

Suicide, the Soldier's Bane



Here's how it happens: you get a text. Or you see a cryptic post about the importance of friendship and "reaching out" on Facebook. Or an email. Then, the phone call comes.

"Hey man. Don't know if you heard, but Jack Smith died."

And you already know what that really means. Gun, drug overdose, poison, car exhaust. One of the many ways to undo or interrupt a fragile system.

Last year I totaled up the number of people I knew, personally, who had committed suicide—people I'd met and hung out with, something

more than a quick
“hello.” The number was seven. I knew of three people,
personally, who took
their lives when I was a boy or a young man; two boys killed
themselves in my
orbit when I was in my teens, and a high school classmate and
lacrosse teammate
took his life sometime after college, perhaps in my mid-
twenties.

Since that time, at least four soldiers with whom I served or
whom I knew,
personally, took their own lives.

Not surprisingly, the event that precipitated this
introspection was the
suicide of a captain whom I’d covered while reporting on [NATO
maneuvers in Romania for Foreign Policy](#).

He was the eighth person I knew, personally, to kill himself.
When we’d met, he
was acting as the S3 of an armor battalion as a senior captain
(something I’d
only ever seen done by higher-ranking officers), and he was
highly respected by
peers, subordinates, and superiors. I heard that he had a wife
and kids back
home, in the United States. He’d sat down on train tracks and
waited.

But eight doesn’t tell the full story, because those were just
the people to
whom I had a direct connection, who decided to send themselves
West for reasons
only they know. One Sunday in March, after climbing into bed,
I scanned
Facebook a final time (always a mistake) and saw people that I
served with
discussing the suicide of someone with whom I’d served, a

soldier I didn't remember.

And *that* experience—the experience of seeing other veterans process

the untimely death of a friend or loved one that I'd met in passing, someone

with whom I'd stood in military formation, suicide by one degree of separation—is

something I've processed more times than I can remember.

Fifteen? Twenty?

Thirty? It happens, I'd say, around once every two or three months. Making that

calculation conservatively, at once every three months, for the eight years

I've been out of the military, produces the number 32.

That doesn't count the soldier who shot himself rather than return to

prison, or the soldier who got so blinding drunk out one night that when he

decided to drive home, he forgot to buckle his seatbelt, and ended himself in a

wreck of metal and glass. They're two of the eight.

It *does* include the brother of a soldier who died in Afghanistan,

himself a veteran, who died of "soul sickness," according to the obituary—and

many others whose families and communities would prefer not to characterize the

death as suicide, though it is. It *does* include a soldier who hung

himself when I was on active duty with the Army. They're two of the estimated

32.

The [most](#)

[recent statistics](#) from the Department of Veterans Affairs says that the

problem of veteran suicide is bad and getting worse. A [story](#) from *The Military Times* from September of 2018 headlined “VA: Suicide rate for younger veterans increased by more than 10 percent” did a good job of quantifying the problem:

In 2016, the most recent data available, the suicide rate for veterans

was 1.5 times greater than for Americans who never served in the military.

About 20 veterans a day across the country take their own lives, and veterans

accounted for 14 percent of all adult suicide deaths in the U.S. in 2016, even

though only 8 percent of the country’s population has served in the military.

Numerical terms, though, are abstract. You read “twenty a day” and think,

maybe, that can’t be right or it’s horrible, or what about the context or those

poor veterans or any of the other socially conscientious things a person

might think when confronted with an impersonal tragedy, and it’s still too far, too distant.

In the coming months and years, as the remaining soldiers and sergeants and

officers I know transition out into their civilian lives, 32 will increase to

33, and then 34, and so on into the uncertain future. At some point—not too far

off from now—I’ll have lost more comrades to suicide than we lost to the

Taliban. The count will continue its irresistible climb.

Suicide is on my mind not only because of the actions of those

around me,
but because it is something I have considered in the past.

It crosses my mind occasionally, the vigor of its allure
weaker than before,
now more an echo of a masochistic urge that is dismissed as
quickly as it
arises. But I used to think about it often. I became
accustomed to thinking
about death. I fantasized about dying in battle (gloriously)
or by accident (absurdly),
and that fantasy conquered and remains in a compartment of my
heart. Each time my
heart contracts, pushing blood through my veins, that
compartment whispers—"what
if this were all to stop?" Over time, the thought became
habit.

It took a lot to break me of that habit. I had to learn not to
covet some
brief control over the terms of my demise. PTSD therapy at the
West Haven
Veterans Affairs helped, and finding my wife, and friendships,
and work.

But then, many of those soldiers who ended their lives had
wives or husbands,
too; they had friends, and children, and jobs. Their Facebook
pages were
active. They shared their happy memories of comradeship in
times of war—of
exhilaration, and love, and respect. They were not so
different. Their hearts,
too, must have asked, "what if?"

That's what makes it all so maddening. Sometimes a person's
suicide seems
rational—a response to hardship, or the accumulated result of

smaller bad choices and regrets. When one hears about a promising life gone to drugs and debt, nobody thinks “how could that have happened” (and everyone’s grateful when it doesn’t), and similarly, something about the experience of being in the military lends itself to this type of sensible suicide. Then, sometimes, it makes no sense at all, from a rational perspective, or from the emotional side. There is simply no accounting for it.

And the lack of an explanation for *why* this is happening means we don’t have a good sense of what to do to reduce or resolve suicide. Perhaps we ought to better fund national institutions and publicize hotlines, so those desperate people who find themselves at bottom due to drugs, or alcohol, or gambling, or bad choices can, in spite of it all, find respite—a bed to sleep in, a job to pay the bills. Currently, \$8.38 billion goes to VA Mental Health services and programs, while there is \$186 million dedicated to Veteran Suicide Prevention and Outreach programs; one can only imagine how grim things would look were this number cut, though it’s difficult to imagine things improving substantially were the number much larger. A scandal that unfolded last year about [money unspent](#) implies that greater efficiency could contribute to the mental health of veterans. But on a certain level this isn’t about money, it’s about

despair and solitude, the lack of company. The rich and professionally successful, too, commit suicide.

Meanwhile, if one views the government with skepticism, and thinks that a person's tax dollars ought to go to charities instead, we can prioritize the expansion of regional and local charities to accomplish the same task. This runs into the same problem as expanding the VA, which is to say, the problem of throwing money at a problem human empathy is best equipped to handle.

On that note, on a human level, we can be more available to the veterans in our lives—not responsively, not reactively, but assertively, checking in with them, calling, writing occasionally to see how they are doing. But this is the dearest solution of all: anyone who has wrestled with depression themselves or in a friend or family member understands that there simply isn't time enough to think positively for another human who's gripped by despair; our own lives are consumed with the requirements of job, and filial piety, and the duties of the father, and mother, and husband, and wife. Living our own lives well guards us against dark impulses, but as every new parent knows, it can be utterly exhausting to live two lives for even an hour, let alone every waking hour.

A too-obvious fix of not going into war so casually any more, such as was

the case with Iraq and Afghanistan and could be the case in Venezuela or North Korea, is rarely discussed with any degree of seriousness, though it ought to be.

Adopting all four of these measures will still not solve the problem of veterans committing suicide. They will help, and because they will help, we ought to do them, but veterans will continue taking their own lives. We can't save everyone.

This leads to a more troubling thought. If there are people who cannot be rescued by individual action—who cannot be saved by even the most technologically advanced and intrusive state—who are not saved neither by religion, nor by secular charities—what then? We are left with a group of honorable people who wanted to serve their country, often during times of war, who subsequently commit themselves to self-slaughter. A group of people who are, in one regard, the type of sons and daughters we'd like, and on the other hand, shameful cautionary tales.

Ancient Rome and contemporary Japan viewed suicide as, potentially, an honorable act. There have been other non-Christian societies whose mythology or narratives contain room for people who no longer wanted to live; paths of last resort, obviously, but dignified exits to the next world. If we have confidence

that the life we have created here on earth is more attractive to people than death (and that, surely, ought to be the most primitive, basic idea animating a developed society), surely there ought to be an acceptable place for those folks who can no longer abide here.

Look, we'd all like to help, according to our ability and bandwidth. But the fact is, when it comes to trauma, the damage to veterans is already done. Many combat veterans or those victimized by bullies or sexual assault were lost years ago, and the bill, as they say, is just late coming due. Some of those veterans could probably be saved by aggressive professional and personal intervention, but let's be honest: that's not going to happen.

Instead, it's only a matter of time before the next suicide, which will add itself to the others that came before. And we'll all be left sitting in our chairs with the terrible news ringing in our ears, wondering: what happened to Jack?

That young soldier, jumping down off the front hood, his dusty armor slapping after a long patrol, or seated by a campfire, laughing, full with the power and confidence of their youth? What happened in the intervening years, what caused them to make that choice, in that moment? Could *I* ever do that? What if...?

New Fiction: The Sandbar

The morning of day three, Kelly decided to go out on a jet ski. She'd been resistant at first for all the usual reasons. But the accumulated effect of watching other vacationers roar around on the water, the insanely beautiful tropical backdrop, and listening to Dan complain about her unwillingness to try new things finally broke her. It was for her own good, this trip down to paradise. That's what everyone said, and what she told herself. Looking out onto the water, however, she'd felt nothing. As though the blast that had ripped open her leg had taken something besides blood.

Dan smiled when she made her wishes known and said, "told you, it'll be fun." Then they walked down to the jetty to catch the 11am trip. Kelly wore a one-piece under mesh shorts and a yellow t-shirt, Dan wore a bathing suit and a unit t-shirt from the 82nd. The shirt, which Kelly had bought with some encouragement from her first sergeant, featured a grinning metal skull with wings that said, "Death from Above."



She'd met Dan at crossfit, and she'd given him the shirt after they started dating. Dan had never served, but the shirt suited him. It brought up bad memories for her, but seeing it on her man made the shirt seem less menacing, more like an affectation.

When Dan had left her at the bar last night to chat with an older gentleman and his younger wife—but mostly the younger wife—Kelly had remembered the shirt, how it hung on his shoulders. To be so hard on the outside, so sculpted, made her feel like she couldn't trust him. He was undependable inside, soft, but, she thought, that was the point. His violations the errors of a faithful dog kept inside too long, or of a baby, helpless to avoid filling its diapers with the effluvia after a day's feasting. He had come back to her at the bar when another guy bought her a drink. She'd made sure not to return the new guy's attention, and Dan's ego (light as it was) hadn't even been bruised.

At the beach, a resort employee wearing a blue shirt with "Chris" embroidered in white thread checked the names of

guests against a list he had affixed to a clipboard. He was tall and well-built, and for some reason he reminded her of an Eastern European Staff Sergeant from the maintenance platoon. Dan introduced them, shaking Chris's hand and grabbing his elbow while looking in his eyes. "Got room for two more?" he said.

"Sure," said Chris. "Which house do you have?"

"We're in the 'Prince Eugene,' up the hill," said Dan.

Chris scanned the list he held on his clipboard, pausing halfway down the second page. "Dan Fuchs and Kelly Browksi. Know how to swim?"

"Practically born with webbed feet," said Dan, laughing.

Kelly pointed toward the lagoon's middle. "How deep does it get?"

Chris scratched his head. "Not too bad—maybe twenty feet around the middle? Thirty?" He looked at Dan. "Thinking about diving? It's much better further out, on the reef." He saw Kelly's leg, then looked away quickly. "Wouldn't recommend going into the water if you have any cuts or scrapes... you know. Can attract the wrong kind of attention. Anyway, you'll want to catch the dolphins, they should be around here somewhere."

Dan shook his head, looking down at her with an expression. "Jet skis should be plenty for us today. Maybe I'll head out to the reef tomorrow." The "by myself" was implied.

They dragged Kelly's jet ski into the water, then Dan grabbed his own and pulled while she pushed, wanting to help. Chris and the other guests were already in the water. Dan brought the engine to life with a roar and joined the larger group. Kelly mounted hers gingerly, settled into a comfortable position. She ran her hand down the scar on her right leg,

tracing its fresh, raw lines. Without thinking, she itched it, and blood welled up.

“Shit,” she said, wiping the red on her thigh. She debated bailing on the event, then imagined what Dan would say. She fired up the jet ski and sped out after them.

The lagoon was huge. Three hundred feet out from the shore the bottom had already vanished in the blue. Kelly supposed if it was as deep as Chris said, she didn’t want to see the bottom, see the life swarming beneath the waves, looking for a big shadow, graceful serpentine undulation. The logical antipode to her mantra as a paratrooper with the 82nd – “Death from Below.” Ahead of her, someone shouted—Chris was on a jet ski, pointing. A group of dorsal fins broke the surface of the water. They’d spotted the dolphin pod.

She drifted to a stop, admiring the graceful animals, their subtle rhythm. They seemed so carefree and happy. Of course, life outside civilization was more complicated than a video snapshot of photogenic mammals grinning, they were just animals. For them, life was a ruthless competition for food, sex, sleep, and safety. Maybe what looked like fun to her was a chaotic mess of anxiety and barely-contained violence. She’d heard something about infanticide and murder among dolphin pods, but Christ, at least they didn’t attack humans. Who cared what savage acts they committed against each other?

She moved to join the group, then shut down the engine. Ahead of her, Dan was talking with two college-age girls. They were pretty, which, with Kelly’s injury and the secondary effects it had had on the rest of her previously balanced system, meant they were prettier than her. He was sitting up straight on his jet ski, with his chest out, watching one of them talk—the more attractive of the two. She wondered whether he’d explained his military themed shirt—whether he’d told them he didn’t want to talk about it, or told them it belonged to his girlfriend. The attractive girl laughed and pointed at the

dolphins. Dan was laughing, too.



Kelly sat still for a moment, gave herself space to feel what to do. If she went over now, she'd arrive clumsily, she'd be jealous. In pulling up to Dan, she'd intrude, or worry about intruding, in that way she had of being intrusive in overcrowded social situations. Things would require an explanation, which Dan would furnish, introducing her as his girlfriend. The girls would greet her perfunctorily, and then stare. She'd feel awkward about her body, her legs, forced by bullshit society and their expectations to feel bad about her greatest source of pride: her service. Dan would make the appropriate qualifications. Kelly realized that she didn't want to ruin everyone's good time. She looked out at the sandbar that made the lagoon possible, and headed there instead.

Kelly had grown up in Connecticut, on a typical Long Island Sound beach. During exceptionally low tides, a sandbar connected the beach to a nearby island. This semi-permanent

bridge had a little trail of hardened sand at the very middle, a crust of safety above the mud below. Her dad had warned her to stick to the sandy part, and sink up to her ankle or worse. That if she were too heavy she'd break through, and the mud was bottomless. Clams lived in the mud—normal clams, unsafe to eat from decades of chemicals spilled into the water, and razor clams, native to Connecticut. The razor clams were so named due to their resemblance to a nineteenth century barber's straight-edge. When Kelly was eight, she had walked out to the island during summer and broken through a patch of thin sand into the mud beneath. A razor clam had cut her and she'd bled for an hour. This was one of her most vivid memories from early childhood. Panicking as her parents reacted to the sight of the cut, the red mixed with dark, rotting brown.

Nobody noticed her absence. The dolphins jumped through the water, frolicking and spinning in the hot midday sun. Kelly decided to cruise with the jet ski before succumbing to the inevitable despair of social maneuvering. She revved the engine and headed out toward the sandbar. Forced herself to enjoy the sense of mechanical power, though she knew how many ways that sword cut, forget about it, just try get a sense of the lagoon's boundaries. Kelly bounced on the waves, hesitantly at first, then with abandon. As she got closer to the sandbar she could see the bottom. It was like the shore, not deep at all. Actually pretty safe. And the sandbar was wide. Unlike the murky water of the Atlantic northeast, with its lurking threats.

Five minutes of this left her soaked with sea-spray, and although her wounds burned and tingled, the pain reminded her of childhood, and life, and her unlived future. She remembered the simple pleasure of tearing around dirt roads on a bicycle, wet from exertion and alone, blissfully independent. Kelly let the engine idle as she drifted up to the sandbar, and slumped forward on the handlebars, watching the sea beneath her. She

remembered parts of a dream from last night, and wondered if the other guys in the truck would've liked this place. Portmanteau was always talking about the water—from Mobile, Alabama, with a slow, deliberate drawl—he and Rafe, bullshitting about what they'd do when they got out. Get buried, that's what they did, that was the sum of their human potential, no more youth, no vacation. Barely worth the time it took to remember their names. And here she was, floating in warm, quiet luxury. Two feet of water, maybe less. She could feel the bottom of the craft scraping against the sand.

It was horrifying, the feeling. The lightest of touches on the sand, the machine was no longer floating but almost resting on the ground. *Fuck* that. Kelly gunned the engine and sped into deeper water. After twenty seconds her panic subsided, and she realized that she'd moved far from the rest of the group. They were 500 meters away, now, just a series of black dots, still following the dolphin pod. She hated the jet ski now, everything about the experience made her skin crawl. She turned her craft toward the group, no longer worried about the consequences of her arrival.

As she turned, the jet ski's engine sputtered and died. Kelly drifted to a stop near the middle of the lagoon, facing the group. No chance of capsizing, not with this ingenious contraption. She checked the gas meter—still nearly full. She tried starting the engine again. Nothing.

"You've gotta be *fucking* with me," Kelly muttered, like she was back on deployment. "Cheap goddamn resort piece of shit jet ski..." She beat her fists on the the plastic engine cover. Nothing. The group was so far she couldn't hear them, which meant it was doubtful whether they'd hear her even if she yelled. She stood up awkwardly and waved her arms. No reaction.

Kelly sat down again and looked around. 500 meters from shore, she'd never make that swim because she'd never leave the jet

ski. Exactly why she hated doing this type of shit. Her wound was oozing blood again, dropping her life into the water like a sacrifice to the old ones beneath the waves. Grateful for the one-piece, she took off her shirt and stood up again, waved it in a circle. Maybe a lifeguard would notice or something. After a couple minutes, a commotion among the jet ski group gave Kelly hope that they'd seen her. Three riders sped out from the main group, but cut to her left—heading further out, toward the sandbar. She sat down, quivering with anger. She couldn't wait to tell those lazy irresponsible bastards a thing or two when they got over here. Oh yeah.

Except, she wouldn't. It wasn't really their fault, they were just college kids. Maybe she'd hunt down the mechanics and give them a good razzing. Nothing to do but sit at the moment, she'd try again in a minute or two. Movement out of the corner of her eyes caught her attention, and she looked over the side of the jet ski for the first time since it lost power. The sun was hitting the waves and the tiny objects suspended below, sending shapes and shadows into the depths. Here, the water was deeper, darker—this wasn't 30 feet, it must be more like 50. She blinked. A deeper shadow among the others swam in the depths, slow, unconcerned. Or maybe it was just a trick of the light. She looked again—no way to be sure. Now it moved, now it didn't. Should she look again, confirm her worst fears, see the hammerhead or the tiger shark or the bull shark or whatever they had down here in tropical fucking heaven? A goddamn pack of sharks, a hundred of them, the big ones, twenty-footers, ready to explode up from the deep, cresting through the surface, a storm of teeth and hunger, and take her legs, everything this time, right at the torso? Dan was still too far away. He'd left her alone, just like he had at the bar last night, just like fucking Portmanteau and the rest of them had when it counted, marching off to Valhalla and leaving her adrift.

Kelly made herself a part of the jet ski, hung on to it for

dear life, melded into it, gasping for breath, squeezing. The jet ski was hot, the waves, warm. She forced herself to look down. Nothing. Just the way sun hit the water at that depth. Why keep living this way, goddamnit. Why pretend that this was any better than just *fucking doing it*. She looked again. No shark. Come on. Beneath the unhealed wounds on her leg, wounds that would never heal, fully, a deeper hurt stung now, aching, weeping.

Carefully, deliberately, she let go of the small watercraft, and slipped in. At 500 meters it would take her fifteen minutes to swim ashore, and someone would notice way before then. Her legs throbbed like mad as she began to kick toward the beach, and she imagined the tendrils of blood flowing out behind her, searching for whatever destiny awaited.

New Poems by Alex Pitre



Slurry

The bones had been surrounded by years of
suppression, political amnesia,
and walls of loam that contained not much more

than clay. Now laid out in some large building
on the edge of some town, these amalgamated bones or the
unidentified relatives

of them know the name. The smell fills up to
the rafters and a summer breeze or none
at all passes through picking up new weight.

If each bone could be perfectly matched
with the density of air, D could just
place it in the current. Thoracic cage.
Mandible. Radius. This equated

metatarsal could remain or leave without genocides or policies
guiding the way home.

The smell wrapped around each hair follicle
follows D home into the tile shower.
Maja absorbs it. It stings as it goes,

carrying gravity, leaving impressions
on pillows. The air wilts as it passes:
the difficulty

of finding the definition of a word when its absence creates
the shape of its meaning.

Nettle

Iron legs reach, sinuous and long,
to the floor. Down to the floor. So down, below
a bed under the floor and above the room.
Upside, inside, 'round and 'round.
The smell of iron fills my nose, fermented nettle leaves.
I live in the smell of it all.

I'll take it. All
of you. I'll braid my fingers through your long
eyelashes. Shake your head and let your leaves

drift down, savoring every second below
the winter moon rising. So round.
We've stayed here in this room

with our roots deep in the soil. The sun to light our room,
the walls. If you would have ever asked about all
that I had wanted. The year turning around.
On the beams that hold up your knees I left you such long
messages. Can I write upside if I am below?
And then the sun, it leaves.

I still see your face between the leaves
casting shadows on the dirt brown wall of our room.
Upside, inside, you've tried to hide below.
So silly. Below is my hiding spot. All
the things I have hidden under my roots long
for that humus and detritus to surround

each layer of skin. 'round and 'round.
Lying with my chin upward, your leaves
tickle my cheeks. Lean long
iron legs burying into our room.
For all
of our seconds, I'll remain below.

You know what's down here, below
with me. We've turned around,
spiraling. Twisting all
our leaves and our leaves.
You left me all the room
again, but your arms they are so long.

Below, when I saw you there, I wondered how long
round pupils would last in this room.
All our seconds spent tumbled in leaves.

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 HMM-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.