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College Writing & Research

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What is it like to put Your Life on the Line Every Day?

1) What I Already Know (and don't know) about my Topic?

Action-packed movies and video games have always been one of my biggest weaknesses. In fact, back home I have the *Military Channel* set as one of my top three favorite channels. Yeah, I know, it is a well-known fact that the male gender in general, are suckers for action, but it does not matter if it is a movie or a game, men will flock to it. Some see this and tell themselves that the reason is that men just love the action; big explosions, lots of guns, high speed chases. You know? *Bang, Bang. Boom, Boom. Cool Martial Arts. POW. KICK.* Yes, those things are all fine and dandy, but I have a different thought on the whole theory. What I really think, is that the *glory* is what draws us in. It does not matter what the setting is. Every story contains a hero, and every hero must make sacrifices for the good of those he is trying to save. It is the *Good vs. the Evil.*

I have always considered myself to be someone who stands up for what is right, and who could march steadily into danger, even when the odds were against me. Fortunately for me, I have never had to prove myself in a life-or-death situation. The closest I ever get to one of these circumstances is when I play my games and tell myself

confidently that if I had to, I could run into a fire and save that crying baby, chase down a burglar on foot and tackle him to the ground to make that arrest, or run bravely into combat, outnumbered, with nothing but my trusty M-16 and save my captive comrades from impending doom.

It took me a few days to figure out exactly what topic I would choose, but after talking to one of my closest friends, Cody Thorne, from back home, and admiring him for being a firefighter, it finally came to me. My focus would be on fire-fighting, law enforcement, and being in the military. No matter how many movies I watch, or how many games I play, I will never ever know what it is like to be in these heroes' shoes. So, there it was, my topic would be: "*What it is like, to put your life on the line every day*". Ask yourself; What do you do everyday? Do you help others? Do you save lives? Are you a hero? Police officers are. Fire-Fighters are. Actives in the military are.

2) Why I wanted to Answer This Question:

I wanted to get a better understanding of what it is like to put your life on the line everyday. To be scared. To be brave. I wanted to know how it feels to be in the action. How does that glory feel? Does it just come when you put that uniform on or do you have to *earn* it? How do others feel and perform under heavy stressors? What kind of people enlist for these jobs? Are these men and women really worth the credit we give them? Maybe not. Maybe they really are not doing anything that we, the general public, could not do. I felt though, that some members of these areas, sometimes get a "bum rap", when it comes to their jobs. Are police officers lazy and just driving around, eating donuts? Are fire-fighters just great at keeping a clean station and a freshly washed truck?

Are our soldiers only brainless-muscle-headed-robots trained just to obey? Setting out to answer these questions as realistically as possible, I decided that my plan of attack would include diverse methods of research.

3:Story of the Search

My first step would be setting up my research. I first set up a survey that I could send over the e-mail to various members of the said occupations. Then, I figured out who I would interview. For the section on fire-fighting I knew that I could always count on my good friend Cody, the fire-fighter, for an interview. I called him and we exchanged e-mails so that I could send my interview to him.

After I sent my first e-mail interview, I decided that actually living through a shift, one of a police-officer, would be a great first-hand experience. Always wanting to do a “ride-along”, this seemed like the perfect chance. I immediately called the Cedar Falls Police Department, and was told that I needed to fill out an application. Before I knew it, I was in a chair filling out that very application. It asked me general questions such as what my name was, address, and requested what reason I was applying for this ride-along. The application was filled out quickly, turned in, and then the man behind the glass told me that I would be notified promptly about my trip.

At my fraternity house, I got to thinking. There are at least five or six guys in the house who are either currently in the military, or just got out. Asking around, I was able to hear great stories about guys traveling all over the world. Some of them had been to Japan, Italy, Iraq, Africa, and South America. Others had just been passed around from base to base in America. The problem was though, that I wanted to get answers from

someone who had actually seen combat, and all these guys had held fairly safe desk jobs. Then I remembered something, Ryan Hull, one of my pledge-brothers, had told me that his brother had just come back from serving in Iraq. When asked if his brother had ever seen any action he said that he had, and that he would probably be willing to let me interview him. I would soon have everything I needed.

I figured it would take a few days for any response to get back to me, for the interviews and for my police ride-along, so I decided I would do some research. I figured that most of the information that I wanted I could get from my interviews, but I also wanted to know stats. How dangerous were these jobs? What are the casualties like? Figuring that most people do not know a lot of numbers off of the top of their heads, I headed to the library. It did not take me long to find what I wanted. I walked right in and asked the librarian where she would look if she were in my position. She handed me a list of possible books and then said, "Oh, and also you might try this", handing me a small book.

The title of the undersized book in my hands was *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007, 126th Edition*. Perfect, this is exactly what I was looking for. In this book I was able to find that nationally, there are around 1.12 million police officers on the job, and 156 of those officers were killed in the line of duty with 12 of them being from everyday accidents. From 4.31 million firefighters, there have been just over 115 deaths, and in the military there have been already 854 deaths out of 13.894 million actives stationed around the world. Now, all I could do was sit and wait for my responses.

Finally, after two weeks the police station called me back. My application had gone through and, we were able to set up a night on the first of November for me to tag along in a patrol car.

Waiting for that night to come, my emotions did a complete 180 degrees from being very excited to getting very nervous. I actually started to worry about my safety, and the entire drive down to the station, I kept telling myself that I could just turn around and go back home to my safe bed and sleep away the night. It made me wonder if the officers ever feel that way. When I walked in it was ten fifteen at night, and I had just made it on time for briefing.

The briefing room had about four rows of tables. Seated at those tables were 4 officers. Three spread out around the room, and one at the head table. I introduced myself to the officer at the front of the room, and she then had me meet the “guys”. They each firmly shook my hand, looked me in the eye, then continued on with their conversations as if my existence did not matter. I sat there quietly in my corner all the way through what I assumed was briefing. It was not at all like how it is in the movies. The place was not packed with action-hungry officers. There were no complicated missions. And I listened really intently, but there was definitely not any intense music with lots of bass.

After the briefing, I was assigned to an Officer, and we made our way out to the patrol cars. This officer was 26 years of age, married, and was just about to finish up his third year in the department. When we made it out to our squad car, he was really quite open about everything going on that night. He politely informed me of all the buttons and gadgets in/on the car, and it was interesting to see them check and recheck their cars.

It was like watching a pilot doing their pre-flight checklist. About fifteen minutes into our patrol, we caught a red truck going 48 miles per hour on a 35 mile per hour road. We quickly pulled him over and I sat there like a fly on a wall as the Officer walked up to the driver's side window. I suddenly got very nervous and all these awful images flew through my head, as I imagined Billhorn getting shot right in front of me. Fortunately for the both of us, he does not. Almost as quickly as he leaves, he is back.

"Guy says he's only had three or four tonight," the officer mumbles, "I'm gonna call for backup and administer a sobriety test".

About 45 minutes later the test is finished, and he passes for the most part with flying colors. When the officer comes back he mentions, "It's his lucky night tonight, that guy just blew a .15 and the legal limit is .08. I let him go because he was pretty controlled and because I usually won't arrest someone unless they blow over a .20. Those field breathalyzers aren't all that consistent, so you never really know".

That shocked me a little bit at first but it made sense. We then headed over to the Quickstar on the hill. This is the hang-out for the cops when there is nothing going on. Everyone there is very kind and they shared with me that they treasure times when they can just sit around and hang out. I was very pleased to see that after 15 years or more, all of these men were still so fresh. They all still loved their job.

After a few minutes my officer and I hit the road again, and we ended up busting a party over at "Sterling Apartments". We met up with the lead-officer from briefing and headed up into apartment building four. It was interesting to see how these two went from pleasant and open, to powerful and authoritative as soon as that door opened. Lucky for the resident, they let her off with a warning.

After that, we went downtown to patrol again. We were just cruising along when all of a sudden a car pulls out in front of us and runs a red light.

“Holy shit, that car just ripped through that red light!” the officer exclaims as he accelerated to 50 miles an hour down the winding road of Mainstreet and then bolt over the bridge.

My heart races as we catch up and pull the vehicle over. Same deal as last time, only this time, the driver was an absolutely intoxicated 19 year-old girl. She failed terribly at her sobriety test and is thrown in the back seat of my cop car. Earlier, I was instructed not to talk to the people who were placed under arrest, so it made it quite awkward. The funny thing about this was that the officers were absolutely great with her. They showed great patience and joked around with her. They knew she had done something very wrong, yet at the same time they tried to comfort her and tell her that after she had learned her lesson, she would be ok in life and that she is not the only person it has happened too. She was a different story. To their faces, she was polite, helpful, and sweet. But as soon as that back door closed, she was cussing up a storm.

“God-damn mother fucking PIGS!” she cried, “You don’t fucking know what kinda shit my life is! You don’t fucking know ME! Fucking faggots! All they do is fuck us over and steal our drugs!”

What the hell was that? I was flabbergasted. Where did this all come from? Is this what people think of police officers? It was awful. It is not as if the department just thinks of ways to be a buzz kill. These men and women joined the force so they could help people.

Back at the station, I asked my officer if he ever gets scared. He told me, “Everyone gets scared, but trust and fear can be the things that keep you alive. It’s a shame,” he says “because, awhile ago there used to be a fraternal bond, but now there is a tight political ‘bottle-neck’ phenomena going on with promotions, and some people can be very cutthroat,” he explained it to me that, “Nowadays, it isn’t what you know, but who you know.”

This was very disheartening to hear as I watched him go through packets of paperwork. The night slowly wound down and I went home shortly after three in the morning, exhausted but excited that I had learned so much.

The next morning I call Cody and we go over his and his Lieutenants interviews. Cody is a 20 year-old firefighter/basic EMT who moved eight hours away from his family in Michigan early this year. His training has all been very short and compact, with intense exercises. His Lieutenant’s name is Mike Gentosi. Lieutenant Gentosi’s father was a firefighter for Des Moines for over 35 years. He can remember when he was growing up and how he would always go down to the station. Being a firefighter is all Gentosi ever dreamed of doing, and now he says that his family could not be prouder of him. Once again, it is nice to see that both Cody and the Lieutenant love their jobs and would not trade them for the world.

Luckily for Cody, he has not had anything life or death happen to him yet. Still, I am reminded of the danger of the job and the mental tolls it must carry when I read some of the stories that Gentosi shares with me. Mr. Gentosi, recalls one instance where a car

had caught on fire. They did not make it in time and a 19 year old boy was killed by the fire as it burned him alive. Fortunately for the teen, he was unconscious. It would break my heart to know that I had been too late to save someone's life.

Another memory that he shared with me was from when he was once in a fire with a crew member of his, and the roof collapsed. The Lieutenant had to jump out of a second story window just to escape the danger. His thoughts raced to his partner who he assumed was right behind him, but did not appear for another long 10 to 15 seconds later, thankfully unscathed.

I express my thoughts to my friend on the severity of what he and his comrades do. He claims the trust and fraternal bond is what keeps the men safe. I tell him that they are heroes, but of course he denies it. He tells me of a website of real heroes to check out. The website is <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/index.shtm>. I navigate it a little bit and come across a link that says, FATALITY NOTICES. I click, and a list of 103 names pop up. I scroll through the numbers and go back to the top. I click the first name and this is what I see:

Wach, Jeremy

| | |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Age: | 31 |
| Cause of Death: | Collapse |
| Rank: | Firefighter |
| Nature of Death: | Asphyxiation |
| Classification: | Volunteer |
| Emergency Duty: | Yes |
| Incident Date: | 11/05/2007 |
| Duty Type: | On-Scene Fire |
| Incident Time: | 00:50 |
| Activity Type: | Search and Rescue |
| Death Date: | 11/05/2007 |
| Fixed Prop. Use: | Residential |

Wymore Fire and Rescue Department
 115 East D Street
Fire Dept. Info: Wymore , Nebraska 68466
 Chief: Gordon Michaelis

Initial Summary:

On Monday November 5th at approx. 12:50am Wymore & Blue Springs Volunteer Fire Departments were dispatched to a house fire at 719 West "I" street. Fire Chief Brad Robinson and Firefighter Travis Schmidt from Blue Springs Fire Department and Firefighter Jeremy Wach from Wymore entered the structure to begin an attack on the fire. Shortly after they entered the roof of the single family dwelling caved in. Chief Robinson & Firefighter Schmidt were able to make it out with minor injuries and Firefighter Wach was pinned under the roof. Firefighters worked to free Jeremy but were unsuccessful due to the intense fire, heat & smoke. At approx 7:30am Firefighters were able to get Jeremy out of the structure, he was pronounced dead at the scene. The cause of the fire is being investigated by the Nebraska State Fire Marshal's office. Jeremy, 31years old, is survived by wife, Melissa, and sons Joseph & Matthew. He joined the Wymore Fire Department and worked as a Gage County Deputy Sheriff since 2003.

I read this, and all I can think about is the story of Lieutenant Gentosi and how lucky he and his partner were not to be crushed by that roof that caved in on them. To think that just a few days ago this courageous man was still alive rips through me. I go through the list one by one and slowly each number turns into a name, each name turns into a person, and each person turns into a life lost. It is suddenly very real to me.

Finally, I clicked into my final on-line interview, it is the one that Ryan's brother, Nathaniel Hull filled out for me. I skimmed through it preparing myself for what I worry will be more tragic than what I read about the firefighters. I madee my way through it, and strangely, it is sort of bland. He states that he was a gunner in Iraq for convoys, and

that he once got a purple heart for injuring his leg. After 9/11, he affirmed that his patriotic feelings convinced him to join, and before heading to Iraq, they were trained in Urban Warfare. Looking back on it, he regrets joining because of the sacrifices he had to give up. The thoughts of his family are what drove him to live through his time serving and that he looked over everyone as if they were brothers.

Nathaniel claimed to appreciate life more now, because he risked his life on a daily basis for missions that would last anywhere from 8 to 36 hours long. Coming back from Iraq, Hull stated that the mental affects only influenced him for a few months, but now he has adjusted fine.

Feeling like something was missing, I went to Ryan for some insight. What Ryan told me was another story. On daily missions, they would come across already blown IED's. Ryan's seen a video that his brother took of a mission and he said that when they would drive through the streets, there would be charred bodies lying around. On one video it even showed a man being shot to death because he would not stop at a checkpoint.

What Nathaniel left out of the interview was how his convoy and he had come across an abandoned terrorist camp. While scouring the camp, Nathaniel came across two suspicious men. He forced them to kneel at gunpoint and had them tied up. Those two men turned out to be high-ranking(top 100) terrorists who were wanted by the U.S. military.

Another tragic story was told when Ryan tells me about a friend of Nathaniel's whose name was Dan Sesker. Hull's convoy was on a regular everyday mission, when they came across a strange hole in the ground. Two soldiers got out of Hull's Humvee,

and proceeded to inspect the hole, while Sesker stood guard. Upon better examination, the hole turned out to be loaded with an IED. The two were able to take cover behind Hull's vehicle, but Sesker had no such opportunity, before he could even turn away, the IED exploded spewing shrapnel everywhere. The metal pieces shredded Sesker, killing him instantly. Shrapnel rocked Hull and his Humvee. His leg injury came from this explosion when a piece from this IED shot into his area and nearly took his leg off. What saved him was his 9mm handgun strapped to his leg that took the brunt of the force, leaving him with a severe contusion, and his life. He was back a week later with a purple heart. His friend, Sesker, was not.

4: What I learned:

What is it like to put your life on the line everyday? If you will recall, in the beginning of my paper, I stated that my theory of why people live out their career with their life on the line everyday, was because they wanted the glory. After doing my research though, I have come to the realization that although that may be true for some people, it certainly was not true for all. When I asked Cody why he wanted to be a firefighter, he said it was to make a difference somehow. This seems to be the general consensus on why these brave men and women do this. I think it is because they know that if they do not do it, who else would? Either way, it was astounding to me to find out what these brave souls go through each day and find out what it is like to live their lives.

It is like, being called a "Faggot Pig", when your job is to keep the streets at home safe. It is like having a regular day at the office, only to have to jump from a burning and collapsing two-story home. It is like watching helplessly as an IED rips through one of

your best friends. What is it like to put your life on the line everyday? It is like nothing I ever want to know.

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