

What is Memory? (Continued)

My turn came up, and planks it was. Five of us got down on our forearms and toes, and the clock started ticking.

I don't remember fatigue. I don't remember stress. I don't remember sweat, or all the yelling and cheering I know was going on, or the music the cadre had blasting in the background. I remember the shipmate right next to me, my classmate 2/c Jerry Hong. Jerry had always impressed me as sharp, skillful, locked-on, and just generally on top of things throughout the summer; and at one moment, in the middle of that plank contest, from what I was aware, he and I were the only two competitors left standing...

Oh my God, I'm finally getting this right! Jerry and I were glaring at each other in a vicious stare down and we fought to hold that plank. I knew, I couldn't let him win...I couldn't drop that plank before Jerry did, or I'd be giving up my only real chance to show that I could succeed here, that I too could be strong. The minutes ticked by, on, and on, and on...

Finally, after 9 minutes of holding a plank, the cadre got bored. They tapped us both out simultaneously, and I collapsed with relief. I'd done it...I hadn't dropped. Because in the end, beating Jerry was never really the goal...I just couldn't drop.

It's interesting, though... so I'm told, *that's not how it really happened*. According to a couple of the other former 2014 Hotel swabs, as we've swapped memories over the past couple years, there was one other person still holding on in that plank competition until the very end; only I remember it being just me and Jerry, so hyperaware as I was of that stare down. And, to my surprise, we didn't hold the plank for 9 minutes...*we held it for 13 minutes*. Or, so others remember...

But, we all remember what we remember. I observe now with some pride that in the years that have passed since Swab Summer, Jerry and I have followed rather similar academic and professional trajectories. We're both top 10 in our class, government majors, carrying out independent research projects – we even went to Poland together last year on the ASAP internship. Maybe I'm grabbing at straws with this – but maybe, even as a swab, I could subconsciously identify someone who was, in many ways, the type of person I imagined I could be, someone who was successful in the same ways I envisioned myself being successful, and thus, I chose to challenge them. Maybe that's why I remember doing planks with Jerry, to the exclusion of a number of other details.

Memory 2: The Loss

One of the harshest realities of the Academy is the rapidity with which things change. It's a blessing and a curse; the hard times pass quickly, as do some of the moments and circumstances you wish you could cling to forever. And just as "the times" come and go, so too, people come and go. I learned this lesson the hard way 4/c year, when one of my best friends left CGA, and I was left feeling like my world was crumbling around me.

Back in first semester 4/c year, I still had the rosy view of life that if you work hard enough and keep faith, "everything will turn out ok." Perhaps, in some greater cosmic sense, everything does turn out ok in the end – but things don't always turn out to be your perceived version of "ok." One of my closest friends from Swab Summer – I should say, my personal hero from Swab Summer, the guy I always turned to when I was scared, or I didn't know what I was doing, or I was physically

failing, or I was on the verge of quitting – struggled throughout the semester with his grades. Our friendship, in some ways, had taken on the character of the ultimate role reversal. He was my protector during boot camp, and I tried to be his during the academic year. I convinced myself that if he worked hard, and I worked hard to help him wherever I could, then everything would work out. He'd get his grades up, he'd stick around at the Academy, and I'd always have my best friend and source of stability right down the hall from me. We'd always be buddies and we'd always look after each other...that's how it *had* to work, right?

Unfortunately, that version of "ok" didn't come to pass. For whatever reason, my friend's grades did not come up high enough quick enough, and at the end of 4/c year second semester, he left CGA.

I was so lost. I was so confused. But more, I was so incredibly disillusioned. I felt like I'd been propelled back into Swab Summer again, when I was stuck in this chaotic world where I didn't belong, with no stability, no reference point, no source of comfort. How could I have failed to protect my friend? He never failed to protect me when I needed it...*why did I fail?* The festering mix of failure and loss in my heart was crippling. The first few months of my second semester 4/c are muddled in a dark haze.

Yet, somehow, I overcame. I don't remember what ended the funk; I don't remember when I learned that my perceived "failure" was not my fault, or when I learned that my loss wasn't really a loss at all. But in time, I came to realize that just because a friend leaves your immediate presence does not mean they leave you behind. Things didn't work out as I planned, but they have worked out to be ultimately "ok." My friend and I still keep in touch – not as often as before, of course, but enough to keep the friendship alive.

For my part as well, I learned how to cope with some of the harsher aspects of reality. In many ways, this was my first major experience with loss; it hurt me, but it toughened me up a bit too, for which I am very grateful. Loss is a part of life, and I faced it again at the Academy a number of times. Two more of my closest friends, in later years, left the Academy as well, but by then, I had learned to cope. I didn't let the loss cripple me; I didn't lapse into horrified defeat. I kept faith that we would stay in touch, and all would work out "ok." And you know what? It has.

Memory 3: The Cold

I hate the cold. I hate cold weather, cold water, overly cold air conditioning...my Southern blood just doesn't fare well in the cold. So, naturally, my excitement at a 3/c summer assignment to second phase Eagle and a trip through the Arctic Circle was mixed with some anxiety. The thing about the Arctic Circle is...*it's cold!*

We hadn't even reached the Arctic yet when I began to struggle. The week of transit in which we made our approach to Iceland, about midway through the phase, my division was standing helm and lookout. That meant two four hour-long watches a day, outside, stationary on the helm or the bow, as Eagle cut her way through the Icelandic sea. An undershirt, an Underarmor shirt, an ODU blouse, a hoodie, a parka, a foul weather jacket...at some point, no amount of layers can keep out the chill. I remember clinging to my division mates for shelter from the wind whenever I got the chance. Every watch left me shaking uncontrollably and so utterly exhausted when I returned below deck that I just wanted to sit and stare into space in a frozen daze. How on Earth did I get myself in this mess, going from the Georgia suburbs to the sea outside *Iceland*? I wasn't cut out for environments like this!

One morning on watch, however, I learned that despite the cold, this wasn't such a "mess" at all, and if I could learn to overcome my paralyzing aversion to the climate, the rewards were well worth the adversity.

It was just past 0200 – my division had "the mids," where you stand two watches 12-4 every day. That means you're out on deck in the Icelandic sea from midnight to 0400...talk about an atypical schedule. When we first arrived out there, I was not in the most pleasant of moods. This was going to be just another four hours in hideous cold, at obscure hours of the night, standing in one place. But as Eagle trekked further north and the distant coast of Iceland finally came into view, my eyes opened like never before. The sea was slate-grey and frothy, not so turbulent as to toss us around violently, but stirring and rumbling, so clearly alive. The sun never set, just skimmed briefly just barely out of view, with its brightest, fiery edge still peeking over the top of the horizon. The sky was scattered with thin lines of clouds, staggered in rows like the lines of a garden, dark blue fading seamlessly into grey and light blue and pink and yellow and orange all around you...360 degrees, no obstruction. Yes, it was absolutely *freezing* out....but that cold made the air so clear!

Suddenly, I found myself thinking: how could I possibly wish to be anywhere else? Was my bed, safe and warm below deck, really tempting to compared to everything surrounding me? It came as a shock to realize that, if I'd "had my way" and not been in out in the frigid weather – if I'd been asleep at 0200 like most reasonable people should be rather than being on deck standing watch – I wouldn't have gotten to see any of this. Maybe it was just my perception, but the sights around me at that moment were more pure and more gorgeous than any I'd ever seen before. If not for that watch, I could have been asleep; I could have sailed right through the midnight sun and the early Icelandic morning, and never known just how incredibly beautiful the world can be...even when it's cold.

Memory 4: The Triumph

I spent a year, from November 2011 to November 2012, training for what would prove to be the event of my life...my first Ironman triathlon, in Panama City, Florida. An Ironman is the end-all in triathlons...a 2.4 mile swim, followed by a 112 mile bike, followed by a 26.2 mile run...140.6 miles total, which most athletes take from around 10-17 hours to complete. It's the ultimate challenge for the growing triathlete, and one that one of my teammates, Dave Endean, and I decided to take on while balancing the challenges of CGA life.

It seemed an insane feat – perhaps it was even an idiotic feat. For most people, the thought of a 140.6 mile race doesn't make much intuitive sense, in fact, it sounds downright miserable. But all year as I trained and imagined that race, my blood would boil with anticipation. Of course training for a race that long didn't make sense – it's brutal on your body, eats up massive amounts of time, and generates a lot of stress. Yet, to me, it made *perfect* sense; it absolutely was what I was meant to do. If I could accomplish this, I could accomplish anything, I told myself.

The road wasn't easy, not at all. How many times in the course of that year did my confidence fail me? How many times did I come back from training, from a ride or a run, thinking, *there is not way I can do this?* How many times in the month beforehand did I think, *oh no, oh no...I'm not ready, and I'll never be ready?* I couldn't count them if I tried. I exhausted myself. I scared myself. I pushed myself. But somehow, I made it to November 3, 2012...race day.

At 0700, I stood on the beach with my friend Dale (one of those long "lost" friends who'd left the Academy, interestingly enough) – Dave was off somewhere with his dad, who was running as well.

The sun wasn't entirely up over Panama City, but the elite racers were already in the water. We walked down to the waterline, said our "good lucks" and separated to find our own comfortable entry points...and we waited....

The gun went off, and all alone, surrounded by thousands of triathletes, I charged into the water.

All my anxiety melted away as soon as I started to swim. When I race, there's no sense of time, or distance, or place. There's just me and the course, me and the Earth, me and the feeling of propelling myself forward by my own power - hitting each wave just right so that it carries me, melding with my bike to form the perfect motion machine, feeling the grip and spring of my shoes against the pavement. The course comes meter by meter, mile by mile, aid station by aid station...and you just *go*. I remember certain flashes of events from the race: the blinding light as I turned at the first swim buoy and headed straight into the sunrise; a smiling man riding by me on the same model of bike and yelling out, "RIDE ON, my Orbea sister!"; running past an elderly minister, praying for the woman next to him as they jogged together, asking for her to have the strength to finish the race; passing Dave at turnarounds on the run course and bursting with joy, because I knew my captain and role model was going to beat his goal time. But mostly, I remember a sense of contentment - a calm and assurance like I hadn't felt in years. *This is great. This is right. This is perfect.*

I crossed the finish line at around 2130 at night, with a finish time of 12:23:53...exactly 30 minutes (to the second) behind Dave, and significantly faster than my goal time of 14:00:00. I was giddy. I bubbled away with glee to my dad while we waited by the finish line for Dale, who came in a few hours later, looking fresh and happy as can be like he'd just run a 140.6 meters rather than miles. After hugs and congratulations we headed home for some well-earned rest.

This was my triumph - I'd done the thing that I knew in my heart I was meant to do, but I never really believed I could do. I'd overcome, largely by my own power, but with my friends by my side. Few moments are ever so perfect.