

New Essay: To Honor a Hero by Claudia Hinz



2017 MCAS Miramar Air Show

It's story time at the base library here at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, San Diego, home to the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing (3rd MAW). A girl in a pink dress and sequined sneakers toddles after her mother into the children's room. They are greeted by the singsong voice of the librarian, who welcomes them into the circle of other children and their parents.

The base library is spic and span. The architecture is '70s style, with a flat roof and concrete walls. On the display shelves, new hardcovers shine in protective plastic sheathes. The walls of the library are decorated with paintings of Marines: Marines bowing their heads against a sandstorm in Iraq; Marines in an Afghan village, conversing with elders; an Afghani man fingering prayer beads.

Miramar's Outreach Officer, Second Lieutenant Fredrick D. Walker, leads me into a conference room next to the children's reading room. Lieutenant Walker is courteous in a way that seems old-fashioned. In one day on base, I will be called "ma'am" more than I ever have in my entire life.

Second Lieutenant Walker has arranged for me to meet with First Lieutenant David Guerin, a pilot with the Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron (HMH) 465, also known as Warhorse. Lt. Guerin flies the CH-53E, the largest and most powerful helicopter in the world. He was a colleague and good friend of twenty-seven-year-old Captain Samuel Durand Phillips, who was killed along with the entire crew when their helicopter went

down in a training exercise in the desert north of Miramar on April 3. Also killed in the crash were Captain Samuel A. Schultz, 28, of Huntington Valley, Pennsylvania; Gunnery Sergeant Derik R. Holley, 33, of Dayton, Ohio; and Lance Corporal Taylor Conrad, 24, of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. A Naval investigation is underway. No one will speak on the specifics of the crash.

Lieutenant Guerin could be out of central casting with his high and tight, his standard green utilities ("cammies"), his dog tags snug in the laces of this boot. He looks to be in his mid-to-late twenties, not much older than my own son. It is a jarring realization: the majority of the Marines at Miramar are men (and a handful of women) in their twenties. A whole base of young people, whose daily training involves risks that I have never once faced in my fifty years.

Lieutenant Guerin does not ask why I'm here. All he knows is that I want to write a story about Captain Samuel Durand Phillips, a man I've never met, who grew up in the same small town in Oregon as me and graduated from the same high school my three children attended.

"I really miss Sam a lot," Lieutenant Guerin says. "He was one of the most gentle people you could ever know." A civilian employee tiptoes into the room to retrieve boxes. Before she closes the door behind her, I hear the children's librarian singing in the adjacent room. Lt. Guerin grasps the black bracelet on his wrist. It is a remembrance bracelet engraved with Captain Phillips' name and those of the three other Marines who were killed in the crash.

Lieutenant Guerin was not scheduled to fly the day Captain Phillips and his crew were killed. Instead, Guerin was back on base; he took the call that reported the CH-53E helicopter had gone down. It was his job to call in fire and rescue teams. His eyes cut away from me. He shakes his head and swallows. "I'd been to that area," Guerin says. "That area" is the

desert near the Naval Air Facility near El Centro, California, where many military training exercises take place—the “austere” conditions mimic the challenging “improvised” landings Marines may be forced to make in combat zones.

I ask Guerin if he hesitated to fly after the crash. He pauses and then says, “No.” I ask if his friend’s death has changed him. “Yes,” he replies, after a pause. “It created a desire in me to be better at my job...it added fuel to the fire.” Guerin tells me Phillips was “a good pilot...smooth on the controls.” He was a relentlessly hard worker, regularly staying late to plan flights, arriving on base early to review flight plans and double-checking every detail. He was also incredibly smart, a quick study of new syllabuses for pilot qualifications. Guerin says Phillips would have made a great instructor because he was “passionate about teaching” and “loved teaching Marines.”

In spite of what I’ve heard about the exhaustive preparations required before every flight, no matter how routine, I am curious whether Lieutenant Guerin will concede to some failure, human or mechanical. “Do you do anything differently now before going up in the air?” I ask him.

“Yes.” He pauses again. “I make sure I leave my family the right way.” He says he can’t discipline his son before he walks out the door. Every time he says goodbye, Guerin tells his family, “I love you and I’ll be home soon.”

He looks away again. “You can’t take for granted the life that you have...you have to have your ducks in order in case something happens to you.”



Two CH-53E Super Stallion helicopters from Helicopter Combat Support Squadron 4 (HC-4) pass over the island during a flight out of United States Naval Air Station.

Like most Marine pilots, Captain Phillips attended Officer Candidate School after college. He graduated from the

University of Idaho and commissioned with the Corps. After OCS and flight school, Captain Phillips chose to specialize in the CH-53E and pursued additional training specific to the aircraft. On Miramar's base are F/A-18 fighter jets, C-130s, enormous carriers which trundle as if in slow motion through the sky; MV-22 Ospreys—a hybridized tilt-rotor aircraft with the versatility of a plane's fixed wings and the flexibility of a helicopter, able to take off and land on a dime—and, last but not least, the CH-53E. The Super Stallion of the sky.

The hangars housing these aircraft line the southern border of Miramar. The base is much like one sees in movies: a little city unto itself, although not nearly as big as nearby Pendleton, home to 70,000 military and civilian personnel. Military Police guard the entrances to Miramar's base, and there is a steady stream of cars coming and going. Many are civilians employed by the Department of Defense. There is a commissary for former and active military personnel and their families, retail stores known as the PX or post-exchange; medical clinics; online learning centers for Marines working toward a degree; playgrounds, a sports bar, gyms; Dunkin' Donuts, a Taco Bell, and a Starbucks under construction. Unlike Pendleton, most Marines of the 3rd MAW and their families live off-base, but there is a small complex of barracks, which, from the outside, resemble college dorms.

Marines in varied uniforms jog on sidewalks outside the flight line, which is wrapped in concertina wire. Today, F/A-18s are parked on the flight line. President Trump stood in front of these fighter jets back in March of 2018 and addressed the troops of Miramar, promising to replace the aging fleet of Super Stallions and introduce new "weaponry that we've never had before or seen before."

Outside the officer's quarters, a flag with three stars alerts everyone that a three-star general is on base. A Marine's rank is fundamental to every exchange. Officers are addressed by the enlisted as "sir" or "ma'am" and typically saluted. As

Marines approach us, my escort, Second Lieutenant Walker, checks uniforms to identify rank and look for the “shine” of the enlisted service personnel’s stripes.

“Rah, Lance Corporal,” he says when an enlisted Marine passes by. To the more senior Executive Officer of 465, he says, “Ma’am.”

We pass through security check points and enter the building of the HMH-465. The men and one woman, the executive officer, wear green flight suits with the symbol of their squadron, Warhorse, on a badge over their right breasts. When we head out to the hangar, I am instructed not to report how many CH-53Es are associated with the 465 squadron—it’s a matter of operational security—but suffice it to say, there are more than a few.

I had watched videos of the CH-53E on YouTube, but it isn’t until I’m standing next to the Super Stallion that I realize how truly massive it is. It would be more appropriate to call it “The Beast.” It’s hard to imagine how it gets off the ground, let alone lug 32,000 pounds of cargo, fifty-five Marines, artillery, and tanks. The aircraft is one hundred feet long and weighs more than 33,000 pounds on its own. It is designed for combat assault support, which means weapons can be affixed to the rear, but its main purpose is to bring in supplies, artillery, and troops, and to get Marines out. The 3rd MAW did all of these things in 2002, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, in their support of the 1st Marine Division. Crewmembers say the ‘53 is “all about the guys on the ground.”

Typically, this helicopter has a crew of four, including two pilots—one commander, one co-pilot—and two additional Marines to scout the ground during flight. The Super Stallion is so large that in spite of its sophisticated instrumentation, Marines must be positioned along the side and rear of the cabin to assist the pilots in eyeballing the terrain from open windows. The enormity and heft of the CH-53E presents a whole

host of challenges when it comes to flying the aircraft, to say nothing of what it takes to land one. Every crewmember has to rely 100% on a high level of training. When I asked Lieutenant Guerin why he chose to fly this particular aircraft, he described a "crew mentality": "you have to trust the people in the back, and the guys in the back have to trust the guys up front." This dependence on one's fellow Marines is not so different from other Corps jobs, for which only the most rigorous and grueling training prepares a Marine for war, instilling faith that every Marine has each other's back. Preparing the '53 for battle requires rehearsing different flight patterns and training for a variety of landing scenarios. The training is inherently dangerous, and yet, as Guerin notes, it "builds safety" by "mitigating risk in the future." "If we didn't train to do this stuff all the time, we wouldn't be ready."

The "Ready Room" is where I meet First Lieutenant Jason Burns, who was the schedule writer with Captain Phillips on his last flight. Schedule writers take the flight plan, designed in weekly meetings, and then review every single detail regarding the assigned crew and the aircraft itself. It is an extensive and exhaustive process, from making sure that each person onboard has the proper qualifications for that particular flight's training exercise, to confirming that every safety feature has been reviewed at least twice. A pilot or crew member who is congested or was up all night with a newborn could be sent home at the last minute, the flight cancelled. Every single precaution is taken, every risk assessed, and yet, as Guerin quotes the Navy, "If safety was the number one priority, no plane would ever leave the ground." Risk is part of the job, and while it is assiduously assessed and minimized, it is always, always present.

Lieutenant Burns says Phillips was a solid pilot who was fastidious about details. He was tough on himself and would beat himself up if every single aspect of a flight didn't go

perfectly according to plan. And yet, off duty, Phillips was a “light-hearted and easy-going” guy. “Everyone loved him.”

Burns was teaching Phillips to surf, and while they didn't get much time off, Phillips was really taking to the sport. Mostly, Burns says, they just played around in the white water while Phillips got the hang of standing up on the board. Burns fingers his own black remembrance bracelet. “I had to remind him not to look back at me when he got up on his board,” Burns says, smiling. Phillips was always turning around for approval, always with a huge grin on his face.



Pacific Beach, San Diego

Leaving base elicits a strange feeling. Within 1,000 meters, I am back in the civilian world, but it feels like another country. The vegetation is, of course, the same; rows of palm trees bend in the dim light of low cloud cover. Second Lieutenant Walker takes me to a Denny's where I'll wait for my Uber. Walker hurries around his truck to open the door for me and thanks me for my time. A few minutes later, the Uber driver pulls up. Like the taxi driver who picked me up at the airport, this driver has never set foot on base, although he has driven along the perimeter countless times over the years. Like other neighbors of Miramar's 3rd MAW, he may look up when he hears the F/A-18's roar or the Super Stallion lumbering off to the desert to practice landings on “unimproved” land like where Captain Phillips and his crew crashed. Civilians live side by side with the servicemen and women of the base, and yet, there is little, if any, intersection between these worlds.

Back in downtown San Diego, the news is all about the NFL's decision to fine players who kneel during the National Anthem. Sitting down for dinner in the Gaslamp district, I look through my notes of my day on base. Behind me, a noisy table clinks glasses, and I turn around to see them throw back

shots. It is happy hour, and I assume that they are colleagues glad to escape the office. They seem to be celebrating. One woman stands and dumps a handful of plastic bracelets in the middle of the table. They are rainbow colored. The other people wiggle their hands through the bracelets, while the gift giver explains why she chose them. "I got one for my son, too." she says, explaining that there is a blessing that goes along with them: "You are precious. You are loved. You are blessed." The guy to her left says, "Aw!" before planting a kiss on her cheek. I look out the window in time to see a woman on a scooter crossing the intersection. A giant tote bag printed with the American flag hangs from her wrist.

I am aware of my own hand circling my opposite wrist. Part of me wishes I, too, had a memorial bracelet like those worn by Lieutenant Guerin and Lieutenant Burns, but I've never served in the military. No one in my immediate family has served. And I never met Captain Phillips, although I'd like to think that at some point I crossed paths with him in our small town. I have friends who knew and grieve him; coaches, parents, and their grown children, who loved him and remember him as a standout athlete, the ideal teammate, and just the nicest guy. When I learned of Captain Phillip's death, I tried unsuccessfully to get the flags in our town lowered to half-staff in his honor. I thought there should be some physical reminder of him and who he was, how he chose to live his life, how he was willing to die in service of this country. It's why I'd like a bracelet, why I'd like everyone in our small town to wear a bracelet with Phillips' name on it, to remember what we owe him and his crew, what we owe the Marines who at this very minute are going up in the Super Stallion.

When I go onto the 3rd MAW's Twitter page, I see the photos of troops returning from a six-month deployment in Japan. On the tarmac, Marines in green flight suits squat with arms outstretched as their children race into them. There is a photo of two children holding a poster with small red-and-blue

handprints that reads, "These are the hands that prayed for your safe return."

And for those who do not return safely from deployment, from a war zone or a training exercise in the desert, what are, as Woodrow Wilson once asked in a cemetery in Suresnes, France, "the unspoken mandates of our dead"? What is our part to play, our due to the men and women who risk everything, who put service to their country ahead of their own families, every day? If we choose not to serve, what must we, in turn, do? Insist on improved healthcare and healthcare access for veterans and their families? Protest sending troops to wars we'll never win? Support organizations that work with combat veterans and their families who are coping with post-traumatic stress? Is any of this enough?

Boarding the plane home, I wait behind a man in sand-colored fatigues. His backpack looks heavy. It is covered in badges naming Helmand Province; one sports the bony jeer of a skull. When the soldier turns a little in my direction, I say, "Thank you for your service." And without missing a beat he replies, "Thank you for your support."

While in flight, I think about the mother of the little girl in sequined sneakers back in the library on base. She must have been a wife of a Marine. I wish I had thanked her, although I don't know what words I might have chosen to acknowledge her sacrifices, her willingness to endure the uncertainty and worry every time her husband goes up in the air. I wonder if she knows the smell of the 53's cockpit, if she's seen the rosy glow of hydraulic fluid on the cabin floor, the worn leather on the pilot seats, the stretchers folded up against the side of the cabin. I wonder what she feels every time her husband walks out the door, every time he hugs them goodbye.

Back home, the news continues to roil with debate over the NFL's policy on players kneeling during the anthem. Twitter is

full of thoughtful comments, some from veterans about how they fought to defend our freedom of expression and support athletes' choices to take a knee to protest police brutality. And yet, I am left wondering if the gestures of professional athletes are insufficient. While their protests may be an important expression of their constitutional rights, they do not presage real or significant action. There are other, more outraged voices on Twitter, but even the most compelling and well-articulated arguments are merely performative, and we scroll ever on.

There is a black and white photo of Captain Phillips in the obituary that ran in our local paper. He looks different to me now. I still don't know the color of his eyes. Lieutenant Burns told me Phillips didn't like the cold of the Pacific and wore a wet suit when he surfed. I try to picture him, sleek in his black suit, smiling back at his buddy, the sun reflected in his eyes. I picture him now just above the cloud cover, over the terrain where the Super Stallion lumbers by, rehearsing a mission to help. I think of the bracelets, the Marines' in metal and the civilians' in plastic. I wonder if words are ever enough to memorialize the sacrifices of those who step up to serve.