

A Letter to SOF

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The nature of Special Operations is to accomplish near impossible missions. We are the action arm of policy for our nation, a tool in war and peace. Nowadays we are the primary effort in combat, conflict, and influence. We may be tasked with everything from humanitarian aid to wearing a suit in inter-agency efforts; from preventing a war to running it. We liberate the oppressed and strike fear in our enemies. We play these roles well.

Yet all of these core missions are a lot to ask of a unit or community. Our efforts are task organized and prioritized, but we all know our work is never done. The operation tempo doesn't slow down when our next mission is non-combat related. It doesn't stop a collective effort to be the best, most adaptive, and competent force our country has ever seen. Whether we aim to live up to the archetype of an "operator" or to the standard of our units, we fully commit.

Our chain of command asks us to be ready for and accomplish anything and everything, and they constantly schedule us as such. Our local units create plans to maintain and improve proficiency. And we, as individuals accomplishing these missions on the ground, place an even greater demand on ourselves. Shooting, moving, communicating, and medicating are our fundamentals. We could spend a career working on any of those principles, but we have hundreds of other skills – overt and subtle – that we still must work on. We can develop these skills when our units officially demand it of us, but regardless as individuals we strive for excellence in everything. Self-motivation pushes us to understand cultures, build rapport, innovate our fields of expertise, and prove we are capable for the most sensitive and dangerous missions. It becomes the focus of our lives. It becomes our identities.

There is a cost. Most of us understand the blatant cost to our bodies, brains, emotions, and families. Some of us either don't understand or choose to ignore it. Instead of providing a mentality of upkeep and prevention, we only respond after catastrophic failure. Divorce. Injuries. Emotional breakdowns. Drinking related deaths. Suicides. In SOF medicine, we have a saying: "Treat the injury, not the operator." It's because we compensate with sheer will, brute force, and ignorance. By God, this mentality results in a ferociously deadly fighting force. But there is a cost.

We compensate until catastrophic failure. One of the tenets of Special Operations is, "Humans are more important than hardware." If we kept shooting our machine gun without cleaning it or performing maintenance, that deadly weapon will break. And you'd get your ass kicked for doing something like that. If you do this with a mortar system, people will die. It's ingrained in our culture to never let that happen. So, why is it acceptable with our people?

There are many possible answers depending on your unit: a stigma against emotional health, over scheduled and deployed operators, institutional toughness, and an existing cultural problem. I don't have to prove these exist because I can simply point to the state of our force regarding suicides, divorce, and illegal activity – including the instances the chains of command don't acknowledge. These reasons are important because they let us evaluate our system and best practices. We are constantly improving

our standard operating procedures (SOPs). Military culture does this with the After-Action Review (AAR). These reviews are conducted immediately after an operation to address what went well and how to improve: sustains and improves. We inherently drop our egos during an AAR. We challenge the why of our actions and reach conclusions about improvement. How can we better assault a house, give Versed with Ketamine, or analyze our risk to force during infiltration or exfiltration? AARs are part of our culture, and limiting them to tactics is a philosophical mistake.

The job of unit commanders is absurdly difficult. They make the impossible possible. And, as an enlisted guy low on the totem pole, we appreciate commanders who concern themselves with our well-being. And we can tell the difference; after all, you select most of us for our critical thinking. Making good command decisions is often a marriage of top-down and bottom-up methodology. I can't imagine trying to make policy decisions that influence an entire SOF culture. But I do know when we consider how we can better take care of our people it shouldn't be a one-sided conversation. And I do know our culture is in trouble.

I have been fortunate (or unfortunate through traumatic injury) to meet, talk with, and even become friends with leaders in the SOF community, the Army, and the DOD. They are compassionate and forward-thinking individuals. The leaders I talk to feel the hit when we get hurt and they fundamentally support us. But I never would have met them if I hadn't nearly died. And that's okay. Leaders with stars on their chests or ties around their necks can't talk to every enlisted SOF member. They can't fully understand the challenges of every suicide, divorce, KIA, or burned-out individual. They have to look at the macro and make the best decisions based on what they know and what they can do. Us "people on the ground" can and should do the same. Especially because commanders can't fix this.

Our community is likely spread into a few mentalities in response. Many of you nod your heads in agreement as you read this. Some of you think it's a weak mentality. The rest of you are pissed because I'm not "going through my chain of command." Tell me, brother or sister, would the un-promoted SSG Lascek have a voice if he hadn't almost lost it? If the IED ended my life?

Our culture aims for excellence. It critically reviews itself and aims to improve, yet fails to do so regarding wellness. The well-being of our force – physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually – will dictate our success and retention. The better the wellness, the more effective the force. The better upkeep of our human hardware, the more enthusiasm we have. It means retaining more operators and diversifying the higher chain of command. It means more minds thinking about problems and how to improve them. And it's all of our responsibility. But you can't work on a problem if you don't accept it exists. Every time we quietly never address a suicide in our ranks, we can't begin to understand why it happened. Only through deliberate introspection can we increase our own awareness, develop acceptance, and then take action with intention.

This letter exists on the internet for visibility. If I quietly send it to the leaders at the top, then all levels won't see or talk about it. And it's not solely a problem for leaders at the top. It's okay to admit deficiencies. It doesn't make us weak; it shows our strength to explore vulnerabilities, create solutions, and improve. Analyze our force from micro and macro perspectives. Objectively evaluate the well-being of your friends or the people you command. And not to the "SOF standard" of learned helplessness. Concluding "this is just how it is" and "it's what we signed up for" is like insisting on assaulting a machine gun uphill. Discuss it among your friends, teams, companies – at all levels. Admit our failures.

Acknowledge our strengths. Consider the real-world cost and the implications on the person when this job ends, whether from retirement, disillusionment, injury, or death.

I write this with nothing but respect for our community and chain of command. I have always taken my job as a Green Beret medic seriously. My job is to care for the total well-being of my team, and you are all on my team because I'll never serve on another detachment. Despite being mad as hell, I didn't sit here and complain about what I perceive to be wrong. I aim to increase awareness, generate discussion, and influence our culture. We all know the answer isn't Power Point training to "check the block". What is your answer? How can you influence the situation at your level? If you are a leader, will you listen to our solutions? Will you even ask for them? Our culture needs your problem-solving skills and action, lest we lose another friend to suicide, divorce, and disillusionment.