

TOUGH GUYS

After an assailant tossed his weapon into this spot on the Harlem River, police spent five days crawling through its frigid, muddy floor, inch by inch.

THE COLD, DARK SEARCH FOR THE GUN THAT KILLED OFFICER RANDOLPH

For f
two m
bed.
compl
weap
one t

BY REEVES WIEDEMAN

AT KILLED

For five days, the NYPD scuba team combed two muddy acres of New York City riverbed. By hand. In frigid temperatures and complete darkness. Finding the murder weapon was an impossible task, but it was one they refused to let defeat them.

HOLDER

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN MALLON

C

One Tuesday night last October, New York City police officer Randolph Holder, thirty-three, was on patrol in East Harlem when a call came in: Shots had been fired in a nearby housing project and one of the suspects was speeding up Manhattan's eastern edge on a stolen bike. Holder and his partner took off for the water, crossing a pedestrian bridge over the FDR Drive, and descending onto a narrow path that separated six lanes of speeding cars from the Harlem River. At the end of the overpass, the officers spotted the suspect, who leaped off his bike, pulled out a .40-caliber Glock handgun, and began firing at them. One of the bullets hit Holder in the head, killing him, and the man took off running. By the time the police caught up five blocks later, the Glock was nowhere to be found. When a ground search came up empty, there was only one place left to look: the bottom of the Harlem River.

Soon, four New York Police Department scuba divers were cruising up the East River toward the scene, with two more flying by helicopter from Brooklyn. The NYPD's scuba team, which has thirty-five members on call twenty-four hours a day, claims to be able to reach any of the city's five hundred square miles of water in ten minutes. Sometimes, when the divers receive a report that someone has walked onto a bridge, they are in position before the person even jumps. The team is culled from the ranks of veteran street cops who are both fit enough to pass a strenuous diving test and also interested in spending their shift swimming through the sludge, debris, pollutants, marine life, and fierce currents of the rivers, lakes, sewers, and even the occasional water tower, of New York City. The job entails everything from

TOUGH GUYS

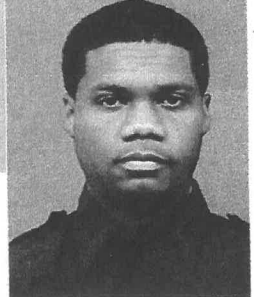
evidence recovery to crime prevention—since 9/11, the team's duties have included scouring the bottom of ships and wharves for explosives—to creating a sense that New York's dark waterways are every bit as safe as its streets. There's nowhere the divers can't go, often to the surprise of the criminals they're tracking, and nowhere they won't.

When the scuba unit pulled up to the gloomy stretch of the Harlem River where the gun had been thrown, the divers realized that while things could have been worse—the gun could have been in the polluted canals of Brooklyn or Queens or under the piers of Lower Manhattan where rats have been known to land on divers who breach the surface—the search had its difficulties. The air was cold, which meant the water felt colder. Several housing projects loomed above, as did the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge, but otherwise the area was about as dark as you could find off the edge of Manhattan. After heavy storms, this stretch of water was often filled with raw sewage from the city's overwhelmed sewer system—you could sometimes see pieces of toilet paper—and the team's dry suits would have to be scrubbed with bleach. Certain parts of the river left divers covered in snails, and, in one spot, they could hear the announcements from subway trains passing through a nearby tunnel.

But the biggest difficulty was the fact that the divers were facing one of the largest search areas they had ever encountered. "We'd like to narrow it down to where the person stood," said Detective John Drzal, who grew up scuba diving on Long Island before joining the scuba unit eight years into his career as a police officer. Because it was dark, and no one had seen the suspect throw the gun, it could have been anywhere between where Holder was shot and where the suspect was arrested—five city blocks—and as close to shore as a few feet or all the way out in the middle, where the river was more than twenty feet deep. (The current was strong but wouldn't matter much: Human bodies end up more or less where they enter the water.) To determine how far the gun might be from shore, the divers weighed an



The NYPD scuba unit that found the gun. They receive no extra pay for the conditions in which they work. Right: Detective Randolph Holder.



from terrorists. But they do carry knives attached to their thighs for breaking windows and cutting seat belts.) The divers bobbed in the dark for a moment, lit only by a row of orange streetlamps, several of which were burned out, and the blinking blue lights from a nearby police boat. Once they dove under and began kicking

unloaded Glock, then found a rock of similar weight and threw it as hard as they could into the river. It traveled more than sixty feet, which, combined with the five blocks of shoreline, left the divers with about a hundred thousand square feet of muddy river bottom, the size of a Walmart, to search by hand.

Before sunrise on Wednesday morning, as cars whizzed by ten feet away on the FDR, two NYPD divers in dry suits, fins, and face masks fell backward over the side of a black Zodiac inflatable boat and into the river. (Police divers don't typically bring guns with them, though they can. Once, the unit practiced carrying a bag of machine guns underwater to Liberty Island, should the NYPD ever need to take back the Statue of Liberty

their fins toward the river bottom, they could barely see anything. "A foot of visibility is like being in the Caribbean for us," Brian Singer, a thirteen-year veteran of the unit, said. At the bottom of the Harlem River, the team's high-powered flashlights are as useful as car headlights in dense fog. There is often just enough visibility for a diver to check how much air is left in his tank.

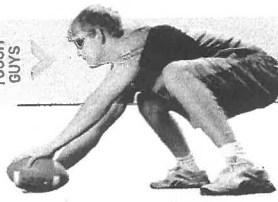
The scuba team has state-of-the-art technology—side-scan sonar, remote-control submarines—but none of that would be useful in a search for something as small as a handgun. "I would much rather look for a needle in a haystack than a gun on the bottom of the river," a police spokesman said, as the search began. Instead, the two divers used old-fashioned tools, heading for the bottom with a seventy-five-foot pattern-line rope that was an inch-and-a-half thick and had a ten-pound grapple hook on each end.

A few feet bottom, i parallel a themself inch by i and asso combing they reach the rope timed. 72), but: forced to

Luck been fis shore. A that doi soon, or A few h same as much o

THE FISH A GA A CA

RECENT NOTABLE TOUGH GUYS

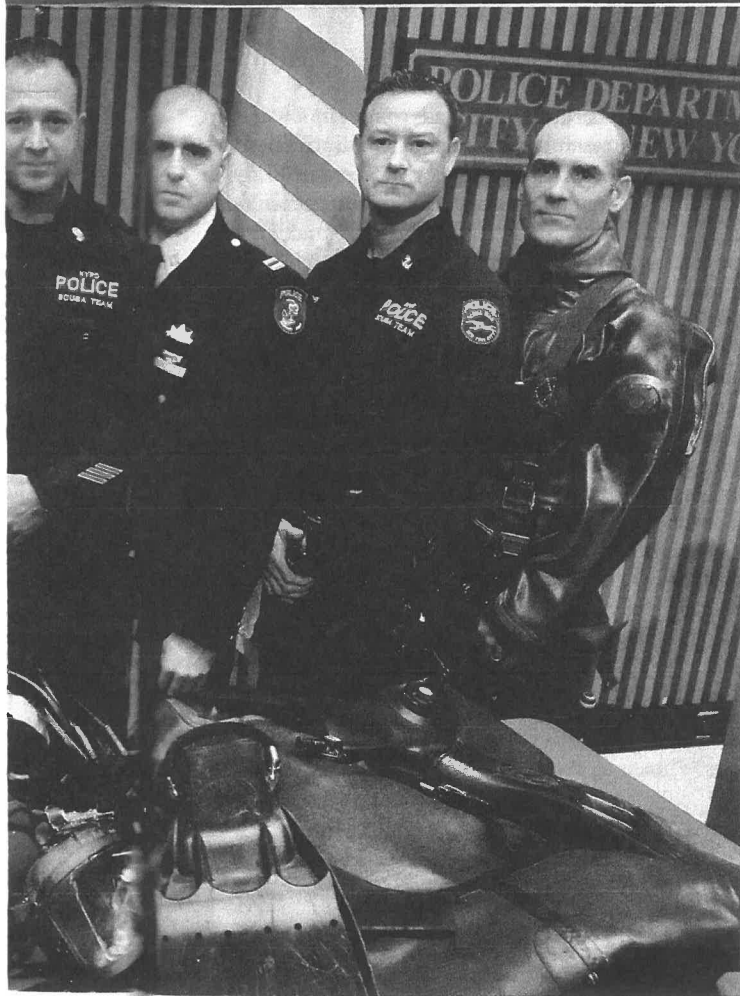


← **JAKE OLSON** Despite being blind, Olson played long-snapper on his high school team, and last fall was a walk-on for USC.



← **MEGYN KELLY** We could almost bear Trump as president if it meant getting to watch Kelly continue to question him.





t they do
d to their
windows
lts.) The
dark for
a row of
several
out, and
ts from a
nce they
kicking
see any-
bean for
nit, said.
owered
g. There
w much

logy—
ut none
is small
dle in a
a police
two div-
n with a
-and-a-
ch end.

A few feet from shore, they attached one hook to the river bottom, its claws sinking deep into the muck, and pulled it parallel along the shoreline. The two divers then positioned themselves on either side of the rope and began moving inch by inch along the bottom, which was covered with silt and assorted debris, using one hand to hold the rope while combing the ground in semicircles with the other. When they reached the opposite end, one of the divers would move the rope a few feet farther from shore, and the search continued. The rope technique is known as a jackstay (see page 72), but some divers call it a braille search because they are forced to feel their way along the riverbed more or less blind.

Luckily, the team got a lead: During the chase, a man had been fishing nearby and saw a splash twenty-five feet from shore. A police boat turned its spotlight to the area—not that doing so did much good at the bottom of the river—and soon, one of the divers found a .40-caliber gun magazine. A few hours later, Matthew Pecora, a young detective the same age as Holder, was near the river wall, unable to see much of anything, when he felt a small bump. He turned

THE DIVERS PULLED UP SEVERAL FISHING POLES AND TIRE RIMS, A GARBAGE CAN, A HOUSE FAN, AND A CAR ALTERNATOR.



THE TOUGHEST GUY I EVER MET

G.I. Joe

BY: KENDALL HAMILTON

Back when I was a kid, my buddy Andrew had a G.I. Joe action figure. (Don't you dare call him a doll.) Ole Joe was a mid-'70s model, the twelve-incher with the demilitarized "Adventure Team" trappings, the monolithic buzz-cut/beard combo, and, of course, the spectacularly awesome and fully essential Kung Fu Grip. Joe was one bad mother, in the parlance of his times. A straight-up survivor. And the older Andrew and I got, the more Joe was forced to survive.

Joe first joined us around third or fourth grade. He had it easy then. He was still a shiny, new, much-beloved toy, and we were innocents, relatively speaking. Sure, he'd white-water raft his way down the creek behind my house, or suffer the occasional dune buggy rollover in Andrew's yard. But as we aged a bit, we got new ideas—aggressive, masculine-type ideas—along with certain accessories that were definitely sold separately and generally not to minors. In short, Joe's mettle would be tested; he would come under fire, often literally. He may have enlisted in our service as G.I. Joe, but he ended his storied career as Mr. Bill.

We shaved his head and beard with an X-Acto knife. Exfiltration from Joe's attic-level "base" was generally accomplished through an open window with only the scant protection afforded by one or another homemade parachute "prototype." How strong was that Kung Fu Grip, anyway? Not strong enough to keep hold of an exploding firecracker, though Joe's hand remained firmly attached—at least through the first dozen or so experiments. An aerosol can and lighter made for an effective, if imprecise, homemade flamethrower. We got our hands on a pellet gun and honed our aim on poor Joe. On various occasions we picked him off of high pine tree limbs and blew him from a tree stump into a lake.

Through it all, Joe bore up admirably. I suspect he's out there somewhere still, half buried or lodged in a bush, his fixed, blue-eyed stare a model of stoicism, conveying an enduring message, perhaps, to two growing boys looking for some small dominion over a world that felt beyond their control. It's not attacking others that makes you tough. It's standing strong in the face of whatever life may throw your way.



Trump as
ch Kelly



← **OLIVER SACKS**, who faced his terminal cancer diagnosis with the humanity, consideration, and resolve of a true scientist.

← **THIS GUY**

who very casually saved his son from taking a bat to the head during a pre-season Pirates game.



on his flashlight and saw “something glistening”—a shell casing. Pecora was nervous about dropping the casing if he tried to tuck it into his pocket, so he held the casing in his fist until he and his dive partner got to the surface.

As the search stretched into the weekend, the divers pulled up several fishing poles and tire rims, a garbage can, a house fan, and a car alternator, not to mention a knife, a rusted .22-caliber handgun, and a military ammo belt with five empty rifle cartridges. But none of those had been used in the shooting, and the divers were no closer to finding the gun, a situation they weren't used to. “If we have good intel, and know where something went into the water, we can bring it up in five minutes,” said Detective John Mortimer, a twelve-year veteran.

Criminals are often surprised to find out how thorough, and routinely successful, the team's searches are—some lie and say they tossed evidence in the river, figuring the police won't even bother to look—but progress here was slow and exhausting. Chilly October temperatures, along with the traffic flying by on

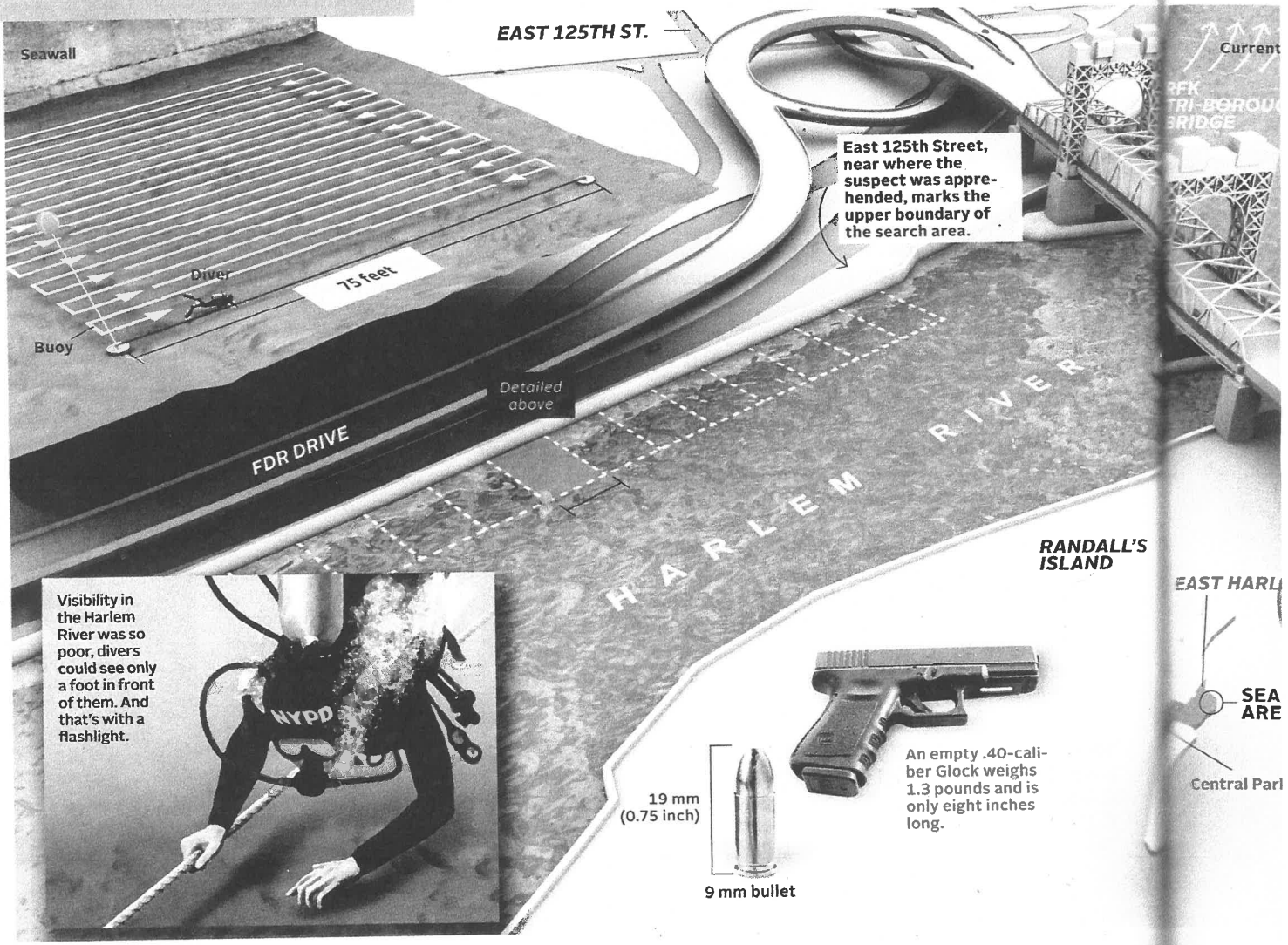
THE TEAM WORKED 13-HOUR SHIFTS AROUND THE CLOCK, AND STOPPED ONLY WHEN THE CURRENT GREW TOO STRONG TO HOLD ONTO THE ROPE.

the FDR at all hours of the day, made coming up for air only slightly less stressful than searching blindly through the sensory deprivation chamber at the river's bottom. In a typical search, a diver would simply replace his oxygen tank and go back under, but the water was so cold, and a quick recovery so crucial, that the team started simply sending a new diver in each time. “When we look for something big, like a body, we can cover the rope in a minute or two,” said Drzal. But searching for a gun is more meticulous. Missing an area as small as half a square foot could mean missing the gun entirely, so the second diver on the rope covered the lead diver's tracks again each time they moved the line. They were spending as much as fifteen minutes going from one end to the other, which meant each diver could make only a few passes before needing to come up for air. The team worked thirteen-hour shifts around the clock, diving at night when visibility was even worse, and stopped only when the current grew too strong to hold onto the rope. “It could get up to five or six knots,” said Captain Anthony Russo, who runs the

unit. “V
The:
divers t
being or
search l
especia
three or
long and
they had
into the
days sea
ered had
been in
any sea
age of T
the likel
the poli
miles of
hoping t

HOW IT WORKS: JACKSTAYING

Instead of high-tech equipment, the divers used a classic technique called jackstaying. They follow the length of an anchored rope, feeling around in the darkness. When they reach the end of the rope, they move it over an arm's length and start again.



Visibility in the Harlem River was so poor, divers could see only a foot in front of them. And that's with a flashlight.

East 125th Street, near where the suspect was apprehended, marks the upper boundary of the search area.

An empty .40-caliber Glock weighs 1.3 pounds and is only eight inches long.

19 mm (0.75 inch)

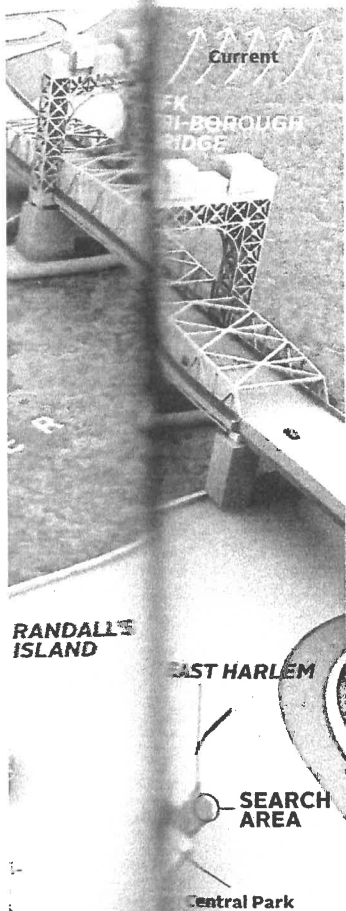
9 mm bullet

air only
ugh the
n a typi-
ank and
k recov-
g a new
ig, like a
d Drzal.
; an area
the gun
lead div-
ey were
one end
ly a few
worked
ht when
the cur-
get up to
run the

unit. "Which is way faster than Michael Phelps could swim."
The scuba unit is, by nature, an optimistic group—all the divers talk about how much they prefer being underwater to being on the street—but by Saturday night, four days after the search began, frustration was starting to grow. "Some guys, especially new guys, get discouraged when you're diving for three or four days and not finding anything," Drzal said. "It's long and boring." The divers were used to difficult searches—they had once been sent looking for a gun that had been tossed into the river two years earlier—but they had now spent five days searching on their hands and knees and had barely covered half of the search area. Every member of the team had been in the water, and they had used more oxygen tanks than any search since the four months spent scouring the wreckage of TWA Flight 800 in 1996. Early Sunday morning, with the likelihood of finding the gun underwater starting to dim, the police department prepared to shut down more than two miles of the FDR Drive in order to conduct a ground search, hoping they might have missed something.

But the scuba team does not give up easily, and around 3 a.m., while a hundred officers readied themselves to put on white hazmat suits and conduct the ground search, Mortimer jumped into the water a hundred feet north of where the team had found the gun's magazine days earlier. Mortimer had spent more than eight hours underwater in the past few days, working the night shift—"We were going without any sleep," he said—and two divers had just come to the surface and reported that the current was getting stronger and they might have to give up searching for the night. But Mortimer, one of the team's veterans, was undaunted. He told his diving partner, Robert Wagner, who had recently joined the unit, to put on his gear. "Oh, you got a good feeling about this?" Wagner said. "Every time I dive, I'm thinking to myself, even if it's zero visibility, I'm gonna find this, I'm gonna find this," Mortimer said.

Mortimer and Wagner were searching a spot forty feet into the river and twenty feet below the surface, where they could hardly see. "I was down in maybe a foot of visibility," Mortimer said. "I was pretty much on my stomach, feeling a short distance in front of my face." Their first pass turned up nothing, but they moved the rope and started working their way back down the line. Mortimer spotted something out of the corner of his eye: the handle of a gun, sticking just an inch out of the river bottom. Five days, ninety-six tanks of oxygen, and sixty-seven thousand square feet of riverbed later, another seemingly impossible case, for a team that considers no case impossible, had been closed.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHAD HUNT



THE TOUGHEST GUY I EVER MET

Dustin E. "Doc" Kirby

BY: C.J. CHIVERS

The bullet struck Doc Kirby on Christmas afternoon. A U.S. Navy corpsman assigned to a Marine Corps infantry company, he was on a rooftop post in Karma, Iraq, keeping watch. As he stood to leave, a sole shot—apparently from a sniper hiding near the building—smacked him in the side of his head, tore through his mouth, and passed out the other cheek.

By most any reasonable measure, as Doc waited for a medevac helicopter, blood soaking his uniform, his lap, and his chest, he seemed soon to die. That he survived the shot at all was pure chance. (Move the path of a bullet a few degrees either way and he would have been killed outright.) Each passing minute his prospects for survival dimmed. After arriving at a military hospital, he lost consciousness at last. As he did, he assumed he was taking his last breath. "I died, man," he told me later. "I just died."

That was in 2006. Nearly a decade and thirty-two procedures later, Dustin E. "Doc" Kirby remains among us. Now thirty-two years old, he is medically retired, the father of two young daughters and the stepfather to two more. And he is in line for another marathon surgery,

which he hopes will improve his bite, his speech, and his profile—and reduce his pain.

It is hard to comprehend what his past decade has been. Narratives of veterans' ordeals and their recoveries are far often too simple, or even naive, offering an airbrushed and implicit arc of recovery. Real life, real struggles, are rarely so. Since that Christmas Day, Doc has endured disfigurement, divorce, disillusionment, and his own demons, along with pain of an order that is difficult to describe. He is not alone in this: His parents, his siblings, and his new partner and their children have been beside him, all living the shared and sustained experience of battlefield trauma and all of its physical and psychological tolls.

I was with Doc in Iraq in the fall of 2006 on the day that he saved the life of his roommate, Lance Corporal Colin Smith, also shot through the head by a sniper. It was an awful instant followed by frantic minutes as Doc leaped to action for a downed Marine. With death dodged, for now, something unfamiliar was ahead for Smith. But what? No one knew, even as most everyone felt a gripping fear of what that journey would hold. Doc would soon be in the same place.

There are species of survival that humble the rest of us, and that give words—Perseverance? Love? Resilience? Recovery?—new meaning while rendering our former understandings of hardship entirely inadequate. Doc, like many people I've seen at war, rearranged the world for those around him, and redefined toughness, like countless wounded veterans in our midst do every day.

