



EVERY VETERAN HAS A STORY TO TELL

USA Written by: Les Stevenson

USMC, USN, & USAF Written by: Adam Walker

“BORN TO SERVE”

The Story of SSgt. Ben Johnson - USMC – OIF



Texas native Ben Johnson knew from childhood that he wanted to be a Marine grunt. He finds it difficult to articulate exactly why. It was simply a deep-seated, unmistakable desire. His grandfather fought as a Marine on Guadalcanal but passed when he was ten. Later in life as a young combat veteran Johnson had the opportunity to learn more about his grandfather's service from one of his peers who'd been blinded on Tarawa. They were generations apart but many of their experiences were quite similar.

Though determined to be a Marine, Johnson's mother implored him to at least talk to the other recruiters. Out of respect for her, he conceded with the caveat "Except the Air Force," an indicator he possesses the cocky demeanor found in most Marines. The Navy recruiter showed up late for the appointment, an egregious affront to the Texan's work ethic, so Johnson shook his head disapprovingly and said "No." A squared-away Army recruiter in jump boots gave a presentation at the high school that began by disparaging Marines. Johnson stood up and walked out of the auditorium telling the teachers defiantly "I'm not going to sit here while he talks trash about the Marine Corps!"

Johnson scored well on the ASVAB and could have picked any MOS, but only wanted the infantry. The recruiter told him "No you don't" but the stubbornness that would one day mature to resolve did not yield. It looked like another dumb grunt was in the making.

Johnson's first day in boot camp was September 10th, 2001, the day before the 9/11 attacks. He graduated on December 7th, the 60th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor bombing. The significance of these dates did not escape him. Johnson was old-fashioned believing he was duty-bound to do his part, that every generation must be prepared to defend our great nation. He took training very seriously at the School of Infantry as the clouds of war hovered over the Marine Corps.

Johnson reported to an undermanned infantry battalion in Twentynine Palms, California. His first major exercise was cold weather training in Bridgeport, California where Corporals served as Platoon Commander and Platoon Sergeant, and Lance Corporals as Squad Leaders. He experienced a measure of hazing from this junior cadre of leaders. None of it was serious, but it was petty,

condescending, and maddening. The "thrash sessions" increased his already peak physical conditioning. A positive result of this ordeal was the bonding that occurred with other junior Marines. Two years later they would be the squad leaders and team leaders in the brutal counterinsurgency fight.

Johnson and his unit were among the first to fight in Iraq in 2003, in what the Corps refers to as The March Up. His apprehension and worry were not a fear of combat, but a lack of confidence in his leadership. Several months in-country that all changed with a new company commander.



This new CO known as Kilo Six gave an impassioned speech when he assumed command. He stated, "One man can make a difference" and showcased this belief by his own example. Kilo Six demanded tactical competency and ruthlessly enforced standards. In less than a week he knew the name of every Marine in the company, a reflection of his care and concern for the men. Under this kind of leadership, Johnson thrived and came into his own as a leader.

Four months after returning home Johnson's unit was again back in Iraq. By then he was an NCO and a squad leader. The training schedule during their brief interim period back in Twentynine Palms was an intense regime requiring attainment of

proficiency across a host of tasks. Johnson would find himself directing his squad's assault, calling in a casualty evacuation, and coordinating close air support simultaneously. In stark contrast to the dumb grunt stereotype, Johnson showcased the incredible intelligence possessed by an infantry squad leader. During this combat deployment, he would do all these things while maintaining composure and leading his men.

Marines have a saying that "the enemy gets a vote." As such not all of Johnson's men survived. He compartmentalized the tragedy and continued leading the reconstituted squad when an IED took three lives, and severely injured another. Amidst this chaotic environment, Johnson remained steady.

Upon conclusion of the second deployment, Johnson arrived at the end of his enlistment. He'd spent so much time focused on the mission and staying alive, he'd given no thought to what he would do next. When the career planner asked him of his intentions, he flippantly replied "I'm gonna be a pirate." The Staff NCO threw him out of his office with a string of profanity. Faced with a decision Johnson considered his options. After the pace and demands of combat, he wasn't quite ready to transition to "normal life" so abruptly. This combined with the sense of belonging, the camaraderie, and the brotherhood caused him to sheepishly return to the career planner's office. He signed on for another four years with orders to serve as a combat instructor.

Johnson said he would only serve as a combat instructor if he could teach infantrymen as opposed to other MOSs who also received combat training. He was told only the class honor graduate could have that guarantee, so he grinned, laced up his boots, and said "Roger that." He graduated as the Honor Grad and the Marine with the highest physical fitness test. The NCO sword and plaque he received still hang on the bulkhead today.

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“FROM THE RUST BELT, TO GREEN BERET”

The Story SSgt. of Larry Broughton - USA – SF

Due south of Buffalo New York in a rural part of the state is the small town of Weston Mills near the New York and Pennsylvania border. This is the town where Larry Broughton grew up in the '60s and '70s in a very patriotic family. His dad was an Iwo Jima Marine Veteran but never shared his experiences with anyone which was a common theme among many WWII Vets. His dad never pushed military service on Larry.

In high school, Larry struggled academically, and when he told his counselor he wanted to be a veterinarian she kind of chuckled and said, “Honey, you’re not smart enough to be a veterinarian.” You can imagine how demoralizing that would be to hear. He knew he was smart but just learned differently.

During high school, Larry took a job at McDonald’s, while his twin brother worked at a local grocery store. Still just 17 years old, Larry and his twin moved out of their parent’s house with a fellow classmate.

Larry was looking for a way to get away from the rural Rust Belt of Upstate New York, as he knew in his gut there was something bigger out there for him.

After a visit to the Army recruiter’s office, and then achieving a superb score on the military’s ASVAB test, the recruiter told him that he had scored so high that he could pick whatever job he wanted in the Army (except that of a commissioned officer). The recruiter said, “You could even try out for Special Forces.” Larry didn’t know what SF was, “but I liked how he said “Special Forces” with a twinkle in his eye. He admits he didn’t know a lot about the Special Forces but it sounded to him like a “life of adventure.”

With a couple of years on their own under their belt, in 1983 the brothers enlisted in the Army. His brother became a Medic while Larry had his sights set on Special Forces.

One of the requirements to apply for Special Forces was to be at least an E4 promotable to an E5. However, at the time a new deviation in policy would allow a private to try out. The downside was if you failed you didn’t return to your old MOS but rather wherever the Army decided. So, with that as a motivator, a high score on the ASVAB test along with a background in wrestling and martial arts set Larry up to score near the top of his class in the Special Forces Qualification Course. He explained that another way you could fail in qualifying was to be “peered out” where your peers submit negative reviews that would disqualify you from graduating. He told of a classmate who made it to graduation day and was peered out. “You can show up and be the smartest person but how you get along with your team members matters,”

Larry commented. A life lesson he took with him was, “Be kind to the people around you and serve others.” Larry graduated from Special Forces at Fort Bragg NC in 1984 and spent the next four years on active duty at Fort Devens, Massachusetts with the 10th Special Forces Group.

Interestingly, while in the Army, Larry discovered he was dyslexic and once he understood his diagnosis, he learned how to overcome his reading disorder. After that, “I couldn’t read enough. I was reading newspapers and magazines and books constantly, with an insatiable appetite.”



He was deployed several times during his time on active duty and in the reserves. While assigned to his “A-Team,” he was the Weapons Sergeant but was also cross-trained as a medic. Larry recollected the time when he joined his first team and walked into the team room on the first day. He saw a sign that read “Individuals play the game, but teams beat the odds.” That really resonated with him and he applied that mantra into the business world with his coaching, mentoring, and keynote speeches.

He left active duty in 1987 and took a job at a “no-tell motel” in the Tenderloin District in San Francisco as a night auditor. He worked nights but attended San Mateo Community College during the day.

After a couple of years, he attended the University of California Santa Barbara, and then ultimately attended the Executive Program at Stanford. About six months after he started, an investment group bought the motel and renovated it to become a cool boutique rock n’ roll hotel. It catered to bands that were traveling on the road such as entertainers Linda Ronstadt, Rolling Stones, Nirvana, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Lenny Kravitz. Larry stated, “Most of the employees at the ‘no-tell’ were either alcoholics, drug dealers, pimps, or prostitutes. I was

the only guy who looked like he had his stuff together. So they asked me to stay on and be a manager for this little motel after it changed ownership.”

During Desert Storm, Larry returned to active duty for a year and then left the Army after nine years of service. He returned to the San Francisco area and met up with the owner who was running the hotel business he had left. The owner had just bought his third hotel and made an offer to Larry that would make him a partner in the enterprise. Larry accepted and it was a huge opportunity. The three hotels turned into fourteen hotels in fourteen years ending up being a profitable venture for all the partners.

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“GO BIG OR GO HOME!”

The Story of Colonel Buff Burkel - USAF – OEF



Laurel “Buff” Burkel grew up in the suburbs north of Detroit, Michigan. She was an athlete who played several sports including football and softball, endeavors that helped prepare her for military service, though she didn’t know it at the time. Buff didn’t come from a military family, and military service wasn’t initially on her radar. She considered becoming a doctor but is such an empathetic and relational person the thought of one day losing a patient was a troubling scenario. She finally set her sights on becoming an orthodontist and headed off to the University of Michigan where she pursued an undergraduate degree in biology.

In college Buff learned more about herself and developed relationships that exposed her to the potential of opportunities not previously considered. She became aware that her talents and disposition were quite suited for military service and before long enrolled in the University of Michigan’s Air Force ROTC program where she became a distinguished graduate in 1991. Circumstances caused her to have to wait almost a year before being able to go on active duty. During this time, she worked at a Chinese restaurant, a humbling experience for a 2nd Lieutenant and college graduate, but one that would provide perspective and appreciation. These two qualities became hallmarks of Buff’s career in the Air Force, contributing to the type of leader she became.

Buff became a Navigator on the C-141, only the second woman to undertake this flight track. As that platform was retired, she transitioned to the C-130. Buff served in many locations during her 27 years of service including California, Washington, Illinois, Arkansas, Texas, Korea, Washington D.C, Alabama, Canada, and Afghanistan. Monterey, California was her favorite duty station, and in classic military fashion that post was immediately followed by her least favorite tour, the Pentagon.

She held several operational and staff billets in her career while attaining several education milestones along the way including master’s degrees from Chapman University, Naval Post Graduate School, and the Air War College. Buff was a Squadron Commander for a C-130 Squadron with a deployment to Kuwait, flying missions to Iraq and other countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Afghanistan.

Buff faced challenges and achievements along the way, events that would again render perspective and a thankful attitude.

Disappointed at being passed over for promotion to Colonel the first time, she persevered. The following

year she was selected for promotion. Buff’s mother was terminally ill, and the Air Force permitted her to have some time at home as the days appeared to grow short. Buff was promoted to Colonel at her mother’s bedside, a touching moment for both. The spirited little girl, now a decorated military leader. The Air Force reinforced the ethos of family, that service members are family when they supported Buff during this time. As a leader, she continues to convey this attitude by example.

One noteworthy assignment for Buff was an exchange tour with the Canadians where she served in Ottawa, Ontario. While there she was notified that that she was to be assigned a one-year advisor tour in Afghanistan.



Achieving the pre-deployment training requirements for this combat tour became quite the challenge. Buff was not only away from the big Air Force, but she was also in a completely different country. Her military occupational specialty had not made it necessary to conduct tasks common to combat arms personnel, until now. In the harsh environment of Afghanistan, everyone must be prepared to fight. Buff found herself qualifying with an M-4 service rifle, conducting convoys, and learning room-clearing techniques, all new territory for the Colonel. Not one to be deterred or intimidated, she reached out to her Canadian counterparts and even U.S. Marines at the embassy to gain as much training as possible before heading into theater. Buff says it was a challenge, but it was fun.

Buff’s tour in Afghanistan would result in a life-changing event, and life-ending for some of her comrades. What was to be a routine, short, helicopter ride ended in a crash that took the lives of several service members. Buff sustained a broken neck and soon found herself at the Army hospital in Landstuhl, Germany.

Now up to this point in her life Buff had never undergone any kind of surgery, nor had even received an IV. She now would face an operation that would include having several screws. She tells folks “We all know that Colonels have a few screws loose, but I am the only one who’s had them tightened!” Humor has been one component of this leader’s resiliency.

Buff is grateful to have been under the care of a neurosurgeon who began his career as an Army Ranger shortly after graduating from West Point in 1993. This doctor was direct with almost no bedside manner, an attribute that set well with Buff. She recognized quiet courage, leadership, and strength in his eyes. He was the right guy at the right time.

She wore a contraption referred to as a halo for three months as her neck healed. The Air Force and Wounded Warrior Program gave her tremendous support during this season, including bringing her father and siblings over to take turns serving as non-medical attendants. She grew stronger and began to ponder her future while taking it all in. Once again Buff had much to be thankful for and honed her perspective even more. She says, “After the helicopter crash, my career crash was nothing.” As retirement sped into the foreground Buff decided to “go big or go home” and retired atop Mount Kilimanjaro, celebrating another milestone in a memorable way.

Through her 27 years of service, accentuated by the crash, Buff has known all along that relationships matter. She found her continued calling to serve once the uniform was put away. Buff is an inspirational and motivational speaker addressing issues such as resiliency and the importance of relationships. Being connected matters and no one should face life’s challenges alone. She serves in various organizations as a volunteer and is seemingly busier than when on active duty.

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“BLUES FAN”

The Story of GSM1 Guy Bensing - USN – Cold War & Desert Storm

Retired Navy veteran Guy Bensing is passionate about two things: his experience serving in the blue-water Navy and hockey, specifically the St. Louis Blues. Both institutions came into his life during childhood and had a tremendous influence on the Guy he is today.

Guy grew up in St Louis, Missouri. He describes childhood as “not too bad, but not great.” After experiencing bullying, Guy found himself in a different school, one with a Navy JROTC unit. Guy’s grandfather served in the Navy during WWII, surviving a kamikaze attack. Guy naturally gravitated towards a future in the U.S. Navy.

As a student Guy struggled academically, eventually being diagnosed with a learning disability. He scored well on the ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) test, a testament to his intelligence. Guy knew himself and also knew that college wasn’t the best fit for his disposition. Both his parents lost their jobs in 1986. It would be a lean Christmas and he would only receive one gift. When asked what he wanted most, it was for them to sign consent for enlistment.

Guy enlisted in the Navy’s Delayed Entry Program in 1986. He had some interest in journalism or radar, and no interest in the nuclear program. Having been advised not to enlist undesignated he finally signed on as a Gas Turbine Systems Technician (GSM).

His Navy JROTC experience ensured he would graduate boot camp as an E-3. A-School followed with one year at Naval Station Great Lakes’ Gas Turbine School, where he left as an E-4. He then reported to his first duty station in Norfolk, Virginia assigned to the U.S.S. Yorktown in 1988. Serving aboard a ship during the Cold War was an interesting experience. Underway for the first time in the North Atlantic during winter, he could see icebergs on the horizon. UNREP (underway replenishment) operations occurred at 0300 to minimize Soviet observation of U.S. Navy methods. Guy had liberty ports in Spain, France, and Yugoslavia. In 1989 while in France, shipmates symbolically tore down a wall of cardboard boxes coinciding with the fall of the Berlin Wall, in a show of solidarity.

After the Yorktown, Guy returned to the Great Lakes for C-School in 1990, then to the U.S.S. Mobile Bay, out of Yokosuka, Japan. This assignment turned out to be the one that would most define his naval career. When Guy thinks of his time in the Navy, service aboard the Mobile Bay draws the fondest memories. It also included a sobering experience.

Guy’s first deployment had been in the Atlantic during the Cold War. Though serious business it didn’t seem to carry the gravity of his deployment with the Mobile Bay in the Gulf War. His ship was 19 miles from the coast of Kuwait. The 22-year-old E-5 wore flash gear (in case of fire) and carried a gas mask 24

hours a day. They patrolled an active minefield and fired Tomahawk missiles in support of efforts ashore. These combat operations ingrained a deep sense of vigilance. It was during this deployment that Guy began sleeping in the fetal position with his back to the bulkhead. In this manner, he would more likely survive contact with a mine, a real threat to the engineering department’s berthing area below the waterline. The Mobile Bay encountered 27 mines, including a cluster of 9. She was 1 of 22 ships from the group awarded the Combat Action Ribbon.



Ask Guy how he made it through these stressful times as a young man and he will tell you “Hockey got me through, hockey saved my life.”

Hockey fans are passionate about the sport and quickly found one another aboard ship. In the days before the internet, it was hard to keep up with sports while deployed. Guy and his hockey-enthusiast shipmates devised a plan by which they would intercept sports magazines, hiding them in a particular part of the ship known only to those in the group. Catching up on hockey gave them something to look forward to when coming off shift. It was an escape of sorts. It brought back the smell of the ice and the thrill of the game. It was comforting.

Guy continued to serve faithfully for many years while leveraging hockey to buoy him through the hard times. He married the former Keiko Hashimoto of Japan while stationed in Yokosuka. He returned to the Great Lakes as an instructor and once reenlisted on the upper deck of Wrigley Field when the Cubs played the Cardinals. He served aboard two other ships, the

U.S.S. John S. McCain and U.S.S. Gary, but nothing would compare to those formative years aboard the Mobile Bay. He has notable memories such as reenlisting three days after 9/11 and taking liberty in India and Pakistan. Guy rounded out his career at the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard. Upon retirement, he remained in Hawaii and worked as a contractor for a few years. Today he is still in Hawaii and pursues creative outlets such as writing and hosting his vodcast the Blue Note Fan Report, where he is known as the “Hawaii Blues Fan.” His love of hockey, the St. Louis Blues, and his work on the vodcast have a great impact on navigating the turbulent waters of post-traumatic stress. These mediums continue to help him turn off the constant alertness required when he served aboard a vessel of war.

Where things like politics divide, Guy advocates that sports unite. He is the newest staff writer of AT EASE! Veterans Magazine and authored “Ten Thousand Words.” Guy is also writing a new feature called “Battlefield to

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As the instructor tour concluded, the Corps thought they could get one more deployment out of Johnson. He checked into another infantry battalion and executed a third deployment to Iraq. The cohesion and leadership of this unit failed to match the caliber of his last combat tour, contributing to an encroaching thought. Maybe it was time to go back home to Texas.

Johnson became engaged before his last deployment, giving his fiancé a taste of what military life would demand. The two of them decided to share a simpler life, raising a family with him at home.

Ben Johnson had more than paid his dues.

The Johnsons just celebrated their fourteenth wedding anniversary, and they are expecting their fourth child. He works in the leadership of a construction company in East Texas and maintains close ties with the Marines of that second combat tour. Ben Johnson is a remarkable man and one of countless veterans who've paid a great price on behalf of their fellow citizens. AT EASE! Veterans Magazine is proud to share his story.

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As an author of a national magazine stated, "Larry was in the right place and waited for the right time to come around." That was a great commentary on life. "Sometimes you just have to hang on by your fingernails and things happen to you when so many other people will quit and run the other way." When asked what are the top characteristics of successful people, leaders, or entrepreneurs the first thing that came to mind for Larry was "tenacity." And a lot of the "culture of tenacity comes from military service because that's where you don't give up. If you do, in many cases, someone gets injured or dies."

In the early 2000s, Larry was successful in his hotel partnership but felt something was missing. He was a primary leader in a secondary leadership role. "I'm never going to be the CEO of this enterprise," he recalled. So he and his wife decided to leave and start their own business. They moved from the San Francisco area to Southern California and started their own boutique hotel development, ownership, and operations company. That was 23 years ago and it has been growing steadily since. Along with the hotel business, Larry has made TV appearances on MSNBC, Fox, and CNN to talk about entrepreneurship and leadership. "I also started

doing a lot more keynote speeches and then coaching and mentoring for other entrepreneurs and leaders."

An entrepreneur, motivational speaker, best-selling author, leadership consultant, and mentor—many of the skills Larry attributes to his military service. Not bad for someone who was told he could never be a veterinarian. Another life lesson: Never let the "experts" define who you are!

"Go Big or Go Home!" continued from Page 32

Buff is a tremendous example of resiliency, the impact a positive attitude can have, and the importance of relationships. She has so much to offer to a wide audience. AT EASE! Veterans Magazine asked Buff what advice she would convey to three demographics: those aspiring to join the military, those serving today, and Veterans.

For those considering the military Buff encourages young people to talk to others about the incredible opportunity. Ask yourself why you are doing this and determine which branch is more suited to your goals and disposition, as well as whether to serve as an officer or enlisted. The experience is special, and you will learn a lot about yourself while developing relationships with amazing people. Buff has the utmost respect for those on active duty. The world is changing rapidly, and today's service members are meeting those daunting challenges. She encourages them to keep it up but to also be aware of when it is time to leave the service. You don't have to stay forever. Know your family and when it's time to hang it up.

To her fellow Veterans, Buff reminds them that each of you has a story. Your service matters and you've done something important. She admonishes them to nurture relationships and their social network. Who do you call when the going gets tough? Who do you celebrate with? With whom do you interact on a daily basis?

As Buff continues to contribute, lead, and serve after overcoming tremendous tragedy, she is an example to all. The Colonel is one tough bird, and in fact, Buff is known as One Tuff Bird. You can find her here at <https://onetuffbird.com/>.

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the Playing Field" highlighting how sports help the military community in remarkable ways. The lessons he brings reflect leadership that continues beyond his time in uniform and are a continuation of his service.

There's no camaraderie like that of shipmates in the blue-water Navy, however, being a Blues Fan is a close second. The camaraderie of the sea now extends to the ice and Guy Bensing is there leading the charge. Let's Go Blues!

"I THINK OF A HERO
AS SOMEONE WHO
UNDERSTANDS
THE DEGREE OF
RESPONSIBILITY THAT
COMES WITH HIS
FREEDOM."

Bob Dylan