

I have many thanks to give today, but I'm going to start this right off by singling out two men in particular...John "Gumba" Carciopollo, who dug me out of the woodwork for this exceptional opportunity to share this day with you, and to Master Chief Gaylord Humphries, my fellow dolphin-wearing warrior, who was originally slated to be up here in front of you. I know the Master Chief, and Hell or High Water or both must be present aboard USS SAN JUAN, because those are the only two things that would stand in his way of being here.

As grateful as I am, I have to say that in one key respect, I do not feel qualified to be addressing this subject. As for the "warrior" end of things, I think I'm as covered as any modern submariner. But the "wounded" end is different. For most dolphin-wearers, the usual post-script of a combat casualty is not "wounded in action", but more often is "lost with all hands". And even though my time in Iraq was marked with my fair share of rocket fire and IED attacks, I returned home as whole as when I left. Really bad sunburn doesn't meet Purple Heart criteria, and I have no battle scars to show you.

So instead of trying to compare my experience with those who have borne far more personal costs, this convoy is going to take a different route. Grab your gear, hydrate, suit up, and get in. We're going to make a few unusual stops, and look out the windows, and some of you may wonder exactly where we're going, but stay locked on the lights of the guy in front of you, and I promise we'll all be together at the end of the mission. Bear with me.

First Stop: Six Lakes, Michigan, 1970-something. My grandparent's house stood on a hill overlooking a very small downtown, with standard-issue grocery store, hardware, barber shop...and little else. Still, it had a lofty commanding view of the

school playground, and just beyond that, the post office. Now, that school yard was, in the dusty lazy summers, hotly contested territory. It was the scene of countless stick battles waged by the local barefooted tribal warlords, and we were a savage lot, dedicated to the absolute annihilation of any outsiders. Strategies were crafted, alliances were formed, and weapons were stockpiled with no less care than the most dedicated General ever gave to his craft. The war itself was an awful spectacle...clouds of dust, war whoops, and the continual back-and-forth battles of attrition between two evenly matched forces. And even though the smallest points of surrenders or concessions were argued with passionate logic and creative name-calling, a few things were universally agreed upon. Fatal wounds lasted at least a hundred "Mississippis". If you got whacked in the arm with a stick, you could still fight, but you had to put one arm behind your back. No throwing dirt in anybody's eyes. And any real blood was an immediate cease-fire, followed by heated negotiations on what our cover story would be on how it happened...not that the story matters much when the battle occurred in plain sight of every house in the 4-square-block downtown. And more importantly, in plain sight of that Post Office I mentioned.

The post office was no different than any small town's...go into Ledyard or Gales Ferry, and you might be in Six Lakes..the same counter, the same rows of boxes for the Townies...you get the picture. And behind the counter, known to every kid in that town who had to go there all summer long and pick up the mail, was the postmaster, Darwin Van Houten. He was a non-descript individual, etched in my memory as a pleasant smiling balding man who handed you the seed catalogs and Sears flyer with a flourish, asked about your grandparents, and always sent word to say Hi to somebody.

He was a fixture in every kid's life, and like most fixtures, didn't warrant a lot of attention. But those who did pay attention noticed that when he turned to walk from the counter to the mailboxes, something wasn't right. There was a drag in his step, and a strained apologetic look on his face that spoke of some great pain that was borne with silent endurance that we could only guess at. And we had to guess at it, because it just wasn't spoken of. But we all knew, from keeping our curious ears open at the dinner table or in the barber shop, or god forbid, at the cut-and-curl with your mother on a Saturday, that Darwin Van Houten had been injured in The War. And even though the nightly news was splashed with television reports from a distant jungle with the strange name of Cambodia, and even though older brothers or cousins were regularly drafted to the whispered name Vietnam, we never asked what happened to Mr. Van Houten. We never asked, and he never told. We were ashamed of our curiosity, we were embarrassed of his discomfort, and we never ever looked behind the counter.

I read his obituary last year, when he died in September. An Army veteran of the Africa campaign against Rommel, he was reassigned near the French-German border in the wake of the Normandy Invasion. While clearing mines for advancing troops, one got away from him. Despite grievous wounds and the loss of his foot and lower leg, he directed his own MEDEVAC, earning a Silver Star for his bravery and presence of mind.

Nobody had a clearer view of that playground, and nobody had a prouder story to tell, and nobody had a clearer understanding of sacrifice and cost in war...but we never asked for his story, and he never told it, and I still wonder what he thought as he watched us out there.

I could have used his strength. I needed it in the early days following my decision to enlist. Vietnam was a fresh memory, and even in my patriotic small town, the military was what you turned to when you had no other options. When the scholarship fell through, when the crops were bad, or when the Judge explained it was the only honorable way out of the courtroom. Surrounded by college-bound friends, I kept my decision to join the military an embarrassing secret, one shared only with peers sworn to silence, and few of them at that.

Mount up, and let's roll on.

Quick Stop Here: Landstuhl, Germany, 2005. Comedian Christopher Titus is wrapping up a USO Tour, with the typical garden spots: Kuwait, Baghdad, Ramadi, Fallujah. Lots of jokes, lots of laughs about base life, guns, bad food, tents, etc, but it isn't all laughs with this guy. In his performances, you hear a raw edge of things that aren't funny...deep concerns about the dangerous world we live in, and a struggle to find some hope to anchor himself to. And you can't help but think that if he weren't laughing, he'd be screaming.

He describes being escorted by four humorless intimidating MPs to meet Sergeant Pepper, a fan who has requested an opportunity to personally thank the comedian for one of his performances. More predictable jokes...one-liners about Beatles songs and the poker-faced MPs. But the tension unmistakably builds. As the formation draws up on Sergeant Pepper, it becomes obvious that the MPs hold him in high regard, and it becomes obvious to the comedian just why, for Sergeant Pepper is the biggest and baddest of them all. He holds a gigantic mug of beer in one hand...his only hand. He is seated in a wheelchair, with portions of one arm blown away, his eyes burned out, and his pregnant wife beside him. And

for once, this comedian who excels at finding laughs in dark places has absolutely nothing to say. The sergeant compliments him for the performance, the comedian shyly says, "Thanks". And for a long drawn-out second, nothing else. Then, one of the MPs asks if Sergeant Pepper would like a photograph taken with Chris Titus. And Sergeant Pepper, looks off toward the MP, makes a V with his fingers and points at his face, and says, in that very special way that NCOs have when dealing with stupid questions, asks "And just who in the Hell is the picture for?" The tension evaporated, and the laughter sweeps the group like a welcome breeze. And later, Titus says, "Is THAT who we sent over there? Is THAT the kind of heart and character that these kids have? Because if that's the case, the world is NOT ending tomorrow, and I've got HOPE..."

And the convoy rolls onward. Camp Bucca, in the Dirty South of Iraq, March 2008. I had been in command for about three months. Deep in Shia territory, with a captive population of nearly 30,000 Sunni insurgents, our local threat came from the fanatic militia supporters of Moqtada Al Sadr. Sensing a vacuum of power Al Sadr rose to prominence by threatening, attacking and killing coalition forces. Although our camp held many of his fellow Iraqi citizens, his attacks did not discriminate between our forces and the unarmed detainees under our protection...the detainees were mostly Sunni, after all, and counted for little to him. The rocket attacks were dangerous, but launched quickly from the back of a Toyota pickup with little in the way of precision targeting, they often fell in unpopulated areas of the camp, if they hit at all. The IED attacks were much more frequent, much more deadly.

Our primary patrol vehicles were up-armored HummVees; the MRAPs came much later. Despite their legendary status, any soldier will tell you that a HummVee was originally a utility vehicle, never meant to withstand sustained small arms fire, let alone RPGS or IEDs. They were literally Chow Chasers; hauling supplies or mail or people, but not engaged in combat. And even after IEDs blanketed every road between Basrah and Baghdad, the Hillbilly armor, the Farmer Armor, and the up-armor kits never caught up with the threat. Any village tin-bender could modify iron pipe, a copper bowl, a remote doorbell and some HE into an Explosively Formed Penetrator, or EFP. It would break your heart to see what an EFP does to the best HummVee we could roll...forget Hollywood with trucks tumbling end over end. An EFP is a hypersonic jet of molten copper that slices through armor like rotted cloth. The blast follows the jet into the vehicle; now the fire storm is loose inside where the people are. When the storm gets to the fuel tank, there is nothing left. Tires burned, steel slagged, aluminum burned away. What remains of the vehicle is a mockery; a suggestion of a machine, with the glass being the most recognizable part. Fit only to be abandoned, or so I thought.

While touring the back corners of the motor pool, I found the remains of several of these destroyed vehicles. Unknown to me, and at substantial risk, one of my patrols took the base wrecker out into the desert, down IED Alley, and brought the derelict shells, one by one, back to the Base. By the time I reached the Sergeant-Major's office, I was in a white-hot fury. After the original loss of the patrol, after the blow dealt by the enemy on our people, after the loss of precious mission material, I could fathom no reason why more of it all was risked to recover these wrecks.

The Sergeant-Major waited for the wave of my anger to subside. He carefully set his pen down, adjusted his desk blotter, and took a sip of coffee before addressing me, with all due respect. He said, "Skipper, we GIVE NOTHING to the Enemy. They may fight us fair for it, they may even take it from us, but we do not GIVE it to them. Every square inch of dirty sand, every nut, bolt, scrap of paper, even every bombed out and blasted vehicle that they want from us, they will pay for. And every burned out Hummer that we leave behind is another win for them. Another thing they can study and learn from. Another playscape for their kids to crawl on. Another photo op for their newspapers and web sites. If they take it and win it, so be it. But we will NOT hand them the win."

I found out later that those badly damaged hummers had other missions. Some were sent back to their builder, for study aimed at improving future designs. Others went to training missions, finding new life in static displays or as backdrops in mocked-up villages for training newly-reporting troops. But mostly, the Sarge was right...the real reason to haul them in from the desert was to keep the faith, to own the roads we travelled, and to keep the victory from the Enemy.

Back in forward gear, rolling again: Houston, Texas, March 2011. If there is a Wounded Warrior poster child contest, consider Corporal Clay Hunt, USMC. By some measures, the scope of his wounds was not as severe as those others have borne. Shot in the hand in Fallujah in 2007 during his second combat tour, Clay Hunt was MEDEVACed to Germany, but returned to his brothers to continue the fight. He left the Corps in 2009 with a Purple Heart, and by all measures was a decorated veteran in control of his future. His unit expected he would shine, and shine he did. He organized veteran's events, advocated in Dc for veteran's causes,

and volunteered with aid groups in Haiti and Chile. A gifted organizer, a visible presence,, and a tireless advocate for all veterans, but wounded vets in particular...you would be hard-pressed to find a man so immersed in the value of continued service after formal service was ended. And likely, the same as many of his friends, co-workers and family, you would not see the darkness coming that ultimately claimed him. On 31 March of this year, a few hours after some upbeat Facebook posts to his friends and supporters, Clay Hunt locked himself in his apartment and ended his life with a gunshot. After escaping serious injury that surrounded him throughout two intensive combat tours, he could not escape the guilt and depression from seeing so many of his close friends fall around him. Not all the scars show on the outside.

Let's roll again; we've got some dusty road to cover. Norwich, Connecticut, June 2011. The event is the annual graduation ceremony at Norwich Free Academy. 520 students and their families pack the football fields and bleachers, and an ugly storm cloud is parked overhead, threatening a couple thousand people with a serious soaking. There is a palpable mood of hurry-up in the audience, and the organizers seem to catch on to it. Faculty, student speakers, and alumni representatives step out and move with purpose. Remarks are brief, flow is seamless, and the polite amount of applause ushers each recognition off the stage. That is, until the MC asks all students who have volunteered to serve in the Armed Forces to stand. The applause starts slowly then increases exponentially, building over thirty seconds to the ONLY standing ovation that was delivered that day. The speaker closes with remarkably simple words. Our prayers are ALWAYS with you; good luck and God's Speed.

We've got a couple of minutes before I get to my stop, so we're going to pull the trucks into close formation before we pass the final checkpoint and arrive at the main gate. It's been a strange route, and as you've stared through the thick dust-covered bulletproof glass at each of the stops, maybe the view wasn't very clear. So here's the Commander's Intent for this convoy...

This is my stop; where I get out. And I wish I could tell our Wounded Warriors that they were Mission Complete as well...that they could debrief the Run, get some chow and head to some well-deserved rest. They can drop their gear, and shake out the kinks, but they roll again in a few minutes, and here's where I need them.

I need them out from behind the counter. The stories MUST be told, not read on page 6 in a small-town obituary column 60 years from now. Yeah, there are scars involved, and that isn't comfortable to show, or be shown. But we all need to know and understand the costs paid, the burdens borne. Otherwise, we risk a playground understanding of conflict...that rules are followed and nothing hurts for long. Understanding sacrifice, every bit of it, ensures that we do not frivolously spend the lives and health of our young people. But also, showing the scars teaches us that when conflict is thrust upon us by dire necessity, the costs can be borne with the same strength and courage that it took to face the fire in the first place.

I need them to help find the laughter and strength when we're in dark places. Our people look to institutions, continually and with some desperation, for Heroes. Increasingly, Heroes are in short supply in politics, religion, business and sports...where else is left? The military remains one of the most respected

institutions in this Nation, and our Wounded Warriors are there to rally the People when the night is darkest.

I need them to show the Enemy that we give him nothing. He may scar their bodies, tear their flesh, and break their bones but those gains will be paid in blood and fire, and never ever will we hand them the second victory of our Wounded Warrior's broken spirit.

I need them to find their brothers and sisters in arms, those who struggle with painful yesterdays, todays and tomorrows. I need them to tell every Vet out there that the grateful thanks of a proud Nation and the commitment and support of their comrades never leaves them.

I need them, for their shining examples of unmatched courage and unbreakable will to inspire tomorrow's warriors to stand tall on the football field to the thunderous applause of strangers.

And mostly, I need them if it is ever again time for me to turn from the LZ, where the thump of helicopter blades announces the latest departure of the MEDEVAC flight...to help me turn from the pain and blood toward the faces of the next waiting patrol and once more hurl America's might to answer the Enemy's challenge...I need them with me, so that I never forget what true resolve really looks like.

So mount up, move out, be safe, and know this...our prayers are always with you; good luck and God's Speed.