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Abstract

SPC Brabazon grew up in a troubled home that was filled with poverty and drug use. Family life was non-existent which created a lack of trust and confidence in friends and everyday life. This young man had more drive than your typical 17 year old and faced adversity on daily basis. Brabazon would volunteer to serve as a paratrooper in the United States Army. This young paratrooper had heart and a dying willingness to enjoy life to the fullest.

Troubled Paratrooper

SPC Brabazon was a young man with an endless supply of energy and ambitions. Growing up on the streets of New York and failing to be accepted by his own family created a young man with no self esteem. Foster homes provided the only family he would ever know and trust. Mom had a history of severe drug use which led to poverty and failure to provide direction for her seven year old son. At the age of 14, survival was a way of life. Street crime and gang involvement was normal day to day activities. Brabazon often bragged about his up bringing to peers. He considered himself a modern day era thug and was proud to be associated with the troubled youths he called family.

Brabazon's life of the street would take its toll. Failure to be accepted by family and friends would bring this young man to his knees. This young man was hungry for direction and had no one to turn to. He often passed by the local Army Recruiting station but was afraid to leave the life he had been a custom to. In December of 2001, Brabazon made contact with the local Army Recruiter. After several lengthy interviews, Brabazon made the decision to reenlist into the army. The ASVAB test became a major hurdle. He failed his first examination and with help of the recruiting team, passed on his second attempt.

PVT Brabazon selected the airborne option and enlisted into the army in May. He often bragged about the phone calls he made to family and friends about his enlistment and the sarcasm he received. He was finally leaving the street life and ready to face the challenges that lie ahead.

Fort Benning would soon become his new home. Successfully completing Basic and AIT, PVT Brabazon would later attend Airborne School. Paratroopers habitually brag about their first jump. PVT Brabazon was no exception to the rule. His war stories of jumping out of a perfectly good airplane often overshadowed that of his peers. Drawing a crowd was not uncommon for this young paratrooper.

PVT Brabazon was assigned to Alpha Company, 2/505 Parachute Infantry Regiment in May of 2002. He served as an M203 gunner for 3rd squad, 2nd platoon. SFC Belding served as the Platoon Sergeant and welcomed PVT Brabazon to his new found family. SFC Belding was astonished after his first conversation with the young paratrooper. He openly discussed his life in the streets and the family he yearned for.

I assumed duties as First Sergeant for Alpha Company in October, 2002. CSM Hodges informed me of the disciplinary problems within the Company. PV2 Brabazon and two fellow paratroopers were pending UCMJ action for drinking under age.

Within twenty-four hours of my arrival, I held a Platoon Sergeant meeting to address these issues. I informed the Platoon Sergeants to brief current platoon status, losses, and problems within their respective platoons. SFC Belding, the strongest of the three, wanted to discuss his platoon issues in private. PV2 Brabazon became the focal point during the discussion and concerns grew as time passed. I reviewed his counseling packet and found a great deal of inconsistency in his job performance. I found off duty time seemed to be the biggest discriminator. I was astonished to find out he qualified expert with his assigned weapon and scored a 306 on his APFT. This paratrooper was full of potential and additional guidance and direction was imperative.

We received deployment orders for Afghanistan with a report date of 15 January, 2003. The next couple of months were solely dedicated to pre-deployment briefings, Soldier Readiness and block leave. PFC Brabazon, newly promoted, was instrumental in assisting operations with inventories and actual out load of equipment. It seemed as though Brabazon was headed in the right direction. SPC Brown would become PFC Brabazons airborne buddy and their close friendship was observed through out the company.

Deployment to Afghanistan went very smooth. Bahgram Airfield and the Pakistan Border would become our new home for

the next 9 months. SPC Brabazon and SPC Brown maintained their close relationship and were very popular with the soldiers from the Louisiana National Guard. The MWR applauded them for their efforts in establishing a dance and karaoke night for enlisted Soldiers. They often spoke about plans for block leave and their trip to Brabazon's hometown. The unit safely re-deployed in late October with the possibility of deploying to Iraq the following year.

Our unit executed its first large airborne operation since our return from Afghanistan. Late that night, SPC Brabazon asked to speak with me in private. He shared his interest in joining Special Forces and showed a great deal of concern about his GT score. I was fully aware of his current GT score (82) and that he needed a GT score of 110 or higher to qualify. I educated young Brabazon on how to raise his score and offered study material to assist him in reaching his goal. He gladly accepted my offer and went up stairs. I spoke with SFC Belding the following day and addressed SPC Brabazons ambitions. I contacted the education center and enrolled him into the next available class. SFC Belding informed SPC Brabazon on his scheduled class date and a loud and thunderous "Hooah" echoed from down the hall. I told him to study at least three hours a night and to take good notes.

Later that week, SPC Brabazon came by the office with a look of concern. He informed me that he was struggling with vocabulary words and achieved a score of 70% on his first pre-test. I asked to see his work and identified the problem. Suffixes and prefixes were challenging. We spent the next hour working on his entire vocabulary list and a big smile came across his face as he absorbed the meanings.

Monday evening there was a knock on my office door. The company commander and I were discussing deployment criteria and invited SPC Brabazon in. He received a 100% on his practice test and was overwhelmed with joy. The commander and I shook his hand and congratulated him on his accomplishment. He said he felt comfortable with the material and was looking forward to his final exam on Friday.

The day of the big test was finally here. The Company wished him luck as he passed down the hall. High fives were exchanged and off he went. SFC Belding contacted me by cell phone later that evening and informed me that he raised his score to a 109. SPC Brabazon was so overwhelmed with emotion on his recent accomplishment that he bought pizza for the entire platoon. He told his squad leader he would rather stay in the company than try out for Special Forces. His education and learning experience was the highlight of his life.

On December 2, 2003, we received deployment orders for Iraq with a report date of 14 January, 2004. Block leave was granted and Soldiers scramble to make plans for the holidays. SFC Belding informed me about Brabazons plans to go home for the holidays and ask if I would talk to him before his departure. Two days before block leave, SFC Belding and Brabazon came to my office as previously requested. I asked him where he planned on going and where he was going to spend the holidays. He planned on staying with his Grandma and visiting a girl he use to date. He never mentioned anything about his mother. SFC Belding asked the question about his mom and the room went silent. After a couple of seconds had passed, Brabazon said that he has made several attempts to contact her but to no avail. You could see the anguish on his face. We asked if everything was OK and assured us everything was.

Block leave had ended and all the paratroopers made it back to work on time. The Soldiers were rejoicing in the hallway and preparing for a 4 mile company run. I briefly spoke to the company and noticed that SPC Brabazon was standing in the rear of the formation and seemed distant from his peers. This was out of character for young Brabazon. I later asked the platoon chain of command to see what was troubling him.

SFC Belding informed me that he had a serious altercation with his mom and that he was really mad at her for the things she had said. He would not expound on the exact details and said he would attempt to call her over the weekend to help resolve the issue. No contact was ever made.

We deployed to Iraq in January, 2004. My company was attached to 1-4 ADA indefinitely and our main mission was man pad suppression. The Soldiers lived in hardstand buildings which were well structured. I had air conditioning and heater units installed and acquired over 100 bunk beds with mattresses. Needless to say, the soldiers living conditions were far greater than the rest of the brigade. Soldiers' morale was high and every mission was a success. The company was doing well and received high recognition for our efforts. Who would've thought that a single shot would soon change our lives forever?

On 9 March, 2006, 3rd platoon and I returned to base at 0235 hours. We had the mission to clear Route Tampa and Route Irish. The paratroopers were tired but proud of their accomplishment. The Soldiers downloaded their ammo and rucksacks and began weapons maintenance. I proceeded back to my hooch to brief the commander. After a quick debrief I proceeded to my hooch to download my ammo. At 0416 hours, I received a sensitive item check from the Platoon Sergeant and fell fast asleep. At 0521

hours, SFC Sturm busted into my room in a state of panic and informed me that SPC Brabazon had shot himself and that we needed a medic ASAP. I immediately jumped out of bed, woke up the medic and ran to the barracks. SFC Sturm was out of breath and could barely speak. As I ran 100 yards to the platoon barracks, my first inclination was that Brabazon had a negligent discharge and shot himself. I personally assisted the PSG in clearing all weapons prior to our arrival back to base. My mind shifted gears several times during my journey to the barracks. Upon my arrival, several of my paratroopers directed me to the small six man room where the incident had taken place. I ordered all the soldiers outside to decrease the chances on possible mental and emotional trauma. As I entered the room, I observed SPC Brabazon lying on the floor with severe blood loss. The Platoon medic and I checked for a pulse and the results were negative. I immediately had SFC Sturm run to the head shed and request an immediate medivac. I observed a small entrance hole under his chin and the found the exit wound on the right side of his temple. I knew at that time what had taken place. We immediately attempted to clear the airway and began CPR. All means were exhausted. Still no pulse! I assisted the PA in initiating a trigonometry. Once inserted, we received a pulse. SGT Beely said communications were up at the medivac aircraft

was airborne and approximately 15 minutes out. The PA and several medics were diligently trying to keep this young paratrooper alive and were ready for transport. We placed SPC Brabazon in the FLA and raced to a pre-determined LZ 200 meters down the road. I jumped out of the FLA and immediately reestablish communications with Raven 64. The litter team was ready to load as soon as the aircraft touched down. I yelled at the PA for a status on his condition and all he could say was that he was sorry. We loaded the deceased onto the Aircraft and watched it fly away. I never shed a tear and new the toughest challenge I was going to face still lied ahead. I will never forget the looks on those Soldiers faces as the PA and I exited the FLA covered in blood. The Platoon Sergeants had water cans on standby so I could clean off before addressing the Soldiers. Chaplain Harris came to the other side of the vehicle and asked if I was alright. I reassured him that I was fine and asked how my paratroopers were doing. I informed the men that SPC Brabazon was pronounced dead by the PA at 0551 hours.

CONCLUSION

SPC Brabazon was young paratrooper with a heart of gold who faced adversity in every sense of word. MSG Belding and I often discuss the relationship we shared with this young man. We came to the conclusion that leadership is challenging. In this case, knowing everything about soldier can be heart wrenching and unforgettable. Leaders need to mentally plan for casualties of war. I have and continue to second guess my leadership because I was in charge. Barbizon's suicide was something I would have never predicted or even mentally prepared for. I have seen my share of wounded and deceased soldiers but the images from that morning were far more traumatic than I could ever imagine. I never shed a tear, but the pain comes from within. I am looking forward to my next combat tour and striking fear into the hearts of the enemy.