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Jun. 18, 2019 10:11AM EST

MIGHTY CULTURE



Are you born a warrior? Is it learned?: A Delta Force Perspective

It is my staunch belief that warriors are born and not created. In the case of either you can trace back through your past to your first ever action that made you realize — though not likely back then at the time — that you were destined to take the warrior's or the leader's path through life.

I came up through Army infantry at 19 years old gravely afraid of heights, a condition that kept me from becoming a paratrooper, the gateway training to the elite forces. After two years in the infantry, I was ready to jump even without a parachute if that was what it took to get me out of that horror show.

I made it into the Green Berets only to be met with great disappointment, as in those years between wars I felt we were more of an in-case-of-war-break-glass unit with peacetime ambition and an equally disappointing budget. The thought of going to war with my Green Beret A-Team scared me to the extent

that I ran arms-flailing to the Delta Force, where I immediately faded into anonymity by a sea of raw talent and sheer badassery. I was home.

But even after arriving at the unit, which requires one of the toughest selections on the planet, I came to realize that the essence of my warrior spirit had been with me all along. I can finally go back to the very early days of my own basic army training and identify an event that has stayed with me for so many years. Finally, I think I understand what it meant and why the simple memory has remained close to my heart for so many decades.

Search as I have for hints of warrior potential during my coming of military status in basic training, I'm put finally in mind of a trivial incident that remains to impress me still today. I have thought of it often in attempts to make sense of it. Since it is mine, I shall own the interpretation.

It was during my own Infantry Basic Training in Sand Hill Georgia, where my platoon and I were waiting in the pine woods for a couple of hours between training events. At times like those, there was nothing to do but notice and complain about how hot it was, and it was plenty hot.

We boys huddled under the shade of an awning in our steel helmets. In that year I learned that shade was indeed only a state of mind, and had little physical impact on the Georgia swelter; where a boundary blocked the direct sun's rays, the humidity served to usher the heat around obstacles, presenting it to who would cower. "We" huddle and bitched and complained and moaned, making it all the worse. I quickly grew annoyed with the negative attitude of the group to the extent that I, but for slight, sniped at them verbally.

The "group" — my group: the hayseed from under the Bible Belt who spoke maybe just a little too fondly of his female cousin, the guy who came in for college; he already had one semester and constantly wanted everyone to know that by saying things like: "Yeah, but that doesn't detract from or minimize the context of what I'm saying," the fellow who was given the choice by a judge of either the Army or jail, the black man whose dad and granddad were both in the Army before him, the white dude who felt a patriotic debt to the country but really had no clue what that meant, the Chicano who wanted something different out of life... anything other than what he was living at the time.

And then there was — OMG! — that Asian fellow who during a group debate on race and equality announced to the group: "If there is a man here who can sh*t with his pants on, let him stand now and show it!" As God as my witness, he did say that. I resigned to the notion that he was trying for something along the lines of "We all put on our trousers one leg at a time."

I suffered too from the heat, but the urge to bellow seemed so futile, only adding to the misery. Knowing no better, I decided to remove myself from the crowd, so I stood and stepped some fifty feet away in direct view of the blazing sun. There I squatted in the muddy sand and hung my head and thought:

"The heat is bad, but it's better than being in the shade with the pity patrol. Bad means there is a worse; there is even a worse than this... somewhere. This too is bearable. All things, no matter the intensity, are always bearable. Here, I'm setting an example for all my platoon — see me here, guys? It's not so bad!"

Indeed remarks wafted over:

"What the hell's the idiot doing?"

"He can't last out there like that."

"Someone needs to go get him; he's delirious, he is."

"Yeah, holy crap, man!"

You see, now no longer were they absconded in their own misery; they were submersed in mine. I had taken their suffering away, even if for this brief bout of minutes. "I complained because I had no shoes, and then I saw a man who had no feet." Bad begets worse, and even worse is tolerable.

I think by wanting to be alone I had only drawn attention to myself... but it was done, and now I would give them a show. This is how we deal with the pain. This is how we stand up and take it... how we shake it off and defy it! This is how a much grander force within us makes a thing like the Georgia swelter such an insignificant trifle — "pour it on, Blythe! Fire your weapon!"

From the nose of my drooped head, beads of sweat were queued up and falling in serial. I decided that I would count off 100 of them before I went back to the shade. When 100 beads had fallen, I decided that I would let yet another 100 fall before I relented... then another 100, followed by another then another concatenation of 100.

After 500 had fallen, I stood and removed my helmet. I shook my face wildly, like a dog shakes off pool water upon exit. I wiped my face with my sleeves as I trudged back to the shade and the group. I remarked as I squatted back down:

"Yep... it's a real scorcher out there today, brothers."

And there was nothing but silence and a man who reached out his canteen my way, which I graciously declined.

Sometimes we imagine the Earth was gifted with us, to just be us, our mystical, magical, wonderful selves. Other times we might wonder if the planet might get along just swimmingly without us. Ask ten people if they "march to the beat of a different drum," and you will get ten affirmative answers every time. Now watch when the different drumsticks start their cadence how many stand, step out, and march... and keep marching until 500 beads of their sweat have rolled from their nose and hit the ground.

As I have searched and debated over the years to answer the question are warriors born or made, I often think back to the quote from Heraclitus nearly 2,000 years ago,

"Out of every one hundred men, ten shouldn't even be there, eighty are just targets, nine are the real fighters, and we are lucky to have them, for they make the battle. Ah, but the one, one is a warrior, and he will bring the others back." (Heraclitus c. 535 – c. 475 BCE)