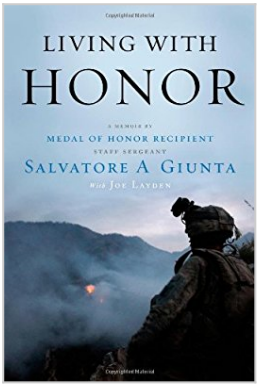

Living with Honor: A Memoir

By Salvatore Giunta, Joe Layden

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A compelling memoir from a true hero—and one of the few living persons to ever be awarded the celebrated Medal of Honor.

There was the sound of a single bullet, and then . . . a deafening barrage of gunfire and explosions. There were, literally, thousands of bullets in the air at once, and more tracers streaking across the sky than there were stars overhead. It was a miracle that most of us weren't killed instantly.

Staff Sergeant Salvatore, "Sal," Giunta was the first living person to receive the Medal of Honor—the highest honor presented by the U.S. military—since the conclusion of the Vietnam War. In *Living with Honor*, this hero who maintains he is "just a soldier" tells us the story of the fateful day in Afghanistan that led to his receiving the unique honor. With candor, insight, and humility, Giunta not only recounts the harrowing events leading up to when he and his company fell under siege, but also illustrates the empowering, invaluable lessons he learned.

As a seventeen-year-old teen working at Subway, Giunta was like any other kid trying to figure out which step to take next with his life after graduating from high school. When Giunta walked into the local Army recruiting center in his hometown, he just wanted a free T-shirt. But when he walked out, his curiosity had been piqued and he enlisted in the Army.

Deployed to Afghanistan, Giunta soon learned from the more seasoned soldiers how "different" this war was compared to others that America had fought. Stationed with the 173rd Airborne Brigade near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in the Korengal Valley— also known as the "Valley of Death"—Giunta and his company were ambushed by Taliban insurgents. Giunta went into action after seeing that his squad leader had fallen. Exposing himself to blistering enemy fire, Giunta charged toward his squad leader and administered first aid while he covered him with his own body. Though Giunta was struck by the relentless barrage of bullets, he engaged the enemy and then attempted to reach additional wounded soldiers. When he realized that yet another soldier was separated from his unit, he advanced forward. Discovering two rebels carrying away a U.S. soldier, Giunta killed one insurgent and wounded the other, and immediately provided aid to the injured soldier. More than just a remarkable memoir by a remarkable person, *Living with Honor* is a powerful testament to the human spirit

and all that one can achieve when faced with seemingly impossible obstacles.

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The President clasps the medal around my neck. Applause fills the room. But I know it's not for me alone. I look at my mom and dad. I look at Brennan's parents and I look at Mendoza's. And I try to communicate to Brennan and Mendoza wordlessly: *This is for you . . . and for everyone who has fought and died. For everyone who has made the ultimate sacrifice. I am not a hero. I'm just a soldier.*

—Salvatore A. Giunta, from *Living with Honor*

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Editorial Review

Review
“More than anything, it’s his genuineness and humility that will make you appreciate Giunta’s spirit and his memoir. If we as a nation are still capable of producing young men like him, we’re doing okay.” (Time Magazine)

"Candid, confessional...a simply told account that reminds us of the awesome weight accompanying this signal honor." (Kirkus Reviews)

"An adept observer of human nature, Giunta's portraits of his comrades-in-arms are full of wit and warmth about their foibles and admiration for their combat skills...With clarity and maturity, Giunta shows he understands the complexities of contemporary Afghan society." (Publishers Weekly)

About the Author
Salvatore A. Giunta retired from active duty in 2011. Prior to that, he was responsible for the health, welfare, morale, training, and accountability of the soldiers in his company in the Army, working to ensure all unit family members were well taken care of while their spouses were deployed in Afghanistan. He is one of the few living persons to ever be awarded the Medal of Honor, and he was presented the award by President Obama in a White House ceremony on November 16, 2010. Giunta has also received numerous other commendations, including the Bronze Star, Meritorious Service Medal and the Purple Heart. He lives in Colorado with his wife, Jen, and their daughter.

Joe Layden has authored or coauthored more than thirty books, including multiple *New York Times* bestsellers.

Living with Honor

CHAPTER 1

I should probably warn you at the outset that there is nothing very inspirational or heroic about the early part of my life. There is no military tradition in my family, no long gray line of service that inspired my enlistment. To the best of my knowledge, I have only two relatives who served in the military: a grandfather who did two years in the Navy during World War II, and an uncle on my mother’s side who retired after twenty-one years of service, also in the Navy. Although I’m sure they were decent men who served their country honorably, neither one really inspired me, simply because I never really knew either of them. I suppose my uncle might have had some wisdom to impart, or at least some practical information about what it’s like to serve in the military, but I rarely had a chance to speak with him. Practically speaking, there wasn’t much need for a Navy man to spend time in Iowa, where I grew up. In recent years we’ve gotten to know each other a bit, but when I was a kid he was just someone whose name we invoked from time to time. Both he and his job were a mystery.

Our family history is a fairly typical American story, although maybe a bit more colorful than most. Three generations back, Augustine Giunta emigrated from Termini Imerese, a small Sicilian port city of maybe seventy thousand people located roughly twenty kilometers from Palermo.

My great-grandfather Augustine first came to the United States with one of his brothers, Anthony, when he was just fourteen years old in 1892. Augustine worked in Chicago at markets until he was twenty-eight years old, sending money back to his mother in Italy and traveling back to see her from time to time. When he went back to Italy, he would work as a sheepherder, making five cents a month. In 1905, he married Josephine Pusateri and together they emigrated to the United States, arriving first at Ellis Island and then moving to McHenry, Illinois—roughly sixty miles northwest of Chicago. They soon opened an ice cream parlor in the Chicago area.

As I understand it, being a Sicilian in America at that time was a rather difficult and complicated matter. Sicily, of course, had its own issues with organized crime and the pressure it exerted. Some people were marrying into their own families in a desperate attempt to preserve lineage and avoid the corrupting influence of the Mafia. Others simply pulled up roots and left their homeland. The Giunta family became fractured around the turn of the century: Some stayed in Sicily and some came to America. But even among those that immigrated, there was disagreement over how the family name would be represented in the New World.

There was, of course, a thriving criminal element in Chicago at the time, and because of this Augustine and Josephine figured it wasn't a safe place to raise a family. Augustine decided they would move to Dubuque after hearing the town announced at the train station in Chicago and then taking the train there to see what it had to offer. Among the first things he saw were some Italian storefronts, and the decision was made on the spot. During the move from McHenry to Dubuque, there was a train wreck in which all of the family's ice cream parlor glassware broke. Lacking the funds to purchase new equipment, Augustine and his brother Sam bought a horse and wagon and in 1913 began delivering produce door-to-door. By 1928 they had opened Giunta Brothers Produce in an open-market area of Dubuque. Business went so well that the family (which by this time included Augustine's two sons, Salvatore and Vince) opened a second Giunta Brothers Produce store in Clinton, Iowa, in 1940. That store, unfortunately, burned down in 1963, and due to a combination of financial problems and the growing popularity of large supermarkets, the family produce store gradually went out of business, prompting my great-grandfather to reconsider the merits of a being a small business owner.

Having now visited Termini Imerese, I can't help but be filled with admiration for my great-grandfather. To think of that journey—from a coastal city in Sicily to Chicago and finally to Dubuque, Iowa—well, you don't do something like that unless you have a sturdy set of balls. I can only imagine the disorientation the Giuntas must have felt while passing through the great, sweeping cornfields of eastern Iowa. But I guess they figured it was worth the risk.

Family history gets a little fuzzy after that. I was named after my grandfather, Salvatore, who held a number of different jobs in addition to serving in the Navy. I do know he was stationed for a while in Australia, and that he suffered from a variety of health problems, most notably emphysema, and from what I hear he was a good and honest man. But my dad didn't talk about him that much, and I always got the sense that Salvatore Giunta was not a strong, visible father figure in his kids' lives. At least, not in the manner that my father was involved in our lives. But I suppose that's a generational difference.

My father, Steven Giunta, is Iowa born and raised. He grew up in Dubuque, went to school in Chicago, came back home, and eventually got a job as a lab technician for Abbott Laboratories, covering a territory that stretched across the eastern portion of the state. I was born in Clinton, Iowa, and we spent a few years there before we moved to Cedar Rapids, which gave Dad the opportunity to get home more often.

My mother is of Irish descent; her maiden name was Rosemary Judge. There's actually some Irish blood in

my father's family as well, so despite having a name like Salvatore Giunta, I'm more Irish than Italian. It's a volatile mix, but a good one, in my opinion. You get the Irish and the Italians together, and nobody backs down from a fight.

Looking back on it, I was blessed with a remarkably stable and nurturing upbringing. I didn't always see it that way at the time, unfortunately, but I know better now. Before getting married, my mother had worked as a security guard at the Quad Cities Generating Station, a nuclear power plant located in Cordova, Illinois. I never saw this part of her life and couldn't imagine it, frankly—the idea of my mom wearing a uniform, carrying a gun, and escorting truck drivers from the front gate to their destination within the plant was almost beyond comprehension. That part of her life had long since passed by the time I came along. And for the next several years she was a stay-at-home mom, raising three kids while my father worked, and re-entering the workforce only when all of her children were in school.

I have two younger siblings, a brother named Mario and a sister named Katie. We're all lucky to have been raised in this environment. Cedar Rapids was a city of perhaps a hundred thousand people when I was growing up—big enough to be interesting, but not overwhelming. We lived in a pleasant suburban subdivision where the doors were never locked and you knew all your neighbors. Mom was actively involved in everything we did, from teaching arts and crafts to arranging play dates with other kids. It was idyllic.

Best of all, we lived right across the street from the city's municipal golf course. I wasn't a country club kid—we didn't have that kind of money. Nevertheless, thanks to the city of Cedar Rapids, I became an avid golfer. A youth golf membership at the muni was ridiculously cheap. For a hundred bucks you could golf every day, all summer long, quitting only when your hands blistered or you grew bored or frustrated. It was easily the best deal in town. As a result, from roughly the age of nine, golf became my passion. I'd get up in the morning, throw my bag over my shoulder, and meet a few of my friends on the first tee. Sometimes we'd stay there all day long.

Golf was the first sport that really captured my attention, which is interesting when you consider that it's such a contemplative, finicky sport, and I was by nature a hyperactive and even somewhat reckless boy. But time and circumstance and proximity allowed me to get serious about it. Golf also encouraged me to learn the fine art of bullshitting, a skill that comes in handy to this day. There were times I'd show up in the clubhouse alone, eager to play a round, only to find that I'd been assigned to a foursome with three strangers, some of whom were older than my parents. I learned to introduce myself, and to act like I belonged there. I tried always to be respectful, because I knew that, unlike me, most of them had paid some fairly serious money for the privilege of golfing. I'd listen thoughtfully to their conversations, choosing carefully any words I might contribute. Last thing I wanted was for them to think I was some punk kid. Fortunately, my game spoke for itself. At that time, when I was golfing virtually every day, I could outshoot a lot of grown-ups, and my skill on the course gave me confidence in social interactions.

Golf helped me fine-tune interpersonal skills like shaking hands or looking someone in the eye when I spoke. I could do twenty-seven holes a day; sometimes thirty-six holes. Then I could walk home, jump on my bike, and ride a mile or two to hang out with my buddies. How many boys have that sort of freedom and fun when they're nine or ten years old?

Yeah . . . I was lucky.

Like most kids in Iowa, I was introduced to wrestling at an early age as well. While wrestling is an overlooked or forgotten sport in most parts of the country, it continues to be practiced with an almost

religious fervor in the Hawkeye State. I was in first grade the first time I wrestled, weighed maybe fifty pounds. I got into it because all of my cousins wrestled, and it was Iowa, and the sport just seemed to be out there in the atmosphere, taking up space and demanding interest. Within a few years, though, I'd learned how to golf and my interest in wrestling ebbed and flowed from that point forward. I liked the physicality of the sport, the intensity of one-on-one battle, but golf was more convenient, more fun. And I was better at it.

Golf gets into your blood, in ways both good and bad. As a grown man I golf only recreationally, more for the peacefulness and tranquility it offers than for any desire to master the game or shoot a particular score. I like being outdoors; I like the smell of a freshly clipped green, and the feel of the earth giving slightly beneath my feet. When I golf I am reminded of how much I love nature and the outdoors, and how much I have to be grateful for. In the beginning, though, I was a competitor and a student of the game. For maybe five years I soaked up every lesson I could learn, spent hours on the driving range and putting green. I was calm and focused, determined to absorb everything around me. I'd find myself in a foursome with better golfers and start taking mental notes. It was a healthy, productive obsession.

And then it wasn't.

I golfed so much, and became so familiar with my home course, that I began to expect perfection. The slightest deviation—a single bad approach shot or three-putted green—could mess up an entire round. By the time I hit the teenage years, I had become a volatile and unpredictable golfer—your basic club-throwing, cursing, red-faced maniac. And that's when I quit. Golfing was no longer fun; it was an exercise in frustration. I'd started out playing for economic reasons, falling in love with the game because it was enjoyable and a good way to spend time with my buddies, and now I cared only about shooting a great score. If I didn't par the first three holes, I'd want to turn around, march back to the clubhouse, and start all over again. I sought perfection, and perfection just isn't possible. Not in golf; not in life. There are things you can't control.

Fortunately, other sports are more forgiving. Eighth grade was the first year I could play football for my school team, and I fell for it almost as quickly as I had fallen for golf, although in a very different way, and for very different reasons. How can I put this without sounding like a knucklehead? I guess I can't, so I'll just say it:

I liked to hit people.

It kind of surprised me that I felt that way, as I'd never been a particularly big or tough kid. Even now, I'm only five-foot-nine, maybe 175 pounds. And I don't think of myself as being especially aggressive or temperamental by nature. With adolescence, though, I was flooded with testosterone, and it was in need of some proper channeling. Football was the most obvious and healthy option. Anyway, the competition for golf in Cedar Rapids was intense. If I wanted to excel at something, football provided a much wider path. That realization, combined with my growing annoyance with the sport of golf, and the satisfaction I felt whenever I had a chance to put on a helmet and collide with another boy, led me to football. Truth is, while I still enjoy golf to this day, I also enjoy flattening someone to the ground once in a while. No point in denying who and what we are.

Something happened to me around middle school. For a while I was a reasonably engaged and successful student, but then things began to change. School lost its appeal and quickly became merely something I was required to attend, several hours of forced inactivity made tolerable only by the presence of middle-school

girls. I'm not proud to say this, but by the time I reached high school, here's the way I looked at it: I know I need a diploma in order to do anything with my life, and all my friends are here anyway, so . . . I guess I'll keep going.

If dropping out had been an acceptable option, I might have quit school at the age of sixteen, but it wasn't an option. Not in my house. So I continued to float through school, getting Cs and Bs without a whole lot of effort, never striving for anything more than that (even though I was capable), never missing class often enough or causing sufficient trouble to get tossed out or even suspended. I went to school for my own reasons—which had nothing to do with academics—and figured I had control of the situation. I didn't lack confidence or capability, that's for sure, but I was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a serious student. I didn't exert myself, didn't study, didn't lose a moment's sleep about how I would perform on a given test or lab. I'd just sit in class, half-listening, half-daydreaming, and then I'd take the test and generally do well enough to avoid calling attention to my performance.

And that was fine with me.

It was not acceptable to my parents, however. I'm a new father myself now, so I have a completely different perspective on a lot of things that occurred while I was growing up, but at the time I just didn't understand why my mother and father were so exasperated by my lack of academic effort. That I was a perfectly competent but indifferent student was a source of unending irritation and frustration to them, as it would be for any parent. I would never go so far as to call myself "smart," but certainly I was capable of more in the classroom than I had demonstrated. I was a classic underachiever, and what parent wouldn't find that disappointing?

"What's the big deal?" I'd say. "It's not like I'm flunking out."

This often provoked a lecture about responsibility and the importance of setting goals and having some greater purpose in life, some focus and ambition . . . none of which I wanted to hear. As a result, my parents and I engaged in a running battle, one that stretched out over the course of some five years, ultimately ending with a fracturing of our relationship—particularly between my father and me.

The thing is, I wasn't a troublemaker, so I usually felt the criticism was unwarranted. I would show up to class, be quiet and respectful while the teacher was talking, speak only when I was called upon, and simply try to avoid embarrassment or trouble. Granted, my mind would often be a hundred miles away (or at least a few rows away, depending on where the pretty girls were seated), but I wasn't a bad kid. I didn't get detention and I wasn't disrespectful to teachers; I didn't get into fights with other students. I knew where the line was and I tried very hard not to cross it. This was true throughout middle school and high school, and, to a great extent, even while I was in the Army. It's a valuable skill—knowing when to pull back from the abyss of stupidity. Despite my best efforts to underwhelm them, most of my teachers actually liked me. I think they saw me for what I was: a nice enough kid, sociable to a fault, who would rather have been somewhere else.

Football provided structure and engagement for a while. I played safety and wide receiver, preferred the former because I got to hit more than get hit. By the end of my sophomore year, though, I had given up the sport in favor of less structured and wholesome pursuits. I had a group of buddies, and we would pass the time by lifting weights, playing ball at the Y, drinking beer . . . the stuff kids do when they have no real direction or ambition. I had a girlfriend, too, at the time. As has been the case throughout my life (including my marriage), she was an example of me outkicking my coverage: A senior, two years older than me, Abby was intelligent and pretty and as driven as I was directionless. I'm not sure what she saw in a sophomore, but

then I don’t claim to have any great insight into the female mind. My parents were ambivalent about our relationship. They were naturally concerned about the age difference, but couldn’t deny that in every other way Abby was a positive influence and a terrific role model. She was a good girl, popular with her classmates, admired and respected by teachers. She was in the school orchestra, which by definition made her a smart and motivated student. If not for the fact that she was eighteen and I was sixteen, they wouldn’t have had any reason to complain.

As it turned out, the difference in our ages proved too formidable a hurdle. Abby went off to the University of Iowa the following year. I chased her to Iowa City on weekends (and sometimes even during the week), driving my ’96 Dodge Stratus forty-five miles down the highway for the chance to spend a few hours with her. The idea of their sixteen-year-old son running around unchecked in a college town did not sit well with my parents, of course, but there wasn’t much they could do about it except let the relationship run its course. Which it did, in fairly short order.

I can honestly say that military service wasn’t even on my personal radar until about a week before I actually enlisted. I was not a particularly ambitious or zealous kid, not really politically or militarily aware. There was one current-events class I enjoyed at Kennedy High School, a language arts class called Perspectives. It involved a lot of discussion and debate about topics in the news, and I kind of liked that. Still, it felt somewhat abstract and distant. Like many other kids of my generation, I felt no strong connection to or interest in politics until the morning of September 11, 2001.

Like most people, I can vividly recall exactly where I was when I heard the news. It was chemistry class, second period. I was a sixteen-year-old junior, wandering aimlessly through another school day, working halfheartedly on a lab assignment, trying to figure out the density of different liquids, when word filtered down to our classroom. Something about a terrible accident in New York City; a plane crashing into one of the Twin Towers. Suddenly every television set in the school was lit up, and every classroom had suspended normal teaching activities to focus on this tragedy half a continent away. At that point that morning, no one knew what had happened yet. The news commentators—like everyone else—were working under the assumption that the jet had gone wildly off course and experienced some sort of catastrophic failure, resulting in a collision with one of the towers. It wasn’t until the second plane hit that the unfathomable became real: This wasn’t an accident—it was a terrorist attack, intentional, willful, coordinated, and almost incomprehensibly lethal.

To those of us watching, it was our first view of evil.

We didn’t do any work the remainder of that school day. We just watched in stunned silence as events unfolded in real time. I remember feeling a weird and almost inexplicable mixture of repulsion, anger, and energy. I was just a kid, but I was an easily excited kid. Although generally lazy and unmotivated when it came to schoolwork, I could be hyperactive to the point of annoyance if something caught my attention. I’d slog through the day at school, but as soon as the final bell rang, my motor would shift into gear, and I’d be going a hundred miles an hour. Even as I sat there quietly, trying to be respectful of the horror endured by the victims of 9/11, thinking about their friends and families, I felt like I wanted to jump out of my skin. I wanted to be there. Better yet, I wanted to be wherever it was that these fuckers called home, laying waste to everything they held dear.

It was primitive, unfocused, animalistic.

I wanted revenge.

Not long before 9/11 I had read a book about the Vietnam War, and the sacrifices that had been made by the men who fought there, and how underappreciated they were. The book resonated to some extent, but more on a visceral level than a psychological level: Hey, war sounds kind of cool! I didn't get it then, and I wouldn't get it for quite some time to come. War is not cool, of course. It is brutal and inhuman and tragic on multiple levels. It's also sometimes necessary. All I knew then, as I watched the Twin Towers fall, was that someone had to pay for what was happening to the United States. And I wanted in on the deal. To a great extent, I think this was true of the entire country. Even though there had been other military actions since Vietnam—Desert Storm had brought us into Kuwait and Iraq in the 1990s, and by the start of a new decade we had established a presence in Afghanistan as well—it took a historic terrorist attack to galvanize the nation to such an extent that we were not only prepared for war, but eager for it.

So, yeah, the sixteen-year-old kid in that classroom wanted to jump out of his seat, run out of school, enlist in the Army, and get a gun in his hand as quickly as possible. I wanted to shoot someone in the face for attacking the United States, and for doing it in such a cowardly way. Admittedly, though, it was a fleeting moment of rage, fueled primarily by adolescent adrenaline. In the coming weeks and months, the images of 9/11 fell into the back of my mind, losing clarity and provocation with the passage of time; as they receded, so, too, did my bloodlust. I had smaller, more personal things to worry about—like graduating from high school, which was still nearly two years down the road, and still far from guaranteed.

After taking a few years off from wrestling, I returned to the mat late in the fall of my junior year, hoping to earn a spot on the varsity team. Unfortunately, right before the season started, I suffered what would prove to be a career-ending injury. It happened in a preseason tournament, when my opponent executed a single-leg takedown. I knew it was bad before I even hit the ground. I felt something pop in my knee—one of those weird sensations that doesn't just hurt like hell, but also demands attention simply by virtue of how unusual it feels. When I looked down, I could see that my kneecap was in the wrong place, sort of pushed to the side, out of its normal track. The orthopedic surgeon popped it back into place the next day, but made it clear that I wouldn't be wrestling any time soon. I was placed in a straight-leg immobilizer for several weeks and continued to feel the effects of the injury for some time to come. Rather than work my butt off trying to rehabilitate the leg in time to salvage a few weeks at the end of the season, I decided to direct my energy elsewhere. After all, it was winter in Iowa; if you're not on the wrestling or basketball or swimming team, there's not a lot else for a high-school kid to do. So I decided to get a job.

In theory, this seemed like an admirable display of maturity and initiative.

In reality it was a big mistake.

See, the job was at a Krispy Kreme doughnut shop. And not just any old Krispy Kreme, but a production facility, where they make thousands of doughnuts a day. I'd stand there all day, bored out of my mind, watching the doughnuts slide off the line, hot and sticky and tantalizingly fragrant. More times than I can remember I'd just grab a doughnut and pop it into my mouth. Sometimes, in fact, one wasn't enough. I'd grab five or six glazed doughnuts at a time, squish them into a solid little doughnut ball, and devour it in one bite. That's like two thousand calories and a hundred grams of fat—in one mouthful!

This was a bad time for me. When I got hurt right before wrestling season I was in great shape. Stood about five-foot-eight, weighed maybe 145 pounds. Six months later I had ballooned to an unfathomable 220

pounds. It looked like there were two people stuffed into my body. I was abusing myself—eating too much, drinking too much, not working out, feeling sorry for myself. Abby broke up with me, citing, among other things, a sudden lack of physical attraction. (Who could blame her?) Most of my buddies were playing sports, so I didn't see them quite as much. And home life? Well, that had become a toxic situation.

I'll take most—if not all—of the blame for the deterioration of my relationship with my parents. Mom was more tolerant of my aimlessness and belligerence, so we managed to at least keep the lines of communication open. But my relationship with my father completely fell apart. When I was sixteen years old, I thought my dad was the stupidest man I'd ever met in my entire life. I couldn't see why I had to listen to him or take his advice or follow his rules. What did we fight about? You might better ask what didn't we fight about. Every interaction was cause for antagonism and verbal jousting. Simply put, I was an idiot: drinking, hanging out with the boys, chasing girls, ignoring my schoolwork . . . getting fat and lazy.

My father had been a hard and diligent worker his whole life, so he naturally and understandably found my lack of initiative and my self-destructive tendencies somewhat disturbing. I didn't want to hear it, though. I figured as long as I wasn't being brought home by the cops, I wasn't doing anything wrong. And that wasn't true, of course. It's not the right way to look at life. But at that point in time, that's the way I saw things: through a very narrow and selfish prism.

Only when I became smarter and older (which went hand in hand with me, by the way) did I come to realize that my father's advice and concern came from an honest and respectful place—a place of love. I'm a father now, so I get that. I can just imagine the way he felt at night, staying up and worrying when he knew I was out drinking with my friends, driving home, and generally just behaving irresponsibly and selfishly. I can imagine how much I must have hurt him when I lashed out at him and insulted him and refused to even negotiate. I understand now that while he wasn't a perfect man, he had my best interests at heart. He had life experience; I had none. Hell, I was the one being stupid and rigid. I look back on it today and I just feel so apologetic, so . . . ashamed.

I don't mean to imply that I was a budding criminal or anything like that. A lot of activities that occupied my time fell under the heading of Normal Stupid Adolescent Behavior. When I joined the military I was suddenly surrounded by kindred spirits—kids who had gotten sidetracked in one way or another, maybe didn't fit in at school, or had gotten into some trouble. Most of these guys had not been as fortunate as I was in regard to their family or socioeconomic background. A number of them had been raised near the poverty line; many came from broken homes. I was lucky by comparison. I'd come from an affluent area and had been raised by two loving parents. In some ways I led a double life while growing up. I'd go out and raise a little hell, treat my parents poorly, and then behave respectfully and maturely around other people, like my teachers and coaches and employers. I figured (incorrectly) that one canceled out the other.

Being a good person in one setting does not give you a free pass to be an asshole in others.

It's interesting, though: I ran into a lot of people in the Army, especially the infantry, with similar stories. The job no doubt attracts a certain personality type, one that craves action and confrontation and risk. Adrenaline junkies, I guess. While some of us have had difficulty with authority and discipline, we ironically embrace a culture in which, from the moment you sign up, someone is in your face, screaming at you, barking orders, telling you when you can tie your shoes or take a shit. Maybe "embrace" isn't the right word. When you join the Army, you either accept the culture or you wash out. You learn to survive. I got sucked in by a recruiting pitch and soon found myself in a world unlike anything I'd ever experienced. And while it seemed at first to be a place of maddening illogic, where rules were established for no apparent reason and punishment was dispensed with glee, eventually I learned otherwise.

The Army brought me for the first time into a world with an unyielding moral compass; a world in which breaking the law results in the law breaking you right back—swiftly and without discussion. It taught me for the very first time that responsibility is a real thing and that authority matters. And you will respect it.

But, as I said, those were not the reasons why I signed up. I did not enlist in the Army to better myself. I did not enlist because I wanted to learn the value of respecting authority, or to force myself to behave in a certain manner. No, no, no. Those were secondary things that came with enlisting in the military—fringe benefits, I suppose you could call them. I signed up to fight for my country; to jump out of planes, shoot guns, and kill people. I signed up for the T-shirt. That's just the truth of it.

But I got much more than I bargained for, in ways both good and bad.

I should also tell you that Jared was my inspiration.

Remember Jared? The guy who lost a hundred pounds by adopting a diet composed mainly of Subway sandwiches and later became (and remains) a popular Subway spokesperson? I was thinking about Jared when I swapped my job at Krispy Kreme for a position at Subway late in the fall of my senior year. Everything about Subway was an improvement. At Krispy Kreme I worked the assembly line; at Subway I was a sandwich "artist." Instead of scarfing down mounds of hot, greasy doughnuts, I'd eat one six-inch sub, loaded with veggies, every shift. And I started working out again. Like crazy. Pretty soon I was down to 185 pounds and feeling good about myself.

That's when I heard the commercial.

It came over the radio one night in April of 2003, a simple little advertisement by the Army, promising a free T-shirt to anyone who stopped by the local recruiting center. I went in the very next day, not so much because I had any burning desire to join the Army, but because I thought it would be neat to have an Army T-shirt.

I'm not kidding.

I went in for the free T-shirt and came out with a sense of curiosity. The recruiter did not feed me a line of bullshit. He very quietly and matter-of-factly said that we were a country at war.

"We're in Afghanistan," he said. "We're in Iraq. And we need men and women to fight these battles."

Then he sort of shrugged.

"If you want to make a difference, this is your chance. You can do this if you want to do it."

He paused, smiled.

"Or you can be a pussy and not do it."

I have to give the guy credit—he knew how to push the right buttons. Dispense with the flag-waving and rah-rah rhetoric. Just go straight for the gut: question my manhood. It worked, too. For the next few days I chewed on his challenge. Beyond the visceral attraction of being a soldier—this guy was airborne infantry,

which sounded exciting—I found that the notion of serving my country (a higher purpose, to be sure) began to resonate.

I was eighteen years old, and at that age there's not a lot you can do to change the world. I liked the idea of trying to have an impact on something important. It made sense to me that the Army offered that opportunity. If nothing else, the Army offered a guaranteed paycheck and a job that would entail significantly more action than working at Subway . . . as well as a chance to jump out of planes, shoot guns, and see the world. It promised an adventure, and it sure delivered on that promise.

It took about a week for me to make the decision. I'd already accumulated enough credits to graduate, so most of my time was spent working and working out. I had no intention of going to college. Whether I had the required brainpower was irrelevant; I wanted no part of school at that time. I wanted to get out of the Midwest, do something exciting, serve my country.

So I signed up. I'd like to say I asked my parents for their permission, because they probably deserved to be involved in the process. At the time, though, we were essentially estranged—I'd moved into an apartment with some friends and had little contact with my mother and no contact with my father. Frankly, I didn't really care one way or another how my parents felt. Our relationship now is much different than it was then (thank goodness), but during that period in our lives there was no chance of reconciliation. I wouldn't listen to my father, and if I wasn't going to listen, then I wasn't going to live under his roof. It was a hard thing for my mom to accept, of course. She wanted peace in the family. But the truth is, I was a crappy teenager; I was up to no good, and I wanted to be up to no good. I'm not proud of that, but I own up to it. There's no point in whitewashing it. It's part of who I am, and what I was before I went into the Army.

Did I know what I was getting into? Not really. The recruiter's pitch had nothing to do with daily life in the Army, or with trying to carve out a career path; it was all about trying to get people to enlist. When I found out there were jobs you could sign up for, I was actually surprised. I just figured they'd give me a gun and send me to Iraq. The complexity of training and education I was about to undergo did not factor into my decision at all. I suppose that's true of many guys who enlist. Along the way I took a competency test to determine which jobs were best suited to my skill set, and I did pretty well. They told me I could choose almost any job in the Army. The recruiter was a member of the airborne infantry, and I kind of liked the sound of that: They were the ones jumping out of planes and getting into the heat of battle. In the abstract, at least, it seemed interesting. I figured if I was going to join the Army, I might as well feel like a soldier. I didn't want to sit behind a desk and stare at a computer screen all day. I wanted to get out there and do the job.

Not that I really understood the job. In retrospect, I might have asked a few more questions.

What I knew about the military, or thought I knew about the military, could be summed up by what I saw on the cover of Time magazine when I visited the recruiting center. It was a picture of a soldier kneeling in the mud, a parachute draped behind him, mortars hanging off his uniform. The photo was snapped shortly after the soldier and his unit, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, nicknamed the Sky Soldiers, had dropped into Iraq on March 26, 2003. To me, that was the face of war: strong, tough, triumphant. I wanted to be part of it. I could do almost any job the Army had to offer, but I had one plan: I wanted to be like that guy on the cover of Time; I wanted to do what they did on the television commercials. I wanted to jump out of planes and shoot guns and spit and swear and kill bad guys.

Spitting and swearing almost always comes with those first two things, so I felt pretty confident that everything would fall right into place. See, the thing about the infantry is that it attracts fighters. There are a

lot of people in the U.S. Army, but not a lot who are guaranteed to see combat duty. Some people enlist as a way to subsidize their education or simply because they have limited options. Maybe they want to learn computer skills or engineering. Maybe they want to become a medic.

I wanted to join for one reason: to learn how to shoot my weapon more proficiently, and with greater accuracy, than the person I was shooting at, so that I could kill him and then move on and kill some of his friends, because they were all enemies of the United States. If that sounds barbaric, well, it was exactly what the infantry wanted: people who were eager to fight.

Practically speaking, that was the only skill the infantry was interested in teaching. It was the only one that mattered.

I was a good learner.

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