

New Nonfiction from John Vrolyk: “Black Bracelets”



In 2011, two years before I show up to Officer Candidate School, the Marine Corps changes its uniform order to allow black memorial bracelets in uniform. ‘Acknowledging the close personal nature of our 10 years at war and the strong bonds of fidelity that Marines have for one another, especially for those fellow Marines who we have lost,’ the Commandant says, the bracelets will now be allowed.

The officialese disguises a change of mind by our senior leadership – not something they like doing. But like it or not, after ten years of war it’s finally gotten too hard to keep yelling at young Marines for commemorating their dead friends.

By the time I arrive at an infantry battalion as a new

Lieutenant in 2014, the bracelets are everywhere. For the older guys who are veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, sometimes many times over, the engraved names are talismans of violent and brutal memories. The scars are fresh, real, in the open.

Yet for the younger guys – the vast majority of an infantry battalion – their meaning has shifted over time. The experience of combat is at best second-hand. The infantry still deploys but it's no longer to war. Everybody withdrew from Iraq in 2011 and only special operations regularly go to Afghanistan. The infantry goes aboard ship, to Australia, to the Black Sea. Nobody shoots at us, we don't get to shoot back, nobody gets a combat action ribbon, nobody loses friends, nobody gets a good explanation for wearing a black bracelet.

My platoon sergeant and section leaders are the only ones who've been to combat. My platoon sergeant's been four times. He doesn't wear a bracelet. I never ask, but he'd probably tell me he doesn't need a bracelet to remember the guys who didn't come home. But half of our salty lance corporals – veterans only of a six-month peacetime rotation to Australia – wear the memorial bracelets. Most of their bracelets are inscribed with the name of a corporal.

He dies on a warm Sunday night in the spring of 2016. That night I'm at a beach bar in sleepy San Clemente, drinking cheap Mexican beer and watching the sun sink into the ocean. I would have been on base for all-night duty, but a buddy switched with me the night before.

My buddy on duty is the one who finds the corporal's body against the wall of his barracks room shower. He's used the detachable shower head's tubing to strangle himself.

I find out Monday morning at 0630 at morning formation. The battalion don't give us any details – just that he's dead. My

buddy doesn't want to talk about it. I don't blame him.

As far as I know, they never find out for sure why the coporal killed himself. He'd deployed to Afghanistan the year before with a different battalion. Maybe he brought demons home and couldn't shake them. Maybe it wasn't related to the military at all. Across the United States, suicide is the second-leading cause of death for the fifteen-to-twenty-four cohort.

His death hits close to home for me. I knew him – not well, but we were in Charlie Company together for about eighteen months. He was attached to my platoon for a month-long exercise. Two days before we went to the field, I was walking through the squad bay late one night, checking on the guys. He and his buddies were about to start a movie – *Pitch Perfect* – on his laptop. He invited me to join them. I sat down. He told me he wanted to go to college when he got out on the G.I. Bill. He asked me if college was just like *Pitch Perfect* but stopped me before I could answer. "Don't tell me, sir. I don't want you to burst my bubble if it's not."

I don't put his name on my wrist after his death, though. In retrospect, I probably would have if he'd died in a firefight, been blown up by an IED, maybe even gone down in a helo crash. But as it happened, somehow it didn't quite feel like I should. I don't buy into the Sergeant Major's old-school pontification about how suicide is somehow an 'easy way out' or selfish. There's nothing about killing yourself that sounds easy or selfish to me. It just seems like dying by suicide is different than dying in combat.

Yet within days his name circles a lot of wrists. The three other guys in his fire team – they're a given. Pretty sure that the ten others in his squad get them too. Most of the rest of his platoon. A good portion of the rest of the company. More than a few others throughout the battalion. Some of those guys knew him well and are pretty broken up. Some of them just want to be part of something.

Other guys, especially boots who join the battalion after his death, wear bracelets for guys from their hometowns, or the town over, or the town past that. If you ask them point blank, most will tell you that they never knew the guy personally. They'll choke out something about 'honoring sacrifice' and 'continuing the legacy' and 'community.' Mostly they squirm, like they've been caught listening to Justin Bieber or they know you overheard their Mom on the phone, using their childhood nickname. Some of them wear generic bracelets with just the number '22' on them, honoring the not-quite-accurate number of vets who kill themselves every day.

A few months later we're in the field. We're getting ready to deploy, this time to the Middle East via ship. We'll steam across the Pacific courtesy of the Navy, to serve as the offshore 'theater reserve.' It sounds grand and noble, but it actually means being crammed aboard a too-small ship, cutting endless kilometer circles in the trackless ocean, working out, waiting for something to happen, knowing it probably won't.

It's the last day of the exercise when my platoon gets tasked with assaulting an objective way up in the mountains on the eastern edge of Camp Pendleton. There is only one road in – a washed-out dirt road that switch-backs up the side of a cliff face, an eight-hundred foot drop off just past the road's crumbling edge. Talega Canyon Road.

My platoon rates eight up-armored HMMWVs. The HMMWV was a great all-purpose utility vehicle back in the eighties, before someone up-armored them against IEDs with twelve-thousand pounds of extra steel. It turned out that strapping armor to the sides doesn't help much against IEDs because the IEDs are usually buried in the road. Mostly the armor does a real number on the suspension, the transmission, the brakes, everything.

At this point in the exercise only six of my vics are still running. 'Running' is charitable. One burns a quart of transmission fluid an hour. Another overheats at random, pouring steam and boiling coolant out of the pressure-release valve. Another has a broken door latch – which sounds trivial, but it means we've rigged a cat's cradle of 550 cord across the interior to stop the five-hundred-pound armored door from swinging wildly on its hinges as we drive. Another has a frayed throttle body cable which will fail halfway to the objective, though we don't know that yet.

I think the assault is a terrible idea. As it is, the trucks are barely running – if we go, we'll definitely break at least one, maybe two of them. Going up a 40% grade on a washed-out road with no place to turn around – let alone going back down the same road – is asking for trouble. If the brakes fail and the truck goes over the edge, everyone inside the vic is dead for sure. There's a lot that can go wrong and not much margin for error.

I tell this to my company commander, then the operations officer, then the executive officer. They each agree, nod in turn, encourage me to bring it up with the battalion commander. It's showing I'm a responsible officer, they say.

At the brief, I lay out my concern to the battalion commander. '...at this point, sir, I just don't think the juice of the additional training value is worth the squeeze of the risks involved.' He listens without making eye-contact. He pauses. He tells me that we're going anyway. All he says about the risk, about my concern, the only thing he offers by way of explanation at all is 'that's what makes it special to be a Marine.' I stumble out a 'yes sir' and go brief my platoon.

On that day, I'm proved right about the risks we run. We break two vehicles – one on the road in, the other on the objective itself. We get lucky – nobody gets hurt. Allegedly

victorious, we limp home towing the broken vehicles behind us, tasting burning brakes all the way.

It was never a surprise that my battalion commander – a combat veteran from a couple Iraq deployments – didn't wear a bracelet. Not his style, not even a little bit. But he was also right that day, about what makes it special to be a Marine. It's unbending fealty to an order of priorities: mission first, troop welfare (i.e., living through the mission) second. It's doing your job with the understanding the cost might be wearing – or ending up engraved on – a thin black strip of metal.

Being a Marine is more than just having a strict order of priorities, though. Having strictly ordered priorities isn't terribly uncommon. Most parents claim the same (kid first, themselves second). What makes Marines special, though, is that actually we want to follow through.

It's both almost universally true and almost universally unacknowledged that infantrymen become infantrymen because we *want to go to war*. Outside the infantry, this probably seems paradoxical, maybe even pathological. Inside, it's so patently obvious that it's hardly worth mentioning.

We want to go to war knowing full well that combat is casualties, pain and trauma. Our training makes that obvious, right from the first day. We spend too much time too close to the ugliness to put much faith in the lies society tells itself about war – neither the highfalutin language of glory and triumphs nor the clinical language of 'surgical strikes' and 'precision operations'. We know full well that combat is a living nightmare.

It's just that avoiding *our* particular nightmare doesn't leave us feeling lucky. It leaves us feeling purposeless and cheated.

Officers and senior enlisted try to gloss this discomfiting truth with nuance. We'll tell you that we hope – broadly – that the country never calls anyone to go overseas and kill people and maybe die, but if our country needs to call *someone*, we want to be the ones to go. It's a way to see your choice of an uncomfortable and uncompromising life for yourself and your family as selfless and honorable. It's a feel-good explanation for the military, one you can say out loud in polite civilian company without raising too many eyebrows. It's also at least partially a lie.

The junior guys – the ones who do the majority of the killing and dying – are more straightforward. They'll tell you they joined the infantry to go to combat. They know that means killing people. They know that means risking dying. They know that means losing friends. They are on the whole neither stupid nor blind. They've probably thought about it more seriously, more up-close-and-personally, than you have.

When they speak to these junior guys, senior enlisted types – the gunnies, the master sergeants, and some of the sergeant majors – will tell them all they have to do is stick around. The United States averages a new war every ten years. If you want to go, stay in, don't get out, you'll get your chance. If the speaker truncates the cover-your-ass part of his 'safety brief' and has a chest lined with combat action ribbons and valor awards, you'd swear you can hear the machinegunners in the formation salivate.

We turn out to be among the lucky few – we won't have to wait ten years. It's early 2017 when we deploy to Syria to combat – at least a combat zone. It isn't Hue City, the Invasion, Fallujah, Ramadi, Haditha, Sangin, or Marjah – or even much like the combat deployments that span the gaps between the history book names. My platoon – actually, our entire battalion – fires exactly one shot in anger.

It isn't even really in anger. It's a warning shot, on our first night forward, at an unknown van that ignores the signs and the barbed wire and the flares and gets way too close. We find out the next day that it was our local partners, coming to link up with us.

That's as close as we come to a fire fight. For most of the next sixty-seven days, we're just shot *at*. It's all 'indirect' fire – quite a few Soviet or Iranian Katyusha rockets, I think a mortar two or three times, and once an old but terrifyingly accurate piece of Soviet artillery. Most of it isn't close – a thousand meters to the left or right, way short, a bit deep.

Sometimes it is close. One afternoon, that old piece of Soviet artillery drops three rounds in fifteen seconds within our inner wire. One round lands where a bulldozer was, at most fifteen seconds prior. The driver swan-dives ten feet into the dirt of an anti-tank ditch. A piece of diamond-cut rocket frag bounces off the dog-handler's helmet. No one is hurt.

None of us ever directly see the enemy. We wear our body armor, dig holes, fill sandbags (two hundred sandbags per man, per day), protect the daily supply convoys for building material and artillery ammunition, improve our position, go on patrol, and take cover when we hear the incoming call.

Initially, the aircraft overhead shoot back on our behalf. We send them the coordinates and a few minutes later the point of origin disappears into a grey cloud that rises from the horizon into the crisp blue sky. A few seconds after we see the smoke rise, we hear the sound of the bomb. We all cheer. Revenge.

Later our own artillery – the reason we're in country – arrives. They fire all day and all night into the city south of us. When we get hit, they race the aircraft to be the

first to shoot back. Battalion tells us over the radio that our artillery is shooting back at the point of origin. Otherwise we wouldn't know – we have no idea where the rounds go after they pass over our heads. South, somewhere. Raqqa. Sure. When we know we're shooting back, the guys cheer under the rounds passing right overhead, trailing the tearing sound of their sonic booms.

Most of the targets are at close to max range, requiring the maximum propellant to reach them – five hotel. When the cannon goes off, the concussion shakes the all the dust out of the gunner's clothes at once. It looks like a ghost leaping fully formed from their body.

The regulation says gunners should only fire twelve rounds a day at five hotel, even in combat. At that charge, the gunners get a minor concussion from overpressure every time the cannon fires. On the big days they shoot more than one hundred. They MacGyver extensions to the firing lanyards out of 550 cord to get away from the guns. It doesn't make much difference. Dust cakes in the blood which trickles from their nose and ears.

The rounds from the cannons pass directly over my platoon's holes. At night we lie on our backs and feel the concussion through the earth. The blast from the cannons firing comes through the ground before you hear it. It moves faster in solids than in air. Thirty seconds later you feel the dull thump when the round explodes downrange.

On the opening night of the 'big push,' the ground rumbles all night. The aircraft drop bombs in waves. Our artillery shoots steadily, hour after hour. The Rangers to our north light off with HIMARS – big truck mounted rockets that leave red streaks across the dark sky. The horizon is a sea of flashes.

The next morning everything is quiet. A couple days later, we

take our last incoming – fourteen rockets that all land within a couple minutes. A week later, we are relieved. We brief our relieving battalion on the situation, our procedures, what we're worried about, what we've left undone. Our artillery has fired more than five thousand rounds while we're there.

By the time ISIS is out of Raqqa and the Marines leave Syria, those four cannons will have fired more than fourteen thousand – more rounds the U.S. forces fired in total in preparation for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. They'll literally have burned out the chrome lining of one of the barrels.

But that's all yet to come. We're just relieved to give them our positions, sign away our ammunition and special weapons, and hear them say they have the fight. We go home.

We go to combat. We do our jobs. Everyone comes home safe. That's a happy ending. We should be proud.

But are we, really? No one comes home with a good reason to put on a black bracelet. None of us ever even fires our rifle. We don't earn the combat action ribbon. The lance corporal rumor is that the battalion commander submitted it too early, and his boss' boss – the division CG – said 'fuck no, not now, and now not ever.' He's seen too many people get ribbons for being on the other side of a hundred square mile airbase in Iraq that took one mortar round. We don't get a CAR for taking a few incoming rounds – not on his watch. The CAR is a big deal in the infantry. Napoleon said armies fight on their stomachs and for little pieces of colored fabric and he wasn't wrong. It's important to make sure the symbols you're willing to die for actually mean something.

Everyone knows you rate a CAR if you're shot at and you – like, you personally – shoot back. The order says you rate if you have 'rendered satisfactory performance under enemy fire while actively participating in a ground or surface

engagement.’ But what is ‘satisfactory performance’?

‘Satisfactory performance’ could have meant extreme heroism under fire if our mission was, say, clearing ISIS out of Raqqa. For lance corporals, it would have meant unflinchingly taking point, house after house, room after room, when behind any door, every door, might be a homemade bomb, a burst of AK fire, disfigurement, death. For their leaders – me – it would have meant sending the guys I love into those rooms – to die, lose limbs, come out with scars nothing can ever really heal.

The lance corporals spend their days wanting that mission. But especially in the military, just wanting something – no matter how sincerely or desperately – doesn’t make it happen.

For us, ‘satisfactory performance’ will remain mundane.

So all the the lance corporals can do is talk endlessly about what could have been, what might yet be. They talk about it on post, staring at the empty desert. They complain about it in the bunker, passing time over endless games of spades. Sometimes late at night, when they can hide their faces behind thick darkness, they’ll wonder aloud how they’d measure up, worry that they won’t really be tested, worry that means they’ll never really know.

Three months after we get home, I am on a long run with my now-former platoon sergeant. He’s getting ready to retire and I’m behind a desk as the assistant operations officer, counting down towards getting out and going to grad school. It’s just the two of us now, no platoon. As we turn back towards Camp Horno, we see a medevac helicopter landing on the battalion parade deck.

Lance Corporal Haley was on a run with his platoon that morning. His platoon commander – the best staff sergeant I’ll ever meet, then and still – was out with his guys, taking advantage of the last days they have together before they all

go their separate ways. They were a good platoon and proud to be one of the few chosen for Syria. That morning PT session was part of their extended goodbye to each other, part of how they remembered who they were and what they did together.

Haley stepped off the trail with his squad to pick up a log. A branch from an old and rotting oak tree chose that moment to give way and fall. It landed on Haley, amputating his arm and killing him.

A week later, I am off work early, sitting at home. I drive back on base and put on my uniform. At 1800, I walk out of the command post and stand facing Basilone Road. Most of the battalion is already there. We're in no particular order or formation on the sidewalk, ranks and companies all mixed together. As the hearse winds its way through Horno, our salutes rise and fall in a languid wave as Haley's body heads back to his parents.

After the procession has passed, I get back into my car and drive home. The drive takes me north, tracing Haley's route. On every overpass above I-5 the local fire departments stand on top of their trucks, holding up American flags, holding their hands over their hearts. I miss my exit, keep driving north, eyes blurring, flag after flag, all the way to LAX, all the way to the plane which will take Haley home.

I'm sure a lot of guys from my battalion put Haley's name on their wrists. I separate from active duty shortly after his death and leave Camp Pendleton for good, having never worn a black bracelet. It always felt like I'd be appropriating something solemn and slightly holy without having paid the full measure of its terrible price.

But I get why salty lance corporals want to wear them. I may be an officer but I'm still a grunt. I get that you want to feel like your performance, no matter how satisfactory,

entailed more than filling sandbags. It never felt like quite enough to have volunteered, to have said pick me, I want to go, I will kill for my country and live with what that does to me, I will carry with me forever the names of dead teenagers I was responsible for keeping alive, I am ready to pay that price. I feel like it matters – like it matters a whole lot – whether someone took me up on my offer.

You'll be tempted to say that we don't know what we're asking for. Sure, that's fair – we don't. But if you're saying that, you don't either. The guy who really knows? He's the Gunny who stuck around, deploying over and over again, trying to keep his salty lance corporals alive long enough to earn being sad, jaded, jumpy around loud noises. He knows why they want black bracelets. He wishes he could help them see that volunteering was enough, share the names he carries, pass them the memories, call it a day. He knows it doesn't work that way. So he tells them a war comes every ten years, stay awhile, you'll get your chance.