



# From the Mouths of Babes: Rediscovering the Calling to Serve

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I make a b-line out of my office like the building was on fire. So ends another Tuesday. I spend my days sequestered in a dismal pooka only to churn out mindless reports of barely readable administrivia. I have to force myself to blink otherwise my eyes would literally dry out.

Spreadsheets, bullet points, and matrices ooze from my fingers. The fluorescent light drives me insane. It resides in the ceiling above my head and flickers in a sequence that will either induce a seizure or a total breakdown. I contemplate grabbing my tape dispenser and launching it at the light in a scene reminiscent of Roy Hobbs's homerun in *The Natural*. I change out of my uniform and proceed to my truck to enjoy at least an hour and a half of bumper-to-bumper traffic. Yet short of winning the Powerball, I will be getting up at 0600 the next morning to repeat the rinse cycle I call duty in Washington DC.

As I enter the house, I can see my three year old son is excited to see me. He drops the cup of juice his mom gave him, runs towards me at full speed and hurls himself head first into me like a linebacker. Sadly, this strike is the best part of my day. My four year old daughter's approach is more graceful. She moves toward me through some type of interpretive dance, gives me a kiss, and then flitters off to whatever she was doing prior to my arrival. After dinner it is baths, pajamas, and bed for the kids. I missed this routine while I was on deployment. Before I left, I sat with Frankie on the rocker and read to him. I return, and it's Dr. Seuss at his bedside because he's just too big to be rocked in a chair. I finish up, tuck him in, and get ready to shut off the light. Before I do, he asks me to wait. This is a common delay tactic my son uses. He announces he has something to tell me: "Dad, when I grow up I wanna be in the Navy." And so it begins. I couldn't be more proud.

How did he come up with that? He wasn't around when I flew a helicopter. The Navy took me away from him on and off for roughly half his life. Yet in spite of this, he still wants to be in the Navy. What kind of dad would I be if I described to him my day as a mid-level manager? He might want to be a fireman instead. No way. I am going to exploit this for all it's worth. Suddenly, I forget about my current situation and reminisce on how I viewed the Navy when I was a kid. Jets! Explosions! I fondly recall my dad's stories of when he proudly served with Underwater Demolition Teams overseas and the time I realized I too would serve when the time came. Frankie would be the son of a son of a sailor—the hook of a Jimmy Buffet song. It is perhaps cliché, but at this moment I find it unique and perfectly fitting. Suddenly my station in life improves. The grey windowless box I work in transforms into a nerve center

of naval intelligence, and I am now an integral cog in the wheel of the machine that drives this global force for good.

I drive to work the next morning and jump on the hamster wheel of reality—a mid-career Lieutenant Commander in the United States Navy stationed in the beltway. I still ponder how my son decided he wanted to be in the Navy. I want to ignore the possibility he was trying to scam a few more minutes with the light on in his room and try to believe he truly meant what he said. At three years old, he is immune to the incentives of college money and world travel. Nickelodeon doesn't air alternative-rock Navy commercials aimed to attract the wayward high school senior. I want to believe it is something inherent in him—a calling. It might be seeing pictures of his mom and dad in uniform, but he is not really a slave to fashion. I often chase him around the house with one sock dangling off his foot and underpants around his head pleading with him to get ready for school. It's back to the hamster wheel. I scream down 495 at speeds upwards of six miles per hour behind an old Volvo station wagon. There's a sticker with a Marine emblem on the back of the wagon that reads, "Proud Parent of a U.S. Marine." The driver is in uniform. She too is a Marine and apparently very proud of her son or daughter who, by what the sticker claims, chose to serve. She is also very angry at the early morning traffic and is yelling expletives at the idiot driver in front of her. I can tell because both her arms are thrusting repeatedly in a chopping motion towards the windshield. Her hands are formed in the shape of a tomahawk. She must be steering with her knees. *Semper Fi ma'am.*

Suddenly, I reach a eureka moment! The military may just be a family business. The one percent of the country serving in uniform is merely passing the tradition down like a shop owner often does with his kids. Perhaps the aroma of service permeates through the offspring of America's fighting men and women like the odor of the boat clings to a flight suit. Maybe it's why a serviceman or servicewoman may end a relationship because their partner couldn't handle the loneliness and separation of deployment, yet the young son or daughter somehow gets that daddy or mommy is away keeping things safe. I remember when I felt the calling, just like my son. I now feel less perplexed and more grateful to my father for passing the gift of inspiration to me. I believe the calling is occasionally misplaced in the course of a military career. A person's feelings toward serving are often clouded by the daily grind. However, somewhere behind the traffic, flickering fluorescent lights, and PowerPoints, the calling is still there for me. It just took a three year old to put things back into perspective.