

ETERNAL COMRADE

By
Steven Manchester

Non-Fiction

Dear Marc,

It's hard to believe, brother, but it's been ten years since we served side-by-side in Operation Desert Storm, As U.S. Army M.P.'s in Iraq, we shared every trying experience one could imagine during war. They labeled us the *Dream Team*, though as you know, our experience was anything but a dream. I've learned that our perspective of the Gulf War is very different from the sanitized version CNN opted to show. I'm sure few people know of the children- we witnessed- get slaughter by land mines. I'm also sure that few people know anything about such hefty costs associated with freedom. I envy them. And, I also wish we could have talked about the pain.

During the 100 hours of ground fighting in the Middle East, there were so many friends that we made and lost, so many battles waged on an internal front, and so many promises that were broken from those who sent us. Though we returned home visibly whole, what we brought with us as a result of experimental vaccines, radioactive depleted uranium, and pent-up rage is more than any man should be asked to carry. "It's a just cause," they said, "Babies are being tossed from hospital incubators in Kuwait." I still wish our government saw our cause to be equally just.

When we got home, I know that you suffered from PTSD, with nightmares, flashbacks, depression, and terrible insomnia. Your Mom also told me that you had severe headaches, joint pain, liver problems, respiratory problems, digestive problems, undiagnosed lump on his chest. But, the VA told you that your problems weren't service-connected, therefore, they couldn't really help you. It's criminal, I know! I was given the same answers.

I guess we were taught to value loyalty above all things except honor, while those who called us to serve didn't have to show either?

But the physical pain is only a fraction of it, isn't it? Men like you and me were forced to learn that- not all war wounds are visible, nor are they all suffered on the battlefield. We also learned that war is a state of mind and that a man cannot live in two worlds at one time. Eventually, there has to be a truce! I wish, more than anything, I could have helped you find that truce.

I sensed that you had a tough time trying to heal. You were one of the lucky few who'd tried everything to patch up some of the Iraqi kids that never made it. I imagine that gory picture haunted you for years. It's certainly haunted me.

For reasons that reach beyond mercy, upon our return though, the *Dream Team* parted ways and we only saw each other at special events. The best explanation I have for this is that it actually became less painful to avoid faces that served as reminders of a difficult time (no matter how much we loved the people behind the faces).

Marc, trust me, you were never alone in your struggle, and this is the greatest tragedy to come out of Operation Desert Storm. Not one of us had to suffer alone. Yet, that's all any of us have done for a decade.

I learned this far too late, but you eventually turned to drugs and got hooked bad. It brought relief from your demons, I'm sure. I'm also sure that you fought desperately for years to beat those demons back. They told me that your son was only five when those demons finally won. Your Mom said that you died at home with her right by your side. Although it was a horrific scene, she said she was so glad she was there with you—even though she couldn't save you. When I heard this, I wept like a child. But I was also relieved that you didn't die alone. I am

eternally grateful that you passed over with someone who really loved you by your side. Now, I can only pray that this incredible tragedy has finally brought you peace from your demons.

I'm writing you now to let you know that I haven't forgotten: When we were in the Gulf, you were there for me when I really needed help. I've always felt I owed you one (though I'm sure you'd argued that). In any event, as I never got the chance to pay you back, I now owe it to your son, Anthony. I don't know that I'll be able to clear my debt until Anthony gets older, but it's my word that on the day he really needs someone, I'll be there. His honorable father already paid for it!

This past Veterans Day, the *Dream Team* (12 of us) went to the cemetery and had a remembrance at your gravesite that lasted better than two hours. The beer was cold and it was quite emotional, though I'm confident you already know these things.

While the boys and me were at the cemetery, a stranger approached with his mentally retarded son. Their presence felt peculiar. The man prayed at the stone to the left of yours, and then walked over to ask what you died from. I hurried to explain that you'd been sick from the Gulf, and that...when Doug Donnolly interrupted, saying, "He died of a broken heart." It was as good an explanation as any, so I nodded. The stranger smiled and said he understood, and then walked away with his boy. At first, I didn't think much of it. On the way home, though, I started to question whether or not it was a coincidence.

I promise that Anthony will know that his Dad was a great man, and loved by many men who also chose to serve a purpose higher than themselves. 'Goombah,' you were loved very much, and still are! And, you are still quite respected by people who don't show respect unless it is earned. I miss you terribly, brother, but have also experienced enough to know in my heart that it's only a brief matter of time before we reunite and laugh over old times.

I recently wrote the American Gulf War Veterans Association for you and Anthony. I told them that I have a comrade from the war that died; that he was ill for many years and could not find relief at the VA. As a result, he self-medicated himself until he silenced his pain with an overdose. His name was Marc Susi (Sgt.) and he was a very honorable man: one hell of a soldier. Tragically, he left behind an 8-year old son named Anthony. And although my brothers from the *Dream Team* and I will insure that the boy knows his Dad was an honorable man, we could use some help. I told them that I fear that Anthony may grow up thinking that his Dad's premature death was the result of some random addiction and not the result of war. I explained that this boy should take pride in his Dad's service to America in ODS. I told them that you were one of the few heroes I've ever met, and that you would have given your own soul to a dying Iraqi child. I told them everything.

One month later, Anthony received a medal in the mail. The letter attached said that he was being awarded the medal for his sacrifice toward the liberation of Kuwait. I know you're proud.

Brother, trust that when the time is right, I will tell your son: Your father's death was not caused by some random addiction. He was a casualty of war. And because of his premature death, you have also been forced to sacrifice a great deal for the liberation of Kuwait. You are one of us now. Do not be haunted by silence. Be proud of what your father gave to his country, and understand it was that noble decision which took his life. If anyone questions who your father was, you have thirty "uncles" that you can call on to help you explain. I'd be insulted if you didn't! Be proud, Anthony, and always keep your chin up. Your Dad was a bonafide hero!"

I love you, brother. I'll be seeing you soon.

Your eternal comrade,

Steve Manchester