

Sharp knife of a short life (blog by Sarah Kemp posted 27 February 2011)

I am not naive enough to believe that I was going to come to Afghanistan for a year and not lose someone I knew. I could have never imagined it would be Daren. He was so full of life I didn't think a full head on collision with a speeding train could stop his heart. In a world where most people I meet can seem very one dimensional; they're a soldier and not much else, Daren was like one of those pop up books with the gorgeous pictures that jump out and grab your attention and maybe even has some sound and lights and somehow the batteries just never need to be recharged.

"I knew he wouldn't die, because his life was like the roots of a tree that went miles into the soil and miles around its trunk and came up in my cousins in their faces and their voices and their character. I didn't think you kill a tree that big. Not even God could kill a tree that big." - Donald Miller discussing his uncle's death in *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*



Daren making me laugh on Halloween. I had asked him to pose with some decorations that my friend Carri had donated.

I had met Daren Hidalgo a time or two before when he first got in country before pushing out to his COP. I vaguely remember making a dumb joke about Hidalgo and that being the name of a horse (thank God he didn't hold it against me). Then a few weeks later on Halloween night he and some other soldiers from his company volunteered. It was my first holiday away from home and he made me forget that I was in Afghanistan. By the end of the night I thought holidays will not be so bad with my new family out here. He was hysterical. His huge dimples reminded me of an athlete who has huge muscles because they work out so much; he had these huge dimples from smiling so much. Everyone was drawn to him like mosquitoes to a blue light, they can't quite pinpoint why but they were captivated.

He was at KAF because he had escorted the belongings of a fallen soldier in his platoon. That night we talked about death and how no matter how much 'training' he had, he was human and felt emotions about his buddy dying but that he had to be strong to lead his men. That's the kind of guy Daren was, he always, without a doubt, put others first.

We spent a lot of time that week just talking about everything: growing up in PA and WV (we both liked pepperoni rolls), being Catholic, choosing the military or me choosing to come out here, and especially about missing our families and friends. We debated whose mom sent better

care packages. He insisted his mom was “The Queen of Care Packages” because she had so much practice with him and his brothers all in the military. He said she clearly topped all other care packages because sometimes she even put in magazines with hot girls in them. He was so proud of his brothers Miles and Jared. He joked about the “rank race” between them all. He claimed it wasn’t really that fair because Jared was in the Marines and they have different criteria for promotion. He loved his sister and getting to be an uncle. We shared stories about our nephews and the joy of being able to give them back after playing with them. He also talked about learning Spanish and how one of the most favorite moments he ever had was when he finally learned Spanish well enough to have his first real, actual, deep, involved conversation with his Dominican grandparents.

Although I may have only known him a few months, I feel like I knew him for years. Time plays some funny tricks out here. Daren brought out the best in me and in everyone he knew. He encouraged me to write. My entire post about “No Washers Available,” was about him. I said I was feeling uninspired and he told me he wrote every day. I said I’d feel stupid I had nothing exciting to write. He read me one of his journal entries and then told me even if I just wrote about being pissed there were no washers available I should write something down because life’s too fast you don’t want to miss it. So many people spout logic about live life like you are dying or make the most of each moment, but Daren is one of the only people I’ve known to actually accomplish it. I talked about trying to learn different languages so I could greet every person that came in the center, but that Pashto was too difficult. He said, “You’ll learn it, I know you, you care too much.” He made me want to live up to what he saw in me. I understand why his soldiers loved him so much.

He was so funny and full of life. Soldiers from his unit are always coming through the center when they rotate into KAF and Shaw (one of his soldiers) told me a couple weeks ago that he had to wake Daren up and he said, “LT get up!” and that Daren immediately sat up and karate chopped his way out of his sleeping bag. Shaw said it was hysterical. I can picture it, and it makes me laugh. Gentry who volunteered with Daren at the center and was in his company said, “He could always bring a smile to anyone’s face and it was contagious. You couldn’t help but be around him and be in a great mood. He was one of the best leaders I have known in the Army. He never looked at anyone any different regardless of rank.” Another soldier Cooper said, “He was a hell of a man, and everyone that knew him is gonna miss him.” My roommate/coworker/friend Sarah York said, “You know I’ve only known 4 men in my entire life that I consider GREAT men. The kind of man that every man should aspire to be. Hidalgo was one.”

I feel incredibly blessed to have known Daren. I am positive that anyone who met him will say that. I’ve talked to soldiers in his company the last few days and it is as if I’m trying to ingest every last tiny morsel of Daren I can, trying to hear every last story and have every last image of him making every one smile and laugh.

His last messages were that he was going to be coming through KAF soon for some scheduled maintenance. He was supposed to come on 21FEB. On 20FEB11 Daren was killed by an IED. I got a text that night at 2324 from my coworker, “Showtime is 0340 for 1 US Army.” I had no idea how that text would impact me. As a USO staff we try to have at least one person attend every ramp ceremony for a fallen soldier at KAF. I had been to about 4 or 5 previously, and since I just finished up my shift, it was my turn. I didn’t see the text until 0300. It was bitterly cold that night and I was tired and honestly did not feel like going, but knew I would be honoring a fallen soldier so I got in the truck and drove to the flight line. I was wearing a ridiculous hat with flaps on it that I felt a lil funny for wearing, so I took it off when I arrived.

Soldiers from every country were chitchatting quietly before the ceremony. I spotted the general who is in charge of KAF, the one who watched me sing like an idiot to Kix Brooks a couple months before. I looked and saw the MRAP waiting on the flightline to bring forth the casket. As I looked around with my hands in my pockets fidgeting to stay warm I saw the 6 soldiers assembling to walk out to carry the casket and I stopped moving, I stopped looking, I stopped everything when I saw their unit patch: "TOUJOURS PRET" Always Ready. My heart sank into the pit of my stomach, that was Daren's unit. Although I wouldn't allow myself consciously to acknowledge that it could be him; somewhere, somehow I knew something wasn't right. This was going to be someone I knew. I walked out onto that runway and stood in line at attention across from a line of soldiers. I was concocting in my head the angry e-mail I would send Daren. I would yell at him for not responding to my e-mail from 2 days prior and making me worry that it was him. I'd ask about the deceased and hope he wasn't close with him. I'd see if he was coming soon.

The wind was whipping through the flightline. The speaker for the mic stand was swaying. I couldn't see the chaplain but I heard him speak some bible passage that was meant to give us hope that the deceased is in a better place. Sometimes they say the name of the fallen soldier, and other times they don't. This time he did. The chaplain said, "First Lieutenant" and my mind sighed with relief because I had momentarily still thought Daren was a Second Lieutenant, but then I remembered he had just been promoted, "Daren" and I knew it right then and there, there are not many Darens, it was him, "Hidalgo." Honestly I'm not even sure I heard the Hidalgo part. I gasped aloud and saw the worried look of the soldier across from me whom I could tell was thinking, "This chick is gonna lose it." I had been to ramp ceremonies before, I usually spent my time praying for their family and friends who knew them. I would look out at the fallen soldier's unit with pity, and ache in my heart for their pain. Always in the back of my head, I was thanking God I didn't know the deceased. My worst nightmare was imagining attending one of those for my friends. My nightmare was coming true and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I quickly told myself to get the F over it because it was happening and the ceremony would be over before I knew it and I would miss it. I would miss honoring him. I pulled it together and I stood there and I saluted him. I watched the soldiers hold him while holding their arms around each other's backs. I can still vividly see his steel casket with the flag draped over, the two female soldiers at the front, the one male soldier who looked no older than 19, the gleam off the second soldier on the right's gold wedding ring as he grasped the back of the blouse of his fellow casket carrier so fiercely his knuckles were white, the fancy writing of Mississippi on the back tail of the plane, the slow haunting music of Amazing Grace. I couldn't bring myself to turn my head and watch him be placed into the plane. I stared out into nothingness. Then it was over. We were dismissed. I thought this can't be happening, it's not real, this is a nightmare, I'll wake up. I looked back three times on my walk back across the flight line, just to make sure the plane was still there and the soldiers were still there, and this was still my life. I made it to the car and immediately dialed one of my coworkers, "It was Daren" was all I could get out.

It was a shocking way to find out. But I would not want to change it. I got to stand there and honor my friend. I got to give him one of the first goodbyes. I got to stand there and honor him not just as a representative of the American public or as a USO staff or as a DOD civilian, but as his friend, someone who knew the man who just sacrificed his life. I will always be grateful for that. Being over here I don't get a chance to attend his funeral or go to a showing and see pictures and talk to his friends, all these things that bring solace in a time of a grieving. I've struggled with what to write in this post. Finally, yesterday morning I woke up with the feeling that this post isn't about me, it's about sharing with whomever will listen what an amazing man

I came to know. I have loved reading other posts Daren's friends have put on his Facebook. It brings a smile to my face to get to know the non-deployed Daren. In each note on Facebook, each comment on a news story online or interview on a news station, people always say the same thing about Daren, it's about what Daren did for them, what Daren did to make them happy to bring a smile to their face, because that's what Daren did. He lived for others. He died for others too.

I spoke with the brave soldier who was blown up next to Daren. He said that after the explosion while Daren was lying there he was joking with him the whole time. He was telling Daren to cut it out, but Daren wouldn't stop. That's the kind of guy he was, trying to make everyone else feel better and laugh and making sure everyone else was okay, while he was the one hurting. I know that's what he'd be doing today. If somehow he could pop down here just for a lil while, he'd be telling jokes and trying to cheer us all up.

The last time I saw Daren one of my favorite earrings had fallen out and he had helped me look for it, and we found the stud but not the back to it. I have since then found another back and still wear the earrings. The day after Daren was killed I worked all day and held it together. I knew he'd want me to. I did my job and helped the troops with a mostly smiling face. That night after my coworkers and I locked up, I stood at the front desk where Daren had sat and helped so many days and I lost it. I began crying. My entire day of pent up emotion came crashing out in waves of tears and sobbing. Then I heard the tiniest sound, just a lil 'ping.' I looked down at the counter and there was my right earring, the same one I had lost and Daren found. I looked for the earring back on the floor and in my coat. It was nowhere to be found. I touched my ear again and broke out in a huge shit eating grin. I looked to the sky and said, Damnit Daren, I'm running out of backs. I shook my head and laughed, with tears streaming down my face and one earring in I whispered to him, thank you, thank you for reminding me you're still here.

I'll be seeing you.