WEEKEND *PERSONAL ESSAYS*

Sights from the MH-53E

BY JORDAN EPPING

I'm finally ready to conduct my first flight as an aircrewman aboard the MH-53E, the largest helicopter in the Western world. Standing at the edge of the rotor arc, I wait for the signal to board. This is a "hot-seat"; the helicopter is already fired up, rotor at full speed. The outgoing crew just completed their mission, and we, the incoming crew, are about to begin ours. I follow my crew chief as he jumps through the helicopter's side door to debrief with the outgoing crew chief. The latter walks the 30-foot length of the cabin, turns around, and, in a display of utmost swagger, salutes my crew chief and jumps off the ramp to head toward the hangar. Everything is in slow motion. The three jet engines, 99-foot rotor arc and innumerable moving parts emit a constant roar, as if we're standing in the heart of a thundercloud.

The 179 rotations per minute of the rotor rock my helmeted head back and forth. I take it all in: the fumes of jet fuel, the grease christening my new green flight suit, the analog gauges in the cockpit coming to life as the pilot taxis forward. This old helicopter is like a newspaper press or steam locomotive: a ton of work to get going, but once it does, it's a formidable sight. After taxiing to the helipad, the pilot slowly raises his collective, and the airframe becomes light. The wheels start to lift off the ground. The feeling is indescribable. We swing forward and upward over the blue Chesapeake Bay.

This was the first flight of over 100 during my service. Often, I recoiled at the sight of my name on the flight schedule. It meant either that I was being evaluated or that I had no idea when I'd be home, since operational and maintenance delays were commonplace. Most of the time, flight missions consisted of me being a lookout — a jaded Naval Aircrewman Second Class staring out the window, making occasional reports to the pilot.

Throughout the monotony of mind-numbing flight hours, there were moments that glimmered through the cracks. Flying through a canyon of skyscrapers in Busan, South Korea, following the meandering river below as my feet dangled off the ramp. Buzzing the red sandstone formations of Sedona. Flying cross-country from San Diego to Norfolk, Va. Tracing the Florida Keys and catching the reflection of a massive helicopter in the aquamarine.

Shooting a .50-caliber machine gun at invisible targets in the Atlantic Ocean, my crew chief slapping my helmet because I accidentally went too far in the wrong direction. Watching the stars scintillate in different shades of green through my night-vision goggles during a midnight flight over farmland. Hovering 10 feet above the bay so EOD divers could plunge into the water below, seawater spraying our faces in the cabin. Hanging two-thirds of my body off the ramp to wrestle a piece of equipment four times my body weight, staring at the open ocean below as the rotor wash whipped up sea mist and a big circular rainbow, hoping my gunner's belt was still attached to the helicopter.

Even little things, like waving back at a boy and his mom in a Walmart parking lot as they looked up at the sound of our thunder, snapped me out of the monotony. These little flashes removed me from my disillusionment and woke me back up, reminding me to be the person the wide-eyed kid in the Walmart parking lot probably thinks I am.

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What the 75th Ranger Regiment taught me

BY TRISTAN BENZ

Even before I put on a uniform, I learned what honest work looked like from my parents. Neither of them finished college. Instead, they both worked with their hands. As a young child, I would accompany my mother as she cleaned houses. Later, I spent my summers on job sites with my father, building pool houses, wrought iron gates and hand-crafted arbors with ornate columns for clients across the Bay Area. I learned early what a full day of hard work looked like and what it meant to take pride in something done right. The same foundation was what the 75th Ranger Regiment was built on.

I enlisted in the Army after high school and was fortunate enough to start my career in the 75th Ranger Regiment, an organization that gives its junior soldiers a level of trust that most of the Army never does. Deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq, I worked within small teams running the full targeting cycle of F3EAD: find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze and disseminate. That meant coordinating collection and surveillance, working alongside other government agencies and fusion centers and leveraging relationships across a joint environment to build a clear picture of the enemy. When the picture was clear enough, we sent our assault element after high-value individuals. Lives were on the line every day, and as a junior enlisted soldier and later a junior Non-Commissioned Officer, I held responsibility that soldiers, even officers, in other units don't hold until years later, if ever. But I never felt the weight of it. I was confident in my decisions, I felt the trust of the people around me and I owned every part of my job. In that environment, it felt natural.

I did not understand how unusual that was until I served elsewhere. In the Ranger Regiment, everyone is a Ranger. At 5th Special Forces Group, there are Green Berets and there are support soldiers. I felt like a member of the team there, too. Senior leaders came to me for support in cases where they would normally turn to their Green Berets, and I was sent abroad into a role typically filled by one. I did not think much of it. Then one day, a senior colleague pulled me aside and said, "Tristan, don't you see the way they treat you and look at you compared to me or anyone else?" I didn't. I felt no different from the Green Berets, and looking back, that was the Regiment's doing. My time in the Ranger Regiment had given me a credibility I did not realize I had.

The leaders in the Ranger Regiment trusted me not because I was special but because the Regiment's culture expects you to exceed the standard — and then set it. The Ranger Creed says it plainly: "I will shoulder more than my share of the task whatever it may be, one hundred percent and then some." And the Ranger Regiment meant it. What I took from it was simple: the work you do is bigger than yourself. It belongs to the people next to you and to the organization you serve, and it is still there after you leave. I carried that through every assignment after the Ranger Regiment, including deployments to Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, and then through community college and now to Yale. I try to treat every organization I join the way I was taught to treat the Ranger Regiment: improve the systems, invest in the people and leave it stronger than I found it.

Today, that means working with the Yale Undergraduate Veterans Society to build something durable for the veterans in Yale College. It also means connecting our members to veterans across the Ivy League and partner schools through the Ivy League Veterans Council, so veterans at each of these institutions have a place to build a network. The goal is bigger than us. It is for the veterans who will be in our shoes later, so they inherit something stronger than what we were handed — and for us as future leaders, so that when we are in a position to open doors, we remember the people who are standing where we stand now. I also try to be there for Yale undergraduates and faculty, whether that means offering advice that may seem like common sense to me, connecting students with people I have met on and off campus who share their interests or showing up when faculty host an event and need support.

I owe the 75th Ranger Regiment, its leaders and the friends I made there a great deal. The least I can do is keep building on what they gave me.

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ILLUSTRATION BY SERINA YAN

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:
TALKING POLITICS AT THANKSGIVING