

# COMING OF AGE, IN UNIFORM

By Adam Walker

Many who join the military are drawn by an inexplicable call from an early age. Service, duty, and patriotism are lofty ideals but if the truth be told much of the attraction is challenge, adventure, and a desire to belong to a brotherhood. Generations of men have felt this pull. When asked why they joined a common reply is simply "It's something I've always wanted to do." They intrinsically understand but scarcely explain themselves.

The challenge and adventure are found, but so too is hardship. Marching endless miles in combat boots puts callouses on the feet, while other events cumulatively put callouses on the heart. Whether four years or twenty, it's a hard life.

The military forces one into situations where fears must be faced. There are no other options. Facing fear brings tremendous growth. It may be the gas chamber, jumping from a ten-foot platform into the water, rappelling from dizzying heights, or engaging in unarmed combat. Surprisingly some kids enter the military who have never been in a fistfight. Getting punched in the face is a sobering event.

Facing these new experiences begins to satiate the desire for adventure. The controlled exposure to danger has significance beyond simple excitement. It has a purpose. One trains for a mission. These skills may be required in combat someday.

Travel is another element that feeds the appetite for adventure. Few of us have been further than a day's drive from our hometowns before entering the service. Exposure to other cultures, standards of living, and lifestyles broadens our perspective beyond measure while cultivating increased gratitude for our own country.

Between the travel and adventure are times of hardship, loneliness, and separation. Even with the near-constant presence of your uniformed brethren, there are times when you feel utterly alone. The contradiction is sublime. You couldn't wait to leave home, but once the reality of military life sets in, home emerges as a place of comfort longed for during the late watch.

In time naivety wanes and some of the boyish dreams temper. The routine drudgery of service sets in. Discouragement comes upon realizing that not all of the people you serve with seem quite honorable. Dark humor staves off cynicism while youth provides the resiliency to prevent bitterness.

Coming of age in uniform is certainly a difficult thing, but a veteran emerges with admirable qualities and an appreciation for life. One of the most common phrases as folks look back at their time in the military is "I wouldn't change a thing" or "I wouldn't trade it for anything." In the meantime, however, it can be just plain hard.

A positive and lasting effect of the hard times is the relationships formed. Though each young person faces their private difficulties; their tasks, the environment, and the mission is shared. They serve alongside people from all walks of life, forming friendships more intimate than any relationship before or after service. A military unit is a family. Each has a crazy uncle, a

den mother, an annoying little brother, a prima donna, a boy scout, and an incorrigible. You may not like some of them, but you love them all. You are confident when the chips are down they will have your back.

After that first enlistment, most return to their hometowns or new horizons as better citizens. They've matured beyond their years and have a perspective that reflects patient endurance. They face change and hardship in stride. It is with a bemused detachment they observe civilians' stress over trivial matters. They shake their head and remember when their responsibilities had life-and-death consequences.

A few decide to remain in uniform. Their naivety is gone. Some thirst for adventure remains but what keeps them around is the brotherhood. They recognize that they've walked with legends and served with heroes, though most will not be known outside the ranks. They've seen examples of profound selflessness. They've been influenced by leaders who invested in their lives and cultivated them to be their best selves when they could not see such potential in the mirror. This anchors a commitment to keep going, to sew into the lives of those now their junior. Striving to fill the boots of those salty individuals who shaped their young lives, they now mature into seasoned troop leaders.

Coming of age in uniform is of such great value one might consider advocating for conscription and mandatory service. However, barring a national existential crisis such as we faced in the Second World War, the compulsion to serve would detract from the quality of idealistic youth who raise their right hand. Looking back, we can say that we really didn't know what we were getting into. We possessed a vague idea and certainly had many dreams, but the true perspective was beyond comprehension until such time as it was experienced. It's probably a good thing or we may have turned away.

With confidence, we can say coming of age in uniform is of immeasurable value. It shaped who we became and who we are. We know with absolute confidence we can call up a shipmate or battle buddy from years back and they will swoop in to give us a hand. It is bittersweet to acknowledge that we were closer to them than the people in our everyday life. Years may pass but upon crossing paths, we pick up like it was yesterday. We may not miss the demanding and often maddening environment of our particular military branch, but we miss our brothers tremendously. As one old salt said, "I don't miss the circus, but I miss the clowns."



**Adam Walker** served as a Marine infantryman for twenty-five years, retiring as a Master Gunnery Sergeant with three tours in Iraq and a Purple Heart. You can read more of his work on his blog: [takeitontheleftfoot.com](http://takeitontheleftfoot.com)

