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Red, White, and Blue - An Experience That Affected a Belief

by Joseph Cholewa

(English 1101)

The Assignment: Write a reflective narration telling of an experience that had an important impact on a belief that you held or hold. The belief might be about you, about another person involved in the experience, or about the issue that the experience illustrates. The experience may have helped form your belief, changed, or strengthened it. You should explain your belief, of course, and describe the experience, reflecting on what happened as you tell of its effects. You may want to discuss the sources of the belief.

Every July fourth, Americans around the country gather to celebrate the independence of our great nation with family picnics, numerous parties, and spectacular firework displays. They enjoy the warm weather, all the happy faces, and the countless festivities that go on from town to town. Whether it's the band on stage singing their favorite song or all the great rides that the local carnival has to offer, Americans sure know how to have a good time! However, one would very rarely hear, if ever, from people how fortunate we are as Americans to have so many great things before us, and the sacrifices that were made to get them. I was the same way. Not only on the Fourth of July, but every day I took things for granted about how I lived and the things I had, without ever realizing what kind of sacrifice had been made, or what others had given of themselves so I could have all these luxuries. I never took the time to reflect on the hardships or the tragedies endured by others to preserve these luxuries. Furthermore, I never thought I would have to face these struggles myself to protect such opportunity for future generations. It took a life changing experience in the Army and a combat deployment to Afghanistan to really change my belief in our country.

There I was, right out of high school with no idea of what I was going to do. I really hadn't given college any serious thought. There was just no way an average student coming from a single parent home could ever afford tuition and fees to a university. My job at the local toy store was definitely not a career worth pursuing. I was clueless! Then it hit me. I remember my older cousin talking about the experiences he had while in the Army the last time I had spoken to him. I thought to myself for about a minute or so, but couldn't even imagine myself in Army greens. There was just no way that I would accept any kind of authority in my life, other than my own. After a few days of thinking things over, I realized that my options were limited. I drove over to the Army recruiting office the next day, to sit down and talk about my options in the military. After about five or ten minutes of the recruiter talking to me in what seemed like another language, I heard the only words I needed to hear. He had told me that the Army would pay for my college after I served my time for Uncle Sam. I was thrilled! A week later, I signed my enlistment papers, and was on board a plane to the scorching heat of Fort Sill, Oklahoma for my basic combat training.

When I first arrived outside of the barracks at Fort Sill on August 8, 2001 I was met by a hoard of drill sergeants screaming their heads off, which reminded me somewhat of my father, but on steroids. Their huge frames and gigantic arms made me fear their every word and move. The air was so dry and hot, it made the sweat roll down my face, as if I had just showered. I knew right away that it wasn't my place to say anything, so I kept telling myself, "just keep your mouth shut and it will all be over soon." It was never over, and for the next 16 weeks, sixty fellow soldiers and I had to learn to come together with what little we had and get through with whatever our drill sergeants had

in store for us. I learned the value of teamwork, the importance of discipline, and what food and sleep were really worth. Midway through our training, however, our worst fear came true.

September 11, 2001 came so fast and without warning. It not only caught the United States off guard, but the entire world. It made every American reevaluate their lives and how they lived it. For me that day was about to challenge everything I believed in when it came to my country, and how far I would go to protect those beliefs. After I graduated from basic training, I was shipped off to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where I would undergo more extensive training for my deployment to Afghanistan. I went through grueling scenarios that tested my will and strength both physically and mentally. I went on long road marches, fast runs, endurance courses, and numerous classes that would help me prepare for my time in Afghanistan. Finally, on November 3, 2003, just two days after my twenty first birthday, the soldiers in my unit and I boarded a plane that would take us from one side of the world to the other.

The first memory I had while stepping into the darkness of Afghanistan was the foul smell that hit as soon as you stepped off the plane. I could have sworn the plane touched down on top of a landfill, but they told us it was Bagram airfield. After we gathered our gear from the plane, we were escorted to our tents where we would stay for a week or two until we came down with further orders. Each tent had nine soldiers to it, but there was barely room for five. All I could tell myself was how much I missed home, and how I would give anything to be in my own bed just for one night. All the times that I was fortunate enough to have my own warm bed and I didn't even realize it! Instead, I felt like a lab rat in some unknown place thousands of miles from home; at least they still had hot food for us, and the occasional shower. After a few weeks we finally got our orders to be stationed in Gahzni city, north of the Pakistani border.

My platoon's arrival in Gahzni was our first real interaction with the people and how they lived since we had first arrived in Afghanistan. At times it was jaw dropping to see how people were even capable of living in such conditions. There was no running water for people to use, and toilets pretty much consisted of any spot where someone could have a little privacy, which wasn't much. Food was left exposed in the open, surrounded by flies, in conditions that would have been monstrous back home. Fresh fruit consisted of rotten bananas and withered oranges. There was no type of sanitation department like back home, so trash lined the streets, and small streams that ran through the city gave off a horrible smell. It was just absolutely appalling to know that people could stand such surroundings. It made me wonder how our living conditions were going to be out here, and, more importantly, if I was going to survive the enemy.

When we stopped to set up camp it was in the middle of nowhere. Desert surrounded us in every direction, with Gahzni city to our east, and a lone mountain range in the distance to our south; our shelter would consist of an old mud building with no windows, no toilets, and zero showers. Food for the next few months consisted of meals that came out of a bag that you heated using water from your canteen. Our daily routine consisted of guard duty and security patrols through some pretty tough terrain consisting of sandy desert, rocky mountains, and the occasional landmine. The first night I was on guard, duty tracer rounds and bullets were flying over head in every direction. As I sat in the gun turret waiting to return fire, I just couldn't stop thinking about if I was going to make it back home. Everything quieted down after about a half an hour and all returned to normal, for the time being. A few times a patrol would go out and when they came back, it would be with maybe one, two, or three less than what they had left with. It was during these times that you were left to think why it hadn't been you, or to think about how much you knew the guy. These tragedies made you appreciate being alive and also the sacrifice that was made by these select few to make sure you were able to get home safe. The days past and the routine that at first was so hard to deal with started to become a little more normal. The days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, and the months into a year until we had finally received our orders to return home. I couldn't help thinking of how much I had changed physically and mentally since being over there. I couldn't wait to get

back home to see my family and to finally take a real shower.

When our plane finally touched down I was overcome with emotion to see my family and friends there waiting for me. I was filled with such joy and happiness to finally be home, and to be fortunate enough to see my family once again. I could remember being so overwhelmed with all the green on the trees and how green the grass was. It felt like I was living a scene right out of the movies. Over the next couple of days it was so hard to believe all the things that were there for me that I didn't have while in Afghanistan: a real shower, a toilet that worked, my very own car to drive, the list just didn't end. I couldn't believe that I took advantage of all these things for so long! I finally realized how lucky I was, as well as the rest of Americans, to have so many opportunities in this great country.

My deployment to Afghanistan was such a reality check, and put a halt on my busy life. It made me stop and take a good look at life, and how precious and uncertain it really was. For me, it helped to strengthen my belief in why I joined the Army, and how great and fortunate our country really is. It also showed me that in order to preserve that greatness, like the ones before me, I was willing to give my life in its defense. After returning home I copied a quote that was hanging on the wall of my First Sergeant's office:

I was that which others did not want to be.  
I went where others feared to go, and did what others failed to do.  
I asked nothing from those who gave nothing,  
and reluctantly accepted the thought of eternal loneliness should I fail.  
I have seen the face of terror,  
felt the stinging cold of fear,  
and enjoyed the sweet taste of a moment's love.  
I have cried, pained, and hoped but most of all  
I have lived times others would say were best forgotten,  
but at least someday I will be able to say that I was proud of what I was...  
A SOLDIER.  
-unknown

I can't and never will forget those who didn't come home. They were the ones like so many before them, that paid the ultimate price so that on July fourth all of us can enjoy those family picnics, great carnival rides, and spectacular firework displays.