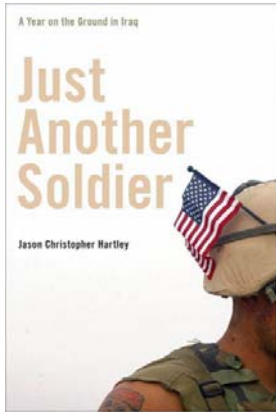


THE TAO OF SOLDIERING



CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE: This article (well, really more of a soliloquy, or a philosophical dialectic) was written by Jason Christopher Hartley, an Army National Guard infantryman activated for OIF (or whatever the name of the latter operation was there in country). Jason has written a book about his experiences, available on Amazon.com, and has a widely-read blog site, JustAnotherSoldier.com. You should read them both.

“Soldiering is boring work with scarce and brief moments of intensity. I’m in for the long haul. There isn’t going to be a tidy coda after two hours of Josh Hartnett mugging for the camera. Credits won’t ever roll and house lights don’t go up for a long long time. On top of it, I’m in the National Guard. The guard isn’t cool, it’s a place for unrepentant masochists with a lot of karma to work off. We’re gluttons for punishment that jones for a monthly grunt fix. If I were cool, I’d join the friggin’ Ranger Battalion and start talking shit about how I’m gonna try out for Delta or SEAL team six. In real life I’m a geek. I’ve never read Black Hawk Down. I miss the city and I just want to get back and finish school. This “war on terror” crap has totally ruined my semester...” —JCH

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Today is the birthday of The Monastic Order of Infantrymen. For those unfamiliar with MOI, let me explain.

Soldiering is difficult. But for soldiers with the proper attitude, there can be great fulfillment from this work. To find peace and contentedness from a job that may seem intuitively chaotic, you simply have to find the tao of soldiering and embrace it.

For soldiers who are nauseated by terms like 'embrace', 'peace', and 'contentedness', and don't know how to pronounce 'tao' (it's like 'dow', as in Dow Jones, and can be translated loosely to mean 'the way') let me put this in terms a grunt can understand. Being a soldier is to live in a world of shit. You're constantly surrounded by assholes, you have to endure an unending amount of bullshit from your leadership, military regulations and paperwork, stupid training missions, and in the end of it all you'll most likely get shit on by your own government sooner or later when they fuck up your pay

and benefits. And to top it all off, you might actually have to go into combat at some point which also means you'll spend a lot of time in another world of shit (i.e. Iraq) and possibly get your balls blown off by some insurgent asshole who is too afraid to fight you face to face so he explodes jury-rigged artillery rounds next to your Humvee while he's outside the maximum effective range of most your weapons systems. Soldiering just plain sucks. From the pogue who cooks my food and does my laundry to the Apache pilots and the Green Berets who do all the Hollywood stuff, our lives are in a constant state of suck. But there are soldiers who have found a way to not only endure it all, but to enjoy it. Contentment, happiness, fulfillment, rewardingness, peace, meaning, purpose, zen, the way, the middle path, nirvana, the big nothing, whatever you want to call it, it's there if you are unafraid to see it.



Learn to Suffer

Most everything a soldier does entails discomfort. As a soldier, you will discover an encyclopedic number of ways to suffer. The suffering is physical, psychological, and emotional. It can also be financial, legal, marital, and any other word you can give the '-al' suffix to. There is nowhere you can go to avoid suffering. There is no reprieve, no solace. It is unavoidable and inevitable. You can either cry about it, or you can just learn how to suck it up.

One of the first things an effective soldier learns during Basic Training is that physical endurance has nothing to do with physical ability. Your body gives you the illusion that you are only able to do what is within your physical limitations. Say for example your muscles are only strong enough to do fifty pushups. This limitation is very convincing. You believe that you can't do more than what your muscles and bones are physically capable of doing. In reality the only limitation is the will of the soldier. You probably think that if you lift weights and get stronger muscles, you will be able to do seventy pushups. This is true, but you aren't able to do more pushups because your muscles are stronger, you are able to do more pushups because your stronger muscles are a convincing illusion to allow yourself the will to do more. The truth is, with will alone you can do seventy pushups, or ten thousand for that matter. Accomplishing more than you physically should be able to is referred to as "using the force." If the Jedi metaphor for describing "will" doesn't work for you, then use the Christian one. In the New Testament (Matthew 17:20), Jesus said that with the faith of a mustard seed you can move mountains. So whether you're raising an X-Wing fighter out of a swamp or parting the Red Sea, the concept is the same: you simply need the will.

It is not necessary for the novice to buy into any of this. But when he's into the twelfth mile of a forced road march carrying nearly his own body weight in gear, he learns that there is a landscape of pain he never knew existed. Once you've learned that there is no real limit to what you can endure, you're on your way to understanding that you can do just about anything so long as you allow yourself to have the will to do it. And the easiest way to learn this concept is to suffer and realize

you can endure it, then as you reach a new level of painful experiences, you are able to begin working on the next level. Eventually you learn that there is virtually no end to the kinds of pain mortality can make available to you, and you continue to learn that there is no discomfort you can not overcome. The process of learning to suffer is always ongoing. No matter how much you've suffered, there is always more to suffer.

You are not Special

As Americans and Westerners, we value individuality more than just about anything. Individuality is at the core of our concepts about freedom. The protection of the individual is vital to a free society. But while the civilian is the "individual", the soldier is the "protection".



As a society, we've gotten really good at fostering individual development. As a soldier, trying to incorporate the idea that individuality must be discarded is usually a very hard thing to accept at first. Because of basic psychological self-preservation instincts and a million beliefs that have been socialized into us from the moment of our birth, we protect our "ego" more than anything. You are who you think you are. You spend your life developing an image in your head of who you are. You have a name, you live in a certain place, you have a certain profession, you have tastes, opinions, preferences, druthers. In terms of a capitalistic society, we are nothing more than consumers. So we define our individuality by what we consume. (Sometimes the consumer becomes disillusioned by this, so he simply adjusts his tastes to something that more easily will identify him as an individual. "I'm not into Metallica anymore, they're too mainstream. I'm into The Mars Volta now.") There are eight million individuals in New York City. I was one of them. Like in college where the second question asked after "what's your name" is "so what's your major", in New York City the only two things anyone wants to know when they first meet you are "so what do you do" and "where do you live". I was a paratrooper and a programmer who lived in Nolita. I doubt there has ever been anyone who could say that. So I'm an individual, right?



In ten thousand years, no one is going to know who you were. Right now, while you are living, you don't even really matter. You live in Ohio, you work at a hardware store, you drive a Saturn, you have two kids, you send your mom a Mother's Day card every year, you have a beautiful lawn. You're the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, you have a loft in Chelsea and a summer home on Fire Island, you come from old money, you visit your mom every Christmas who lives in the home where you grew up an only child in New England, you were on the cover of Forbes and Out in the same month. Does any of this really matter? Someday you're going to die and they'll throw dirt on your grave just like everyone else's. Someday the

sun will expand and consume every living thing on earth. Someday the universe will collapse in on itself then explode into a brand new universe. Even these events don't really matter, they're just things that happen. So whether you prefer creamy or chunky is of such absurdly little consequence, the near meaninglessness of it is mind-boggling. Accept that you are of no consequence, that you are essentially nothing. In a universe of infinite universes that will ultimately return to the singularity from whence they all came, you are as inconsequential as my peanut butter preference.



Know your Place

As a corollary to knowing that you are not special, you must also know your place. Unlike the private kindergarten you attended in Woodstock where everyone was special and an equal, even Timmy in his wheelchair and Tyrone the black kid, in the military there is a hierarchy because it is the easiest way to get things done. I spent an enormous amount of my military career as a private. I took out the trash and mopped the floor. Now that I'm a sergeant, I want you to shut the fuck up and continue sweeping, is that clear? Everyone has a job and a role, and by staying in your lane, work can be accomplished more efficiently. Imagine if your car's fuel injection system decided it wanted to start managing the anti-lock braking functions? The compartmentalization of tasks exists so you can be free to concentrate on your own set of tasks. When I raid a building, I know how I'm going to breach the door, I know how to clear the rooms, I know how to handle detainees. While I'm doing this there are Apaches circling overhead. I don't know how to do their job, and that's okay. I need air support and they provide it. The intelligence guys interrogate the detainees and come up with more targets for my platoon to raid. Remember, you are Soldier Nobody, not General Patton. Concentrate on your job and you will be able to perform it well. As an Infantryman, your job is to shoot people. Don't worry about Abu Ghraib, Fallujah, or Michael Moore. If your target is moving, remember to lead your point of aim a bit.

BURNING SHIT

Release your Attachments

Suffering is caused by attachments. The sooner you accept this, the sooner you will learn how to overcome suffering. As Americans and westerners, we love our stuff. How much did you love Christmas as a kid? I remember thinking that the entire purpose of life was Christmas. That's when I got a whole new batch of toys, because as a kid, all that mattered to me was toys. To this day, I am still in awe at the fact that the feeling Christmas gave me is one without parallel. There have only been a handful of experiences in my life that are on par with how I felt about Christmas as a child. But toys break, they get lost, and eventually you lose interest in them. As an adult, what is more of a pain in the ass than your car? Or upkeep of your house? You can get a lot of satisfaction from stuff, I won't deny how much I love going to Barnes & Noble or to the music store. But you don't get real happiness from material possessions. And attachments go well beyond the things you can own. Relationships you have with people can be attachments. In fact, I dare say that there are more relationships in the world based on insecurity and attachment than love. And the ultimate attachment is your own ego. Your sense of 'self' is something you cling to, because as we already

discussed, it's who you think you are. The linchpin to the the tao of soldiering is freeing yourself from your attachments. The less you own, the better. The more stuff you own is more stuff to worry about while you're deployed. The girl you were dating isn't going to wait for you for eighteen months, so just get over her and move on. Even if you are in a healthy and strong relationship with your wife, your marriage will not be the same when you get back. Like the relationship you have with any of your loved ones, it won't necessarily go bad, but it will certainly be different when you get back. There are several guys in my platoon who missed births of their children. This affects them and I'm sure it affects their wives. And in turn it will affect their marriage. Crappy marriages don't handle this sort of this well and they will end. Good marriages will weather it, but will evolve into something different. Either way, guys who are attached to the way things were, will be miserable. And whatever you thought about yourself, ideas you cling to that you consider part of your identity, may very well change after you've been around some good 'ole fashion death and destruction. Attachments are bad. The less you have the better. Real freedom is having no attachments. Only then are you able to have happiness. When you feel happiness for it's own sake, and not because of some external mechanism, you have found the tao.

The Monastic Order of Infantrymen

Infantrymen who have found the tao of soldiering sometimes find themselves living a near-monastic lifestyle because of it. If you have no major attachments, specifically no wife, no girlfriend, and no kids, and have an MOS that is 11-series, 18-series



(Army), 03-series (Marines), or you are a Navy SEAL, you are able to join the Order. To join, a novitiate must perform an act of initiation involving humiliation, discomfort, and nudity as prescribed by a member of MOI. For example, making a snow angel in public while naked. Exceptional novitiates can be grandfathered in without initiation if three members of MOI approve. The proper greeting between members is a handshake with the right hand while grabbing ones own crotch

with the left. Members will refer to each other as "brother", and the proper way to say good-bye is, "See you in Valhalla, brother." Should a member come to find he has a wife, girlfriend, or child, he is honorably released from the Order.

I like being a soldier and I love being an infantryman. There are a lot things that truly suck about being in Iraq, but none of it's really all that bad. This is the most interesting and exciting thing I've ever done. War is a horrible thing and I hope that as human culture we can find a way to completely put an end to it, but I have to admit I like combat. I'm not sure how this is possible, but it's how I feel. When guys



discuss when we will be sent home, I get sorta depressed. I don't want it to end yet. How often do you get to shoot at terrorists? (Don't try to tell me they're not all terrorists. The guy who fills the water tanks for our showers had his head cut off last week and his entire family killed. That qualifies as terrorist in my book.) I love this job. Anyone who says you won't find happiness during combat, doesn't know how to find happiness. Combat has nothing to do with it.

