

Saving Of Private Stokes

By
Patrick O'Donnell

While eating dinner on a cold February night this year, I received an impassioned phone call. "Pat, this is Stokes. You know my dream has always been to be a Marine. I need your help on something. I found out this week The Corps doesn't want to extend my enlistment -- they are going to kick me out. Can you write letter of recommendation for my career placement officer? He said it might help, but I'm still probably going to get kicked out."

Dumbfounded, I said, "This is crazy. You were one of the bravest Marines in 1st Platoon. Sean, of course I will write something for you. I'll put a few calls in and see if there's something that can be done."

When I hung up the phone I was furious. This Marine risked life and limb countless times, deployed to Iraq twice, single-handedly killed nine insurgents, was twice combat wounded (and those are just the ones documented in his record). Sean Stokes was one of the finest Marines I'd ever known, I personally witnessed his heroism. Now he had to beg and use every contact he had to just to stay in the Marine Corps? My anger drove my calls.

That night I called all the officers who I met as an embedded combat historian during the epic Battle of Fallujah in November 2004. A few days later, I was informed by one of the officers who was with me in the Third Battalion, First Marine Regiment (3/1), "The Thundering Third," that Stokes could stay on for another ten months. He would have to deploy with the Thundering Third, which was sure to go to Iraq, but once the deployment was over so was his career. So for at least ten more months Stokes would remain a Marine.

I met Sean in combat over two years ago while interviewing the men in his platoon for my book, "We Were One." Standing about six feet tall, blued eyed and resembling Luke Skywalker from the movie Star Wars, the young Marine had great personal presence and above all, courage. His peers confirmed my initial impression and what I saw first-hand on the battlefield, that Stokes was a natural leader and fearless. Oddly he was a private, the lowest ranking member of 1st Platoon. I wondered why.

Other men in the platoon explained that prior to 3/1's second deployment to Iraq in the summer of 2004, then-Lance Corporal Stokes was court-martialed for leaving Camp Pendleton without permission. Stokes's motivation for going AWOL was pure: he was trying to help a family member escape domestic violence.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, Stokes put at risk his dream and career, to be a Marine, in order to protect his loved one. After moving her to a new residence, he returned to Pendleton and asked for a second chance. He was demoted to Private, the lowest rank in the Marine Corps, and he was allowed to stay in the Corps on the condition that he join Lima Company, 3/1, and deploy to Iraq.

Before going to Iraq in 2004, Marines knew from Corps scuttlebutt and the headlines in the news that a major battle was looming. Word was, "this is going to be a tough one, you might not come home." Stokes understood the risks of heading to Iraq, but rather than dread the deployment, Stokes embraced it. "3/1 gave me another shot."

The Marine Corps he loved so much gave him a second chance, and Stokes responded by becoming a model Marine during the following three years. The story should have ended here, but Stokes's AWOL would continue to haunt him.

On November 8, 2004, the Thundering Third assaulted the main defenses of Fallujah. Throughout the battle the 1,000-plus battalion was outnumbered at least two or three to one. Stokes's 1st Platoon was often pitted against multiple platoons of Al Qaeda fighters in deadly urban combat. The Marines had to clear a seemingly endless string of houses; Marines kicked in doors, room by room, hoping they wouldn't find a machine gun pointed at their faces. "At each house I said a prayer," said Stokes. "'Please God get me out of this one.' When I come out of the house, I thank Him, light up a cigarette and move on to the next one." The fighting was room to room, often hand to hand, against enemies who were hoping to be killed and only wanted to take an American with them. Stokes's 1st Platoon dropped from 46 Marines to 14 in less than two weeks.

On the second day of the battle, grenade fragments ripped into Stokes's arms and legs, but he was still able to function and he wanted to remain with his buddies, so Stokes hid his wounds to avoid mandatory evacuation. Over the next nine days he led the fight through the endless rows of houses and bunkers.

"Stokes was always the first into the house for my team. I cannot say for sure the number of enemy combatants Stokes eliminated but there were many," recalled Lance Corporal Heath Kramer, Stokes's fire team leader.

On November 17th Stokes, along with most of 1st Platoon, was lured into a sophisticated ambush in a couple of adjacent houses. One member of the platoon was killed, Lance Corporal Mike Hanks. Inside one of the houses, Stokes was thrown back six feet by an enemy fragmentation that detonated next to his body. He was trapped alone in the ambush house with the jihadists. "As I got up, rounds started impacting near me down the hall. They fighters kept coming closer, closer...I was firing at the Chechens who were getting closer (foreign fighters in Fallujah hailed from at least 18 different countries; the Chechens were the best trained, most deadly Islamist fighters in the city) ...then my magazine went dry! Everything I did was by instinct, so I pulled out a grenade to frag the Chechens. I thought I was going to die; I was out of mags and they were just about to peek around the corner."

Before the insurgents could kill Stokes, Lance Corporal Kramer bull-rushed a padlocked steel door and burst into the house, guns blazing. Kramer grabbed Stokes and carried him to safety. The Marines destroyed the house with explosives and tank fire, killing the Chechens. Suffering from a concussion, yet lucid, Stokes refused to leave his fellow Marines:

Kramer said "He begged me not to let him be taken out of combat. This is the kind of Marine I wanted beside me during a time like this. In my four years I served, Stokes was the best Marine I served with. Through all of the hard training we had, sleep deprivation, and having to serve under me as his fire team leader, (I was very tough on my fire team) he never complained and only wanted to learn more and make himself a better Marine."

Stokes snuck out of the field hospital so he could rejoin his buddies as quickly as possible. A week later, Stokes found himself in hand-to-hand combat with an insurgent, whom he dispatched with a trench knife.

In January 2005, 3/1 returned home. The war took a heavy toll on Sean. I remember how he told me all he wanted to do was work out and kick box. "I need to keep busy." To take his mind off the war, I recommended he read Meditations by Marcus Aurelius and get some counseling. Many members of 3/1 suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. To survive on his paltry 13K annual salary, he took a job at a local cellular phone store. He was determined to stay in the Corps.

A year after Fallujah, Stokes returned to Iraq with 3/1 for his second tour. He volunteered to be a scout and lead Lima Company into battle again. As usual, Stokes was out front.

After returning from Iraq from his second tour, Stokes spent the next few months at Pendleton preparing for his next deployment. Since fighting in Fallujah, he had been promoted to Lance Corporal, and again to the rank of Corporal, with Sergeant right around the corner. He was devastated when he was informed that his enlistment would not be extended. While he debated leaving the Marine Corps and taking a real-estate job, he called me and told me his heart was in the Marine Corps.

I was told flatly by several officers that Stokes's chances of staying in the Corps after the temporary ten month deployment to Iraq were practically nil. The Commandant of the Marine Corps would have to approve it, and Marines with similar incidents to Stokes's AWOL were being let go.

One officer stated bluntly, "His only chance is if we get him the medal he deserves from Fallujah. With a combat decoration in his file, there's a tiny chance he might be able to stay in." In my 15 years of conducting interviews with more than 2,000 WWII and Iraq veterans, I've never seen a stronger case than Sean's for at least the Bronze Star. The combat version of the medal is awarded to servicemen who distinguish themselves by courage under fire. Stokes clearly went beyond the call of

duty and the requirements for the medal, so I wrote a four-page letter detailing Stoke's actions in Fallujah and why he merited the Bronze Star. It also included a reference for his second Purple Heart, which he should have received for the wounds he hid at the beginning of the battle.

Initially, I never told Sean about the medal recommendation. I did not want the members of the medal committee to think Stokes was in some way trying to influence his own award. As the USS Bonhomme Richard was pulling out of port with the Thundering Third on board, bound for the unit's fifth combat deployment to Iraq, Stokes called me on his cell phone. "Hey Pat, How are you? We are pulling out. Hope everything is going well with you. By the way, did you ever get a chance to send that letter to the career planner?" I said, "I've done something better, something you deserve." Cryptically, I left it at that. In a final act of selflessness, to spare them the anguish of deployment, he never told them he was heading to Iraq.

Weeks passed and nothing was happening on the medal. I found out that the "award authority" had expired, so the battalion was highly unlikely to approve it. Though the medal was going nowhere, one officer suggested I persevere, in order to create a paper trail. Sean emailed me to let me know he was moving from Kuwait to Iraq the next day, and asked whether I or any of the officers had written on his behalf to the Marine career planner. Out of frustration and because I did not want him to think I failed him, I emailed him Bronze Star recommendation letter I wrote. Stunned, he wrote back:

"Wow, i don't deserve that...i just got off a four day training op in Kuwait so sorry its taken so long to respond but here i am. i can't thank u enough for that but i don't deserve it. The guys who deserved medals got them and i got to live on...that's my medal."

While leading 3/1's personal security detachment on a combat operation outside Fallujah, an honor reserved for the most elite Marines, Corporal Sean Stokes died in his battalion commander's arms on July 30, 2007. He will be a Marine forever.



Caption: Private Sean Stokes carries his weapon and his fallen best friend's weapon (Lance Corporal Benjamin Bryan) home. Stokes single-handedly killed nine terrorists in Fallujah.