The Last Time I Was THIS AFRAID

Under lockdown, a new tradition has spread from one Brunswick office to another: At day's end, a colleague sends a short essay to his or her working-from-home office mates. These are funny, sad, inspirational and philosophical notes, often sprinkled with favorite recipes and TV shows. They're as well-written as you'd expect, if you know Brunswick. The Review is selecting a few to share with a larger audience. This contribution is from Craig Mullaney, a Partner and Leadership Advisor in Brunswick's Washington, DC office. A US Army combat veteran, Mr. Mullaney is the bestselling author of "The Unforgiving Minute," a memoir about his education at West Point, at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, and on the battlefields of Afghanistan.

Dear Colleagues,

I am grateful to those who've shared their wisdom with such candor and vulnerability in previous notes. Each is a reminder of the special culture of Team 202 [area code for Washington, DC]. I count myself blessed to be your teammate. There are two highlights I can count on every day: reading your notes and holding my newborn. Sometimes I do both: reading your emails as I feed Winston at 3 am.

In this formative moment I have been reflecting on the last time I was this anxious, uncertain, afraid—and resolute.

I was 24 when I arrived in Afghanistan. I commanded a platoon of 10th Mountain Division infantrymen at a remote outpost TIME dubbed the "evilest place in Afghanistan." Our circumstances resembled today's lockdown. We took infrequent showers, exercised with homemade weights, ate a lot of packaged food, and cut our own hair. Risk of a different kind lurked around every bend in the trail. We didn't know when the war would be over or even our tour. When my platoon had its first casualty, 19-year-old Private First Class Evan W. O'Neill, our own mortality became all too real. Still, most of us made it home intact morally, physically, and mentally. The story I tell myself is not a tragedy. Indeed, the most painful chapter in my life is also my proudest. How we respond when challenged both reveals and develops our character, as individuals and as a team. At this moment, we are writing the narratives we'll tell ourselves later.

0 kilometers to Hell. Shkin, Afghanistan.

PHOTOGRAPH: ROBERT NICKELSBERG

If resilience is a discipline never perfected, I offer 6 LESSONS for your own practice:

Pace yourself. We trained for Afghanistan carrying heavy rucksacks on long marches through upstate New York snow. The soldiers who sprinted from the start would collapse when surprised by an obstacle, a steep hill or injury. You learn to set a pace you can maintain and put one mile behind you at a time, to keep present in each step while simultaneously seeing the whole course. Along the Pakistani border at 7,100 feet of elevation, our legs benefited from the training. More so, the marathon mindset kept us focused and effective when our tour was abruptly extended, and the casualties and dangers mounted. As we contemplate months of uncertainty ahead, hold the long view and daily grind in balance.

Prepare and plan. It's a myth that people rise to the occasion, said my Ranger School instructor, as we hauled limp dummies on stretchers hundreds of yards all afternoon. When short on sleep, hungry, and stressed, we fall to the level of our training. In practice, this means systematically anticipating awful scenarios, planning responses, and ruthlessly rehearsing under the most realistic conditions. Every one of the more than 200 missions I planned in Afghanistan included a contingency for casualties and medical evacuation. Planning for the worst does not mean you expect it. Indeed, the opposite. Admiral James Stockdale, held in Hanoi for 2,714 days as a POW, concluded that he could not have persevered without an ironclad faith in a positive outcome paired with the discipline of an unflinching acceptance of brutal realities. You cannot control your context, but you can control your mindset and your actions. Make a list of your anxieties: financial, health, professional. Defuse every fear with a plan.

Improvise. The term "Snafu" is actually an acronym—Situation Normal All F___ Up—credited to World War II GIs. It's a truism that no plan survives first contact with the enemy. The information necessary to make the best decision is always imperfect. Your tools will be insufficient for the challenge. The radio batteries will die, and someone will forget the map. At the time we operated in Afghanistan, our platoon had never trained for an invisible insurgency: We couldn't speak the language and our armored transportation consisted of used commercial pick-up trucks. One day, we were ordered to organize a veterinary clinic for goats and cattle. What is a leader to do? We recognize that a good plan now is better than a perfect plan later. We adapt and find solutions. In our case, we studied and adapted lessons from a Russian field guide, became proficient at combat Pictionary, and jerry-rigged machine guns to the Toyotas. I learned how to vaccinate livestock. Getting through the relentless inversions of COVID-19 life is easier with a spirit of improvisation and a graceful acceptance of your imperfections.

The notecard I carried through Ranger School and then Afghanistan.

PFC Evan O'Neill's makeshift memorial in our bunkroom.

Don't survive, thrive. As Brunswick's Admiral Mike Rogers noted, the most dangerous period in a crisis comes after the adrenaline wears off. Maintaining vigilance as the days and weeks elapse is tough. One approach is to focus on surviving, ticking off each mission and each day in the diary. One foot in front of another. In my experience, this is the surest path to mediocrity, disillusionment, and disaster. It guarantees a morass of self-pity and deepens isolation. Instead, when you affirmatively decide to thrive and raise your ambitions then the days feel shorter and the goal line closer. After the fateful battle when PFC O'Neill was shot and the last notes of Taps faded at his memorial service, my commander insisted we redouble our training and lead the next company mission. There is always one more thing you can do to improve and stay a step ahead of your adversary. Action is the best antidote to worrying. In short, focus on what you can do, not what you can't.

BRUNSWICK REVIEW · 2020

There are no lone riflemen. Military maneuvers are exercises in teamwork. Even snipers are paired with spotters. This is a psychological, not just an operational imperative. The willingness to step from behind the safety of a boulder and bound through incoming fire towards the enemy is directly proportional to the confidence you have in your buddy providing covering fire. Isolation induces cowardice. Why would five men pull PFC O'Neill under fire to a medevac helicopter? In my experience, heroism derives from camaraderie, not from barked orders, innate courage, love of country, or the promise of a medal. PFC O'Neill's last words were a question: "Is everyone else ok?" Teams succeed under pressure when individuals fear letting the side down more than anything. Nietzsche was partially right in saying that he who has a why can bear almost any how. It's not why, though. It's who. If ever there were a time for solidarity and love, it's now. Remember that someone—a family member, a teammate, a neighbor, a friend—is counting on you.

Someone is counting on you. Spearhead Platoon (1/A/1-87 IN).

Winston, born on day 10 of lockdown.

Seek perspective. My college sport was skydiving. Each afternoon, I crouched in the door of a helicopter as we climbed to 15,000 feet, feeling my ground level worries recede. On even the worst days, I could look forward to 60 seconds of freefall and the beauty of the Hudson River Valley. We could not have sustained our relentless operations in Afghanistan without regular outlets to release stress, reflect, and keep perspective. We watched bootleg comedies and pranked each other. We had boxing brawls and makeshift beach volleyball. Every Friday was steak, crab legs, and near beer. Sundays I served Catholic mass as a lay minister. The rituals and relief made the rest bearable. These days I'm finding unexpected joy in homemade karaoke, Japanese lessons, and gardening. Find the helicopter that lifts you out of your day-to-day.

This may be the first major test for some of you reading this. Even for experienced crisis hands, this rodeo is different. Either way, I hope a lesson or two from my experience helps. Each of us has the power to write the stories we'll later tell about this moment in time. ◆

PHOTOGRAPH: TOP, ROBERT NICKELSBERG