PERSONAL ESSAY

Building a new expectation for myself

// BY EVANGEL BAXTER

I joined the Marine Corps at 25 because I had reached a crossroads. I could continue down a path that seemed to lead nowhere, or I could join an institution that might straighten me out and give me a chance to attend college. I had been a poor student, repeating more than one grade while growing up in a fractured family. I wanted something to change.

The Marine Corps does not wait for you to find an identity. It demands that you earn one. Its standards are not suggestions. You meet them, and in time, you begin to expect the same of yourself and those around you. The institution's traditions reinforce that identity. Every Marine knows Nov. 10, the Corps' birthday. We celebrate those who came before us, usually with stories and more alcohol than we admit.

I came to understand what all this had done for me during what seemed like an ordinary day in Yuma, Arizona. I was a 3531, a Motor Transport Operator. In plain English, I drove trucks.

That morning, I woke at 0300 and headed into the desert with another Marine. A helicopter picked us up for a training mission, and we simulated firing from the aircraft en route. It dropped us farther into the desert, where we drove to meet artillery Marines and helped support a live-fire exercise. When the cannons fired, the earth shook, and the blast passed through our bodies. Later, the helicopter returned to extract us, and I drove back to base as the sun set.

I showered, sat down in my barracks room and logged into an online class at Palomar College, where I was pursuing my commitment to earning an education while serving on active duty. That evening, we were studying the American Revolution. Hours earlier, I had watched artillery shake the desert. Now, I was learning how our forefathers fought the British.

That night, I recounted the day to a friend. He pointed out that each part of it would have been a remarkable experience on its own. To me, it had become business as usual. That was when I realized how far I had come: the struggling 25-year-old who enlisted had become a disciplined Marine entrusted to lead others. The Corps had demanded more from me than I thought I could give, and in doing so, they showed me what I was capable of. I carry that expectation into my education today.

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The soldier that never retires

// BY ANTHONY OLUTOLA BRITTO

I have been blessed to see life through the eyes of two people, a soldier and a civilian. The seemingly different identities have always been connected.

As a young adult, I was "soldiered" in my habits, not only in who I was becoming but also in how I made sense of the world around me. But I have been a civilian my entire life. Or have I?

My first experience of this was when I would yell, "Yes, Drill Sergeant!" at 3 a.m. during basic training and then go home and realize that the very tone of voice that was validated in the Army was not welcomed by my sister. The difference was apparent, but I always reminded my family, "Of course, I'm a soldier!" I could never disassociate from being a soldier, whether it was my calmness in moments of chaos or just the way I viewed the world.

This was even more evident when I went to Mt. San Jacinto College and served as an Army reservist in California. I would take a bus to school, and then at 4 a.m., my sergeant would pick me up, making me the first one in our unit. In that time, I had to deal with COVID-19, published a poem, took on leadership roles in school and was promoted through military ranks. They were not different versions of me doing different things. They were just my life, two worlds and two realities.

During my time at Mt. San Jacinto College, I was the vice president of Phi Theta Kappa, an honor society for students at two-year colleges. Yale pulled my information from its database and invited me to apply. I was over the moon. Braggadocious. I felt like I was a Yalie even before applying.

And now at Yale, these worlds still impact my experiences, painfully and happily. I'm still learning what it means to be a Yalie, with all that came before that — from dealing with injuries I sustained during my deployment in 2023 to being a part of different clubs and associations.

I try to take things day by day, enjoying what Yale has to offer and finding ways to contribute to its community. I am still trying to process this new reality, but perhaps that is the point. I am a soldier. I am a student. Two identities. One person. Just learning to navigate the worlds I live in.

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WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:
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