

My Flashlight, Just Like Dad's

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43 “trainees” sit in what we were told to call the day room. It wasn't a big room, but somehow we all could fit. It was familiar to us by now, sitting in that hot stuffy room, the dry San Antonio breeze barely making it through the window. It was our drill sergeants' favorite game, hurry up and wait. After what seemed like an eternity the order came, “ROOM ATTENTION!” We eagerly sprung to our feet and assumed the position of attention. It was our second favorite part of the day, besides sleeping, mail call. One of drill sergeants, Tech-Sergeant Gamash, walked into the room, holding a bundle of letters and a small package. Everyone was eager to hear from their loved ones. Sergeant Gamash rambled off names and threw the envelopes into the formation, it was a confusing mess that we had to figure out. Finally my name was called, but it wasn't for a letter. I won the “lottery,” I got the package! It was from my Dad. I was hoping desperately for Doritos. Instead there were twenty three Hershey bars, which I shared amongst my flight, a letter I read later that night, and a small L.E.D. flashlight. It looked so beaten and tattered. I didn't understand why my Dad would send me a small beaten flashlight, but for some reason it looked very familiar. That night I took it apart just out of curiosity, wrapped around the batteries was a note I wrote to my father a long time ago. The last time I had seen that note or the flashlight was September 12, 2001.

August, 2001.

I was attending Padgett Elementary, in Lakeland, Florida. Every Tuesday morning, we had a bookstore, you could buy little things like erasers and pencil sharpeners. On the first day of first grade we took a trip down to the store. When my class was visiting, I saw a flashlight. It wasn't just any flashlight, it was O.D. green, just like Dad's. Almost every boy at that age wants to be an astronaut or

a fire fighter, something like that, but I wanted to be like Dad. He was a communications expert for Special Forces teams, in any environment; he has deployed with the finest this country has to offer, everything from the Air Force Para-Rescue to the Navy SEALs and almost everything in-between. He has been to locations where he didn't know what country he was in, and was told not to find out.

For the next few weeks I would keep every cent I could find to buy this flashlight, so I could be like my Dad. I searched our couch cushions, picked up pennies discarded by the road, and took the extra change from the ash tray. My grandfather still teases me about when we would come over on Sundays after church and I would ask everyone to stand up so I could take the change from the couch. Finally, after I acquired a little over a dollar in small change, one of my aunts got fed up with me looking so hard for money and asked what I was doing,

“Cody, what are you doing with all this money you're getting?” asked Aunt Marcie.

“Can you keep a secret?” I replied tentatively.

“I guess so, just for you” she sighed.

I told her my whole plan to get the flashlight, to be like my Dad.

“Well, are you going to pay your tithe on it?”

“WELL, OF COURSE!”

Aunt Marcie gave me seven whole dollars! That's a big deal for a six year-old, and the flashlight was only three dollars. So I kept only as much as I needed to buy the flashlight, and put the rest in tithe the next Sunday at church, just like I promised.

September 11, 2001

Finally, it was the day, I could get my flashlight. I strutted right up to the desk with my money clutched in a tight fist in one hand, and in the other the O.D. green flashlight just like Dads. As I placed them both on the counter I declared to the lady working the counter that I would be buying that flashlight. She just laughed a little and took my money and put the flashlight in a little bag for me to carry back to class with me. The whole day I was so excited to get

home to show Dad what I got. My chance came early when the intercom started buzzing with names that got to go home. I ran down the hall, raced through the courtyard, and sprinted through the bus loading area until I could see mom in our ugly green minivan. I was the last of my siblings to get there, so I had to sit all the way in the back. The whole ride home my mom was crying, and we couldn't understand why. We pulled into our driveway and that's when my mom tried to explain the events of the day. I couldn't completely understand what she was saying, after all I never heard of the twin towers before, but I did understand it wasn't good.

The rest of the day, we waited for my dad to come home from the base, then the day turned into the evening, then the evening turned into night. I remember that day was the first and probably the last time I sat and watched the news. I got the gist of it, there were bad guys hiding in caves that attacked us. So we were going to send in good guys to get them, and my dad was a good guy. I remember feeling like I needed to help my dad, because caves are dark. I came to the decision he needed my flashlight more than I did.

That night, my dad came home after supper, right before bedtime. He called us all into the kitchen and tried to explain he wasn't going to be home for a while, and the next morning could be the last time he could see us. He was trying to let us know he may come home different, that he could come home in a coffin, if he came home at all. I don't think anyone got much sleep that night.

Looking back on it, that has to be one of the hardest things for a father to do. To have to look his children in the eye and say that could be the last time he was going to see them, and if we did he won't be the same man that left.

September 12, 2001

That morning we got up with Dad to say goodbye, possibly for the last time. There were lots of tears, after all he didn't know where he was going, he just knew he was leaving. He went down the line, saying goodbye to each one of us kids. When he got to me I held out a little paper bag, I told him he wasn't allowed to open it until he was on the plane. He promised he wouldn't, and he didn't.

After all why lie to their six year-old kid when it could be the last time you would see him?

It's difficult to describe the feeling of watching a loved one walk out the door and knowing that could be the last time. You feel sad, empty, proud, and almost betrayed all at once.

A few hours later, his C-130 was taking off from MacDill Air Force Base, FL. He still isn't supposed to talk about where his destination was, what he did, or even what unit he went with. That was the first time he deployed as a father. Once over the ocean, he opened the brown paper bag I gave him, to find the flashlight I worked so hard for, the one that he gave my aunt the money to give to me so I could buy it, the one he tried to teach me the life lesson of persistence with. Inside of the bag was also an envelope, with my note in it. Written with my horrible first grade handwriting:

Dear Dad,

Love you, I can't wait to see you again. I thought you needed the flashlight more than me, you know, when you have to get the bad guys in the caves. Can you come home for Christmas?

Love you,

Cody

My father is still mad at me to this day about that. He began to cry on the plane that was filled with some of the toughest guys in this country, and that it made him look like a "wimp." Personally, I wouldn't make fun of the guy that cried over his kid.
September 13, 2013.

12 years later at Lackland Air Force Base, TX, I received a package, inside the package I received, along with the flashlight was a letter. This time from my father:

Dear Son,

Love you, I can't wait to see you again. You were right, I did need the flashlight. I had it on every deployment I was sent on after you gave it to me, it helped me more than I'm allowed to talk about, and helped more people than you probably imagined. We are so proud of you. I'm glad you barrowed this to me, it was well worth my seven dollars, I'm sorry I had to barrow it for so long. Can you come home for Christmas?

Love you,

Dad

It doesn't seem like much, it's just a flashlight. However to me it means a whole lot more. It's part of my child hood. Having to watch my Dad walk out that door time and time again, being made fun of in school that my Dad is "as good as dead," learning to ride a bike from my grandpa because my Dad couldn't be there, video conferencing Christmas and hearing the fire fights in the background, my sister missing her school's father daughter dance, missing my youngest sisters birth, missing all of our birthdays, hearing his screams of PTSD at night, people avoiding us because my Dad was in uniform, getting judged at church because I was raised by a "killer." After all that I can't be bitter my father came home, and I will always be grateful for that.

I realize, it's not the troop, but the family that has to sacrifice the most.

Dakota M. Cron is currently studying at NDSU with the hopes to later become a Combat Rescue Officer (CRO).