

Claire Harrison

Advanced Composition

Dr. Maxwell

November 15, 2016

### **Don't Wait: The Story of Sergeant Major Jason Moffitt**

He's unsettled at first, sitting back somewhat stiffly in the oversized chair and experimenting with where he should position his hands in front of him. I shuffle my papers and glance over my opening statement one last time, giving him a chance to get settled and take a breath before we begin. Sitting opposite him, I start by asking about his childhood, his family, and suddenly everything falls into place. He immediately relaxes as though he's done this a thousand times before—the epitome of calm, cool confidence. What he tells me about his early life sketches the frame of what will blossom into the incredible landscape of an extraordinary life.

Sergeant Major Jason Moffitt, United States Marine, is back in Springfield, Illinois, where he was born more than forty years ago on 3 July 1970. I watch a faraway look replace the attentive earnestness that had been reflected on his face as he remembers. A clear fondness for his family and childhood shines through his words. His family, like so many others, was directly affected by the start of the Vietnam War. "My father got drafted...and he left in January of 1970 for Vietnam. A few months later, I came around. But he was always pro-military." Though his family did not have a lot of money, Moffitt enjoyed his childhood. His parents both worked full-time jobs to help support his family, and he holds both his parents and grandparents up as key

role models he followed in his early years. His mother, especially, was a source of advice and comfort throughout his life. “If I ever had a problem, I called my mother. And to this day I will still do that,” he says candidly.

Originally, Moffitt did not have plans to pursue a military calling. “I’ll be honest with you: At the time, I graduated from high school, and I had no intentions of joining the military—I wanted to go to college,” he told me. However, his family’s financial situation forced him to begin considering options that would help him pay for a college education. That’s when television commercials advertising the benefits of joining the military caught his attention. “I thought, well, I’ll do four years, get the GI Bill, get out, come back home, and go to the University of Illinois,” he recalls. The Illinois native traveled to faraway California to enter recruit training at Marine Corps Recruiting Depot (MCRD) San Diego on 2 August 1988.

One experience made a particularly lasting impression. “It was close to the end of training, and we were going through the Basic Warrior Training Phase of Recruit Training,” he says. “We were up in the mountains. We had been bused up to the rifle range, and then we had to hike, and I remember, just, it was—it sounds weird—but with all the screaming and yelling going on and the Drill Instructors trying to keep the platoon tight and to keep kids from falling out of the hike, it was just very, very peaceful. It was just nice out there, being up in the mountains and everything. Because that was the first time that I had ever been to the mountains, being from Illinois.” Moffitt graduated on 21 October 1988 as a Private First Class. Four months later, he would find himself on the other side of the country on his first assignment in Beaufort, South Carolina, with an Aviation Logistics squadron.

I asked him then why he decided not to pursue his original dream of getting a college degree and settling down for a normal 9-to-5 job in his beloved Illinois. First, he told me, was his

decision to get married. His wife soon gave birth to their first child, a baby girl, and he knew that he wouldn't be able to return to Illinois and adequately support his young family in addition to attending college full-time. The second reason, though, was clearly the deciding factor in his choice to reenlist: "Camaraderie, and I loved the deployments," he said, laughing. "By the time my first enlistment rolled around, I had already done a deployment to Desert Shield/Desert Storm, and Saudi Arabia, and I was about to go on another deployment." The truth behind his words was evident on his face as he explained, "Everything really about the military, and the Marine Corps, I just could not get enough of." Though he admits that this was the opposite of what he'd expected from his life, the look on his face was one of pure contentment with the direction he had taken, and he expressed a thankfulness that he had not pursued his original plan. Moffitt's first years in the Marine Corps instilled a love for his work that would remain with him until his retirement 28 years later.

Moffitt's parents were always supportive of his choice to stay in the military. "My dad was all about it. He was always [saying], 'You need to stay...It's a good lifestyle, you're doing well, stay in.' But my mother was just the opposite. She was very supportive, and she would listen to anything that I had to say. But she was afraid I was gonna get injured, I was gonna get killed...I was gonna stub my toe, and...she just did not want to see me get hurt, and when it came time for retirement, she was tickled."

From August 1990 to April 1991, Moffitt deployed to Bahrain in support of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm—his second deployment in two years. In June 1992, he returned to the States and was transferred to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, where he learned the skills needed to work as an administration clerk. The next three years would find him with the 22<sup>nd</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) aboard several different ships in support of missions to the

Adriatic and Mediterranean Seas, giving him valuable experience and an uncommon appreciation for the details involved in the strategic workings of the United States military.

While he was deployed, he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant, making him qualified to serve as a Drill Instructor at either MCRD San Diego or MCRD Parris Island.

Moffitt requested orders to be approved for Drill Instructor training and received orders to report to Drill Instructor School with the July Class of 1995. “It just so happened that I had to check in on my birthday,” he recalls with a wry grin. Upon graduation, he was assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Recruit Training Battalion at MCRD Parris Island and served two years on the Drill Instructor Field. Because Moffitt graduated from MCRD San Diego, the time he spent at Parris Island gave him the unique perspective of a Marine who has experienced the training of both Marine Corps Recruiting Depots. While Marines are fiercely proud of where they received their training and will argue the merits of one or the other hotly, Moffitt claims there really is no difference in the training or day-to-day operations. They use the same training schedule, which is developed jointly each year by senior staff from each MCRD, and it is followed strictly by Drill Instructors to ensure that every Marine is given the training he or she needs to perform. “They’ll have a sit-down, and they’ll go over the training schedule,” Moffitt explains. “Because they want to make sure that both sets of recruits, regardless of what company, what battalion, Parris Island, San Diego, male or female—doesn’t matter. They’re getting the same basic training as every other Marine has received.”

In December of 1997, Moffitt finished his time as a Drill Instructor and was transferred back to Beaufort, South Carolina, to serve as the administration chief there where he served for a full year. For about six months of that time, Moffitt was fortunate enough to work under then-Colonel James F. Amos, who would later become a four-star general and the 35<sup>th</sup> Commandant

of the Marine Corps. “He was my commanding officer, and he worked in the office across the hallway,” Moffitt explained proudly.

Moffitt remained at that post until he deployed again on the day after Christmas 1998 with a fighter attack squadron, this time to Japan, as part of the Unit Deployment Program. Moffitt explained the unique nature of this deployment by saying, “You go to a base—you go to Japan—but you more or less bounce around the Pacific. We went to places like Okinawa, Japan, we went to Seoul, Korea, we went to Australia, we went to Malaysia, Thailand...so we pretty much bounce around the Pacific during that six-month deployment cycle.” He would remain in the Western Pacific on two separate deployments until September of 2000.

The end of this deployment marked a difficult time in Moffitt’s personal life. “My first marriage did not go so well,” he admits. “I didn’t have my lines of communication open very much. [My wife] didn’t work, and she was at home taking care of the kids when I was deployed. It’s a tough life, and I’ve heard it said many times: Not everybody is cut out to be in the military, and it takes a certain type of woman to be married to a member of the military. ...By the time we divorced, I had deployed almost every other year and I also did a two-year tour on the drill field, so that didn’t give me much time at home either.” Moffitt had an air of both regret and resignation as he continued, “I had a little girl, Kaitlyn, and I had a little boy, Jacob. And I think the problem that I had was, when I would come home and I did have a little bit of time, that time was spent with the children, not with the missus. And I think she started feeling a little left out, and after ten years of all this, she had had enough.” After nearly twelve years and two children, Moffitt found out that his wife wanted a divorce. “I came home right before Christmas and that’s when I found out that we were gonna get a divorce, so for the next few months I lived in the staff barracks aboard the air station. ...After that, I was pretty much on my own for about eight years

before I met my current wife. But even after I met my current wife I deployed three times in the five years that we've been together," he says almost unbelievably.

After this, Moffitt got orders to West Palm Beach, Florida, to join an Inspector and Instructor Staff serving as Teachers, Coaches, and Trainers for Marine Corps Reservists. "There were maybe 20 people on the active duty staff, and the rest were reservists. They would come in, one weekend out of the month, two weekends out of the year, and we would do what we could within that time frame to get them prepped and ready. Well, luckily we did our job fairly well, because September 11, 2001—9/11. Not a good day. And some of the Marines that were with the reserve unit shortly thereafter ended up getting sent to Iraq. They would be gone for six months at a time, and while they were gone we would be working with another group, and they would just replace one another."

In June of 2004, Moffitt experienced a drastic change from previous experiences when he requested orders to the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps (NROTC) Unit at the University of Memphis. He was approved to serve as an Assistant Marine Officer Instructor (MOI), helping to prepare college students for the challenges of Officer Candidate School (OCS) and future officership in the Navy or Marine Corps. "That was a very eye-opening tour, to say the least," he says dryly. During the summers of 2005 and 2006, he served at OCS in Quantico, Virginia, as a Sergeant Instructor and Platoon Sergeant. "I would spend seven weeks up there, and then get ready for the students to come back or for us to get our new freshmen so we could do freshman orientation, much like you do here when you get your cadre," he explains.

In April of 2007, then-Staff Sergeant Moffitt was promoted to First Sergeant and reassigned to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, to serve as the First Sergeant of Delta Company and, hopefully, deploy shortly after. When he found out that his would not be one of the

companies deploying from Camp Lejeune at that time, he was offered a reassignment by the Command Sergeant Major there and jumped at the chance. “I was just itching to go on deployment,” he remembers. “He came through. He ended up getting me orders to 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 8<sup>th</sup> Marines. I checked in there in early March, and was assigned to Weapons Company.” He deployed to Ar Ramadi, Iraq, from September 2007 to April 2008. He grinned as he recalled, “That was a seven-month deployment, and it was a very, very good deployment. I just really enjoyed it. Being out in the field, being with the Marines—I had a company commander that was just great. He let me do my job, and I appreciated that so much. Just being able to get out and go on patrol every day. Every day of the week, we’d get out there, we’d do surveys... We’d do whatever we needed to do.” After that, Moffitt returned home for an extended period, but was quick to add that much of that time was not spent with his family. “Even when you’re home in the States, you’re constantly training, and some of the times you can’t get the training you need from your permanent duty station, so you have to go elsewhere. But we were home for eleven months, and then we went back on our second deployment to Iraq,” he says. They were sent to Al Asad Air Base from March to September 2009 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. “That was a good deployment, but it wasn’t the deployment we were wanting, because at the time Afghanistan was really kicking off, and we really wanted to go to Afghanistan. But they sent us to Iraq, they gave us a mission, and we did everything we were supposed to do. We accomplished the mission, we were successful, we took all of our Marines over there, we brought each and every one of them back. So thank God for that.”

Upon completion of this deployment, Moffitt received orders to report for duty as the First Sergeant of Headquarters and Service Company back at Camp Lejeune. He tells me insistently, “I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to leave the battalion, I didn’t want to leave the

company. Because shortly before I got the orders, we found out the battalion was going to Afghanistan.” He sits back and reflects, “But in the end, I’d like to say it worked out in my favor, because while I was there I was the First Sergeant for three different companies and I did two deployments to places that I would probably never go if I wasn’t assigned there.” In July of 2010, he deployed to Western Africa as part of a Security Cooperation Task Force, partnering and training with Senegalese and Gabonese forces there. Following this, he returned home. His stay there, however, was short-lived. “The day that I got home, the Sergeant Major told me that he wanted to see me on Monday—that was not good. But I show up on Monday and he says, ‘Hey, I want to move you. I want you to take over Alpha Company.’ So I’m thinking, ‘Okay, that’s fine. Whatever.’ So I take over Alpha Company, and within ten days, Alpha gets a tasker to do a security corporation task force in South America.” Moffitt deployed with them in October of 2011 aboard the *USS Oak Hill* to Columbia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Guantanamo Bay. “That’s one of those deployments that you don’t get every day,” Moffitt explains. “I feel fortunate to be able to deploy like that, because, in reality, I’ve been around the world...and I’ve been to every continent except for Antarctica.” It was while on this deployment that Moffitt found out he’d been promoted to Sergeant Major.

Though he tried to stay at Camp Lejeune, the monitor there “wasn’t having it,” Moffitt said with a chuckle. The monitor told him, “You’ve been there since 2007; you need to go!” On his orders, Moffitt returned to MCRD Parris Island as the Command Sergeant Major of 1<sup>st</sup> Recruit Training Battalion. He marks this time as one of his most stressful. “Being the Sergeant Major of a Recruit Training Battalion has its perks, but it’s so stressful. And I say that because I’m not the one that is training the recruits. ...They’re down there hookin’ and jabbin’ every day trying to get these kids to engross themselves in what it is to be a Marine, and if anything

happens, it kinda falls back on my shoulders—or at least that’s the way I felt. ...I feel like it’s [the result of] something I did or something that I shouldn’t have done.”

After two years at Parris Island, in June 2014, Moffitt was transferred to Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 251, nicknamed “The Thunderbolts.” “I’ll tell you what...it was a very rewarding tour, but I have never been through a work-up like I have with that unit. I check in, and within days I’m getting ready to be deployed again.” Moffitt deployed for the last time overseas on an eight-month trek aboard the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. “Now what makes this cruise so memorable is that they were doing a hull-swap with three different carriers. The carrier that we were on started in Norfolk, Virginia. We ended in California, and had to be flown back to Beaufort, South Carolina. There was an aircraft carrier in Okinawa that ended up being sent to Norfolk. The ship that was in San Diego ended up being sent to Okinawa.”

Moffitt’s life is a testimony to the strength and resolve of the American people. His adaptability and desire to succeed allowed him to overcome numerous obstacles and pitfalls throughout his life, and he emerged after 29 years as a man with the experiences and wisdom of ten lifetimes. When I asked him if he had any advice for aspiring Marines, his warning was, “Don’t wait. Do not wait to prepare. I see it all the time. Kids will wait until the last minute to prepare for something they’ve known they were gonna do for six, eight, ten, twelve months. ...Sometimes, the Drill Instructors can work miracles, and sometimes they can’t. Take every minute, every advantage that you have. Get yourself mentally and physically prepared for what you’re fixing to get yourself into. Because you don’t want to be like myself, who got on those yellow footprints...and you’re like, ‘What in God’s name have I gotten myself into?’ Because

I'd never been yelled at like that before. My parents—they were strict disciplinarians, but good lord, I've never been yelled at like that before! So you have to be prepared.”

Near the end of the interview, I asked if he had any regrets. “If you had told me that I was gonna stay in for 28 years and retire a Sergeant Major in the Marine Corps, I would have told you you were crazy,” Moffitt laughed. “But it’s hard to leave. It’s not the units you have a hard time leaving,” he amended, “it’s the people. You build such a bond in that two- to three-year time frame that you’re stationed with people, getting to know them, that that’s the hard part. That’s what makes it difficult. But every day that I was able to get up and go to work, I was all about it. I wouldn’t change a thing.” Moffitt’s personal integrity and fortitude demonstrate the values and discipline instilled in him by the United States Marine Corps. He is currently serving as the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion TAC NCO at The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, and the cadets here are privileged to have such an incredible example to follow.