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### **“Morale in Shared Hardship”**

William Alexander “Alex” Faulconer knew that watching the Twin Towers fall on September 11, 2001, in his 9<sup>th</sup> grade math class was huge. “Every generation has a call to service, and that was definitely it,” he explained. After determining that Virginia Military Institute (VMI) wasn’t for him, Alex joined the Army and signed up to be an 11 X-ray, or an infantryman.

In chilly January weather, Alex went to Fort Benning, Georgia for boot camp in 2007. “Basic was a lot of fun,” he said, “we had a good group of guys.” It was something he was prepared to experience. The ratline at VMI was “more intense an experience than what basic training was,” with “a lot of yelling and a lot of hazing” going on. It “definitely prepped me for basic training.” However, he did like basic training better than VMI: “It was much nicer having seasoned veterans yell at me than another 18 year-old kid yell at me.” It was also where he met one of his good friends, Matthew “Matt” Francis. This friendship stood the test of time. In fact, at the time of the interview, Alex talked about going to Matt’s wedding a few weeks later.

It was after boot camp that his Military Occupation Specialty, or MOS, changed from 11 X-ray to 11 Charlie. “At first I was a little discouraged, you know, cause I wanted to be a general infantryman,” but he told me he headed to One-Station Unit-Training, or OSUT to train as a mortar man and learned to love his job. Despite a lot of

mathematics, “it was fun playing with the mortars; I was pretty happy with it.” Alex also believes that his training was exceptional because of the high demand for soldiers overseas: “I felt the quality of training was better just because people were getting sent over two to three months after they get out of basic training.”

One thing he remembers is the Tree of Woe from OSUT, which is similar to the Tree of Woe from Conan the Barbarian. Conan’s tree is a lone tree exposed to constant sunlight, causing it to dry out and decay, and is vital to Thulsa’s plan to punish Conan.

He explains:

Way down at the other end of the field, there’s this tree, and God, it’s been there forever, ... and whenever you messed up on the mortar square you’d have to run down to the Tree of Woe; probably about 150-200 meters... a good distance away, especially when you’re dressed up in your full battle gear, and ...you contemplate your mistake on the Tree of Woe.

After OSUT and the Tree of Woe, Alex enjoyed two weeks at home before making his way to his first appointment in the state of Washington with Matt Francis. The two made the drive not knowing what brigade they would be placed in; they only knew to head to Fort Lewis. Both wound up in 5/2, an infantry division with a motto of “Strike, Destroy,” and in the same squadron within the division, 8-1. They had to part ways when Matt went to Charlie and Alex was assigned to be in Bravo. Alex remembers that 5/2 was “empty and desolate,” and that they were supposed to “fill the gaps of that brigade.”

Filling those gaps, 5/2 trained for two years for Iraq, but in early 2009, the objective changed: they would be going to Kandahar Province, Afghanistan –the cradle of the Taliban. They were to be equipped with Stryker vehicles designed for soldiers working in some of the most violent regions. These vehicles are armored with different variances. Alex’s had a mortar variance. Alex explained that strykers “can take small

arms fire” and are “a quick way to deploy people on the battlefield with some armored protection.” Despite the armored protection, there was still uncertainty.



**Alex, far right, with his Stryker Crew, Afghanistan  
2009**

At that point, we were the first Stryker brigade combat team to be slated to go to Afghanistan. A Stryker unit had previously never been in Afghanistan before. It was a change; Iraq is pretty flat, great for Strykers, and Afghanistan is just mountains, not so great for Strykers. So it just completely changed the dynamic of what we were about to do with very little time to adjust.

Getting the Strykers to Afghanistan did not come without issue. The Strykers had to be shipped by boat. “That was an interesting experience in itself, driving the Strykers to get them on the boats,” Alex said. Like Vietnam-era protestors, “we had a lot of protestors outside of the gate. That was the first time I’d see that... it was interesting to see that firsthand... rolling out the gate watching protestors out there.”

Once the strykers were loaded, 5/2 began sending soldiers to Kandahar Airfield. Making a small stop to change planes, Alex will never forget his first drop into Afghanistan. He explained what it was like:

[a] fun little flight because we somehow... got onto a C-130... packed in tight... and when you're going into Kandahar, they do this thing, I don't know the technical term for it, but it's called like a combat drop where they are flying in and then they drop really sharp and fast to avoid rockets from the mountains and small arms fire coming in trying to hurt the aircraft. So you know, we're just chilling there, and all of a sudden it's like being on a roller coaster, just nosedive straight in. Guys were throwing up all over the place.

After a month of acclimating and getting over "the crud," they headed south to what was just an open space. He recalls that "we had to do everything. We pulled up and it was just a big field of dust. We built the barriers, entry control points, we put tents up. First thing we did as mortars was we made mortar positions because we didn't have artillery batteries supporting us."

The beginning of this deployment was also the hardest. First, 5/2's first platoon hit an IED with strykers. "This was right off the bat... so that kind of set the tone for the rest of the year." Then, 5/2 started getting the bad news:

[We] started getting reports, especially 1-17, and.. they got hammered. They [Afghan terrorists] got smart really quick with how to hit us, especially with our strykers because we were the first ones there. [We] go out to this little village, and at that point, it was the most heavily IED'd route in Afghanistan. Every time we went out there, we hit an IED. We found a lot more than we hit, but when you hit some, it doesn't really end well.

Approximately 98 IEDs hit the unit over the course of Alex's one-year deployment. 5/2 kept "getting hit so damn hard. The entire brigade was getting destroyed," he said. This soon turned 5/2 into a statistic: up to that point, they had the most casualties of a single brigade in Afghanistan. Later on, this memorial was erected at Joint Base Lewis



McChord in Washington, in memory of the 41 soldiers lost that first year.

Bearing witness to so many new and gruesome situations, Alex found that it was hard to speak with loved ones back home during this deployment. Every two to three months, he made a trip north to Kandahar Airfield to make a phone call home. “As much as I loved getting letters and care packages, it was more tough to actually speak to them.”

Phone calls were hard because

you have to detach yourself a certain way... Everyone wants to know how you are and what you're doing and, you know, you can't answer that. Everyone's doing crappy, everything sucks. And the only morale you have is making jokes out of your shared hardship. Its tough to make that connection.

Alex's favorite event in that deployment took place during his last month there.

“We get this call... 1-17 is doing a huge push... and needs our support.” 5/2's 1-17 had been hit the hardest, and “we were all pretty bitter about it.” On the way up to 1-17, Alex was ecstatic to find a Burger King, despite the burger's odd and unexplainable taste.



After this short stop, Alex and his mortar crew started to head toward a fire base along with the members of 1-17. “On the way to that fire base we got caught in a nice little ambush... they started hitting us with RPGs and small arms fire from the right side of the mountain,” and the guys from 1-17 were treating the attack as if it was a trivial little conflict, despite getting pummeled by RPGs. Of 1-17's men, “those guys are beasts” Alex says.

Alex felt that this push with 1-17 was valuable and “nice because it was an actual fight. I wasn't worried about some guy that you don't know sneaking up behind you and

whipping out an AK-47 or detonating a suicide vest. It was an actual battle with fronts.” He was close enough to the enemy that he and his mortar team did not need permission to fire.

Two weeks later, he went home. Adjusting was rough. “Two weeks earlier I was just in an ambush fighting for my life and here I am at the house with a crying kid drinking a Coors Light and having a pizza. It was weird.” But his deployment did allow him to appreciate what many take for granted, specifically clean tap water. “I was happy to have a glass of water. I still am. Being able to go to the sink and turn that water on, drink a cup of water. It’s the most amazing thing in the world. I think about it every single day.”

Two years later, Alex went back to Afghanistan for a seven-month deployment. This time, he was an NCO with 147 troops he took charge of while “running operations from our headquarters” and coordinating two platoons while “getting an overall flow in



mission command.” Unlike his first deployment, Alex did not have to set anything up, and the fighting had moved to another location. The threat, however, involved “insider threats. We call them green on blue threats, and, you know, after being surrounded by Afghan cops [it] was definitely

a puckering experience.” Despite the hidden enemy, Alex calls it “9 months of good, old fashioned, going to the office every day.” He also “ate a lot of good Afghan food... I

thought that was a really cool experience, eating food they liked, sharing stories. It was completely different.”

Along with these positive memories, Alex was rewarded for his exemplary service during this deployment with a Bronze Star. A Bronze Star is a medal awarded to service members for either heroic achievement, heroic service, meritorious achievement, or meritorious service in a combat zone. Alex’s

meritorious service and passion for his job as an NCO did not go unnoticed. He had performed well above his pay-grade, although he notes that “it’s more than just about the



**Alex receiving his Bronze Star**

paycheck.” Being an NCO was what he wanted to do in the Army. “I loved being an NCO. To train

and lead soldiers, and that’s your job. There’s something special about it that a lot of people don’t take to heart.”

For a man who excelled at his job, survived Kandahar Province when it was the heart of the Taliban, and witnessed the harsh realities of war, Alex is humble and open about his compelling experiences. His interview illustrates certain experiences many veterans are unwilling to talk about. This truly brings the war closer to home. I urge you to watch his interview and learn more about the humanity behind the term “boots on the ground” and of the brotherhood Alex found as a combat veteran.