Reed. Generals at the highest levels of the Army would stop by my room at Walter Reed just to see how I was doing. I had never served with these men before, and yet, there they were taking time out of their busy schedules to check on another soldier. In fact, it was not until I had spoken with GEN(R) Franks that I even considered remaining on active duty. He had lost his leg to a grenade in Vietnam. GEN(R) Franks showed me what was possible and provided me with an inspirational example. A couple of weeks after the accident, I received a letter from the Department of the Army promising to put me back into command if I could pass the Army Physical Readiness Test (APRT). At the time, I did not have the use of any of my limbs, so I did not think remaining on active duty was even an option. I just wondered if I would be able to do anything productive in life. Nonetheless, the fact that the Army would make a commitment to one of their own, says a lot about the institution as a whole.

So why did I stay? I stayed because of the love of family; because too many people sacrificed their time, money, and even their health to get me back on my feet. I stayed because too many people put their lives on hold to make my life a little better. I stayed because I believe there is power in prayer, and because too many people, in too many places prayed for me everyday. I stayed because of the old soldiers who encouraged me to drive on, as if I was carrying the torch for all of them. I stayed because of the links in the chain from one generation of soldiers to the next. I stayed because in spite of the criticism in vogue today, the senior leaders in the Army

demonstrated with action how much they care about soldiers, and that loyalty from the top is still strong in the military.

### **On the Wings of Eagles**

After leaving Walter Reed Army Medical Center, I was sent back to Fort Campbell. Two years after the grenade incident, the Army leadership kept their promise. I took command again of the same unit that I commanded at the time of the accident, 1-187 Infantry Battalion "Rakkasans." My wife, parents, all of my brothers and sisters, and family members were there. Even the amputee veterans from Walter Reed had a representative there. I received a standing ovation when I received the battalion colors for the second time in my life, and I am told that there were very few dry eyes in the audience. I can say, without a doubt, that marching onto that parade field and holding those colors was the proudest moment of my life.

My first year of command was physically difficult. I did not want any special considerations given to me. I was an infantry battalion commander in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, and I needed to do what infantrymen were required to do. Road marches were the hardest on my stump. The marching itself was not the problem, it was the extra weight I had to carry on my back. Whenever soldiers would pass me, they would yell, "Rakkasans!" or "Hooah!" Young soldiers who were starting to fall back, would try a little harder to keep up with their unit if they saw me coming down the road. I tried hard to look like I was not in any pain, and would tell myself, "just one more step...just one more step," over and over again. When I finally got home, I would discover that the "socks" I wore over my amputated limb were bloody from the march. I would sit there in tears from the pain, as my wife massaged my leg and helped me dress the wounds. The next day, I would pull my boots on and go at it again.

The second year of my command was much easier physically, but much more challenging professionally. My unit was selected to serve as the first infantry battalion from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to deploy to Kosovo. Higher headquarters prepared us well for the deployment, but no amount of training could fully prepare us for the environment that we were exposed to. Kosovo is a complex operation that involves peace support, peacekeeping, and peace enforcement operations all at the same time.

During our tour of duty, the ethnic violence was extremely high. Ironically, NATO went to war to stop Serbian violence against the Albanians. And now, to win the peace, NATO forces were busy trying to prevent Albanian violence against the Serbian minority.

During one particular incident, Albanian extremists murdered an elderly Serbian man who was fishing by a stream. The Serbians who lived in the same town as the old man began to riot. They immediately began to attack any Albanians traveling on the road through their town. Albanian passengers (men, women, and children) were pulled from their vehicles and brutally beaten. Their cars were set on fire. The Albanians would have been killed were it not for the courage and quick reaction of the American infantry squad located in the town. The small group of soldiers risked personal injury to save the lives of the injured Albanians. I rushed reinforcements to the town as quickly as possible. First one squad, then another, and soon entire platoons. Hundreds of Serbians were now rioting and turning their anger on the American soldiers. The riots lasted for 12 hours. Through it all, the soldiers responded just as they had been trained. Several Rakkasans were injured by bricks, bottles, and clubs, but the soldiers maintained their discipline and professionalism. You would have been proud to be an American on that day. No one who was there would have blamed a young soldier for using deadly force based upon the deadly intent of their attackers. But those young soldiers stood their ground in the chaos, protected innocent Albanians, and eventually regained control without using deadly force.

So why did I stay? I stayed because a man could go through his entire life and never encounter men like I served with in that unit. Men who would stand by your side in a fight; not because he believes in your cause, but because of the unspoken bond between soldiers. At the end of the day, he does not risk his life because of his love of country or some higher ideal. He risks his life because the man on his left or right needs him. It has always been that way for soldiers. I stayed because men like these are the reason why the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union was defeated. It wasn't politics or the economy that defeated communism. It was American determination, commitment, and sacrifice demonstrated by American soldiers in far away places all over the globe...every day of every year, for the last several decades.

## Looking Back

Perhaps Tom Brokaw had it wrong. The generation that fought World War II was great, and the world owes them all of the praise that they have received. But the greatest generation of soldiers might be this current generation. Soldiers who have fought and died in the “little wars” in Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Kuwait, and now Afghanistan. It is one thing to serve when the country is united behind the cause. It is much more difficult to continue to serve when the objectives are not clear, the endstate is unknown, and the nation is divided. In spite of it all, this generation continues to volunteer to serve their country and their fellow man. There will always be dragons to slay in this world. Critics will say that we are foolish...that we are charging windmills. Perhaps. I once heard that the lost causes were the only causes worth fighting for, and maybe that's right, and that's why I stayed.

So you see, I stayed for many reasons. A hundred years from now, when the history of America is written, we will be remembered as a great nation not because of our wealth or military strength. History will say that we were a great nation because of the principles and values that we hold so dear; that we gave of our material wealth to help countries that were less fortunate than our own; that at times the nation committed its sons and daughters to defend the cause of liberty and justice around the world; and that in mankind's darkest moments, it turned to America as the last, best hope on the planet.

I guess in the end, I stayed because I love the Infantry and the soldiers who serve in the Infantry. Whenever I think about all that they endure, I think about an article by Ernie Pyle, a war correspondent writing about the Infantry in Tunisia, North Africa, in 1943. He wrote:

“I love the infantry because they are the underdogs. They are the mud-rain-frost-and-wind boys. They have no comforts, and they even learn to live without the necessities. And in the end, they are the guys that wars can't be won without...For four days and nights they have fought hard, eaten little, washed none, and slept hardly at all...On their shoulders and backs they carry heavy steel tripods, machine-gun barrels, leaden boxes of ammunition. Their steps seem to sink into the ground from the overload they are bearing...In their eyes as they pass is not hatred, not excitement, not despair, not the tonic of their victory – there is just the simple

expression of being here as though they had been here doing this forever, and nothing else...There is agony in your heart and you almost feel ashamed to look at them. They are just guys from Broadway and Main Street, but you wouldn't remember them...Their world can never be known to you, but if you could see them just once, just for an instant, you would know that no matter how hard people work back home, they are not keeping pace with these infantrymen in Tunisia."

I will always remember my experiences at West Point and the fun I had as a young platoon leader. I will remember the squad on patrol staying focused even as the sweat got lost in the rain. I will remember the homesick eyes of the soldier on guard duty and the exhaustion on the face of an M240 gunner as he climbed another hill towards the objective. I will remember 1SG Grice and CSM Nichols. I will remember the sacrifice and honor of good, decent men. I will remember their determination in the heat and dust and winter cold. I will remember their loyalty, their laughter, and their tears... And if you could see what I have seen...just once...then you will understand why I stayed.