

Walk Until You Sleep

By Rod Merkley

In his dreams Martin Johnson was dead. He dreamed of a cemetery, full of white headstones. He walked down the rows as the sun slowly passed below the horizon. He remembered the names of his fallen friends and comrades, the names of America's heroes. As he walked by the headstones he read their names. He would wander, knowing that he was supposed to be somewhere but not knowing where it was. He would finally arrive at a headstone, just as the sun finally set and snowflakes began to fall. His dreams were so lifelike that they always seemed real. He could feel the cold, smell the decomposing leaves from the trees around the cemetery, his fingers touched the headstones as he walked by, and he finally saw the headstone. It was three feet tall and one foot wide, made of pure white marble, and on its face it read:

Martin Johnson

Staff Sergeant

U.S. Army

1978-2009

Operation

Iraqi Freedom

He knew that this was where he was supposed to be because it was his headstone. In his dreams, Martin Johnson was dead.

Goodbyes were always hard for Martin. Throughout his life he had said goodbyes to a great number of people. He said goodbye to his mother and father when he left for the military, he said goodbye to his buddies who died on the battlefields of Iraq, and he said goodbye to his wife who could not deal with his PTSD enhanced mood swings after he returned from combat. Martin Johnson was used to goodbyes. But even for someone who was used to goodbyes this one was difficult. Tonight he was saying goodbye to his little five-year-old son.

Martin limped up the darkened stairs, he limped down the hall, he quietly limped through the door, and he limped over to the bed where this little son slept. In fact, Martin limped everywhere that he went. His limp was just a part of him. Along with a handful of medals and the thanks of a grateful nation, Martin had returned from Iraq with a permanent disability.

It all happened on a cold Iraqi morning a few miles outside of Forward Operating Base Warhorse in Diyala Province, Iraq. It was a cold winter morning and Martin's platoon was on patrol. People laugh and think that soldiers are joking when they talk about the cold Iraqi winters, but those who have served in Iraq know the truth. After the scorching summer and windblown fall, the cool wet winter months came with a surprising chill. This was especially noticeable in the early morning hours just before sunrise. Martin was the gunner in an armored Humvee as his convoy traveled through the city of Baquoba. He heard the beginning of the call to prayer and would remember thinking how relaxing that sound was. The morning calm of the call to prayer was violently interrupted by an explosion.

In the latter years of the war in Iraq the technology utilized by the various militant groups evolved with the technology brought by the Americans. The massive bombs that had been used in the past were less

effective against America's heavily armored, mine resistant vehicles, so the Iraqi militants were using something new, or at least new to them.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Western scientists developed a weapon known as a shaped charge. A shaped charge basically harnesses the power of an explosion to form a projectile of molten metal that would cut through even the thick new American armor. It was this kind of IED that was used against Martin's vehicle. The explosion sent shrapnel throughout the cabin of the vehicle, instantly killing the truck commander who was sitting in the passenger seat, significantly injuring the driver, and destroying the front third of Martin's right foot. What happened next led to Martin's receiving the Bronze Star. Heroic actions such as returning fire after sustaining significant injuries, taking control of the vehicle and driving out of the kill zone, and assisting medical personnel in the evacuation of injured soldiers were all cited in his award decoration.

The next few days were a blur of action. He vaguely remembered his evacuation to the Combat Support Hospital at Joint Base Balad where he received emergency surgery to stabilize him for the flight home. He spent a foggy few days at Landstuhl Army Medical Center in Germany where he began to comprehend the extent of his injuries. Finally he made it to Walter Reed Army Medical Center where he received another surgery before he returned "home". Home meant two years and four more surgeries at the Warrior Transition Unit at Fort Carson, Colorado where he underwent physical therapy that gave him strength to walk, hike and run as much as he liked. But he still walked with a distinct limp.

So on what he assumed would be the last night he limped over to his little son's bed and gave him a goodnight kiss. He cried when he thought of his son growing up without his daddy but he secretly knew that this was for the best. He was broken, damaged goods, he wasn't good enough for his wife anymore and he didn't want to burden his son with the problems that he had dealt with since his return from Iraq. So he dad

decided that he was going to die and that weekend was the time that he had chosen to kill himself.

Suicide...killing himself...somehow that had never seemed right. So Martin came up with a plan that would ensure his death but not be recognized by his family or friends as suicide.

He thought about it for weeks after his wife left him. First he had planned a motorcycle accident but decided against it because it could either be too obvious or worse, he could fail in his attempt and be even more seriously injured and not die. Martin had heard stories of suicide by police but decided against that because of how it would affect others. Drug overdose, climbing accident, and drowning were all ruled out because of various reasons. One day he was walking in the hills around his house to clear his mind and he came up with a plan. He would walk himself to death.

Martin Johnson was a planner. He planned everything in his life and his death was no different. It would have to happen in the early fall when the nights were cold enough to induce hypothermia but the days were warm enough to justify going on a long hike. He would have to start walking and get into shape so that people would not wonder why he was hiking on weekends. Finally he would need to get his affairs in order so that his son would be taken care of.

Martin started with short walks two or three times a week. He walked around the hills near to his house or to the grocery store. He hiked with other veterans as part of a service group and he went on longer hikes with a local volksmarching club. As he walked and hiked a funny thing happened. Martin started to become happier. When he began even short walks were arduous and the pain in his foot was severe. But as he started to walk more he got stronger and started to really enjoy himself, and he became happy. It is a well-known fact that getting out and becoming more active has a positive effect on your mood but it was not something that Martin had expected. He actually started to doubt his

plans to die. In the end, however, he decided that his plan was sound and believed that as the winter approached his mood would again return to the depression that he had experienced after his return from Iraq.

Early on the morning of October 3rd, Jessica, Martin's younger sister knocked on his door.

"You realize that I never wake up before six on the weekend, bro. You can't sleep in for once?"

"Fifty kilometers is a long way Jess. You gotta start early and walk all day."

"And remind me, why do you have to walk fifty in one day?" Jess asked.

"It's for a badge from my volksmarching club. I guess that in Germany some of the most famous volksarches are fifty kilometers. When you complete the fifty you get a special badge for your walking stick and a patch for your jacket. But really it's more of a pride thing. If I can walk fifty with half a foot then I'm pretty much the shit."

"Okay, 'the shit'," Jessica joked while doing air quotes with her fingers. "You have a good time. What time should I wake Jakey up?"

"If Jake isn't up by nine then wake him up. His mom will be here at noon to pick him up."

Martin then surprised her by giving her a hug and saying, "Thanks for everything Jess. You're the one that's been there for me through it all."

"Okay bro, I'll see you later."

Martin thought to himself that that was probably the last real conversations that he would have in this life.

He stopped by a diner for a high calorie breakfast and cup of coffee then he was off to the trailhead for the start of his walk. He had chosen this route for a reason. While most of the volksmarches are loops to discourage cheating this one was out and back. The problem was that there were several important forks in the trail where if you took the wrong trail you could become almost hopelessly lost. At eight thirty-five

AM Martin started walking at a nice, steady pace. He walked all morning and into the afternoon. At about two PM he hit the turnaround point and started heading back. He came to the fork where he had decided to get lost, stopped, and said a little prayer. Martin prayed for his family, for his son, and for all of the other soldiers out there who were suffering like him. Then he did something that he had not planned on. He prayed for God to give him a sign that he was supposed to live. Then he just sat there at the fork of the road for about n hour, enjoying the cool, fresh mountain air. Then he slowly stood up and started walking down the wrong trail, walking to his death.

Martin walked for five more hours until the sun had set and he began to shiver. He walked over to the side of the trail, lay comfortably on the hillside, and went to sleep. As he slept he dreamed. He dreamed of his friends, both alive and dead, he dreamed of his son and the life that he would live, and he dreamed of hell. He felt the fingers of demons grabbing his at him. He felt them burning his flesh and pulling him up. He heard the demon voices.

“Calm down! Calm down man! We’re trying to help you.”

Martin opened his eyes, he was awake and he was alive.

“Are you alright? We have a space blanket, we’re going to wrap you up so that you can warm up and then we’ll take you down the mountain.”

“Okay, thank you,” was all that Martin could say.

Even the best-laid plans can be undone by random circumstances. In this case the random circumstance was the poor decision of a boy scout. Thirteen-year-old Jarom Marker decided to go exploring during a weekend scout camp. He wandered a bit to far however and stumbled down an embankment, breaking his ankle. When he could not be found in the immediate area by his troop, Jarom’s scout leader called the state police and a search was organized. The search proved successful and Jarom was found, but the search party also found a hypothermic Army veteran who became lost on a hike named Martin Johnson.

Spending the night in a hospital bed while recovering from hypothermia may not seem like a likely situation to have a life changing epiphany, but that was where Martin had his. He realized that he was happy to be alive. Not only that, Martin realized that he actually had a really good life. He realized that he had found the happiness that everyone seeks, a true happiness based on pride and contentment in our circumstances. Exhausted from his ordeal, Martin fell asleep. He fell asleep and dreamed about being alive.

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