

Every so often, a countryman does something that makes most of us even more proud to be Americans. The men and women who kept the fourth plane from hitting its target on 9-11 were as inspiring as anyone I ever heard about anywhere. Pat Tillman, who gave up millions to serve his country, is by far the best individual example of a Patriot in history.

I did my duty at the end of Viet Nam and those aware of that also know the U.S. military is not on my most-admired list. From 1971 to '73, my ending military occupation required two months of radio school, hours on tactical radio nets, lots of hours learning to direct aircraft to targets and lastly going essentially back to boot camp for parachute school. There were a total of fewer than 100 boneheads in the entire Marine Corps who did our job. As my enlistment ended, we were getting idiots who would not be able to pass radio school straight out of boot camp for "on-the-job-training." If those people came into an elite unit, one can only think who was heading into the infantry.

To reinforce that negative experience, some 15 years ago I had dinner with a Porsche-driving colonel who was in charge of a little group called the Delta Force. The man was so insecure away from his controlled environment he couldn't make eye contact with the women at the table, let alone the men. On one occasion, the Greensboro Rugby Club ran in 76 unanswered points on a combined Camp Lejeune-Ft. Bragg side. My feeling has always been that if you took five linebackers and defensive back from a state champion high school football team and picked five Rangers out of formation, I would bet my house on the football players.

Not a unit with a Pat Tillman, of course. The pictures in the paper showed an average sized football player who looked like a bull in his Ranger uniform. That's Jack Armstrong, All-American, and watch out foes of Truth, Justice and the American way. I actually feel sorry for his drill instructor and that thought never crossed my mind before.

Unfortunately, around the time of the War of Northern Aggression, big strong bulls started to horribly yield to technology. Patriotism is an act that plays well in public but ends even before the start of the shit rain. Patriotism got you into the storm, the hand you are then dealt is a random jumble of emotion and chance where anything but the strongest survive. We are extremely fortunate that our death-dealing technology is far superior to what we encounter because I can damn sure tell you how long Viet Nam would have lasted if we had switched toys with the opposition. "Corporal, why are you running?" "Because, sir, I cannot fly."

Not that many Americans died in Viet Nam; I knew maybe six, and hardly any have in Iraq. My rugby club in London lost more than two full XV's in each of the World Wars. The elaborate wood plaque with the names hand-painted in gold lettering is head-lined "They Played the Greater Game" and it sent shivers down my spine on more than the first occasion I passed by it.

Those nominal statistics of course mean nothing when your convoy makes a wrong turn or some dumb ass officer packs hundreds into an easy target in Lebanon or you get flippant about a quick trip over Mogadishu that does not require flak jackets or canteens. Seeing impact from a helicopter's automatic weapons on television gets the point across on just how awesome they are to deal and terrifying and virtually impossible to deal with. No amount of juking or jiving is going to prevent them from doing what they are going to do – the only defense against them is space so only a couple get hit instead of a squad plus weapons that generate at a couple of thousand rounds a minute

tend to run dry pretty quick. I remember thinking a helicopter was putting way too many rounds of high dollar ammunition into a worthless Iraqi.

On our end, Pat Tillman probably made the best target, like the alpha male in a deer herd. The men with Pat Tillman that day will have trigger time stories for the rest of their lives and, more importantly, will have the privilege to say they knew a real American. He did not mean to be a recruiting tool while alive, he will be one larger than life dead. We need more like him for the parade ground.

Written by Albert Stevens – April 2004