Resilience

"The capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness."

I'm going to use the above definition of resilience in this short paper. My own view of this ability or character trait is to put it simply, making 'lemonade' out of life's 'lemons'. To turn a defeat or some horrible news into something positive down the road.

My own experience started when I was twenty-five years old and was informed by an Air Force surgeon that I had both follicular and medullary cancer of the thyroid. I was a rated navigator and scheduled to fly combat in less than a month when I was informed of this diagnosis. This occurred in December 1969. At that time, a majority of people with this diagnosis did not live longer than five more years. I agreed to the radical-neck surgery and went through a painful four months of physical therapy to regain use of my left arm. The hardest part was knowing that my budding career as a navigator came to a sudden stop. Four months later, the Air Force and I parted ways. I received a 100% disability and an honorable discharge. I did not know what my fate was to be, but I knew I wasn't going to give up. I went back to school to obtain a minor in math, worked on an assembly line to rebuild my strength, and taught seventh and eighth grade math in a private military school. Six months after I started teaching, my roommate from navigation school informed me that the Air Force was taking back cancer patients if they were rated and could pass a class II physical. I applied for the program and was accepted after taking a class II physical in September 1971. Two months later I rejoined the Air Force in order to fly the AC-130A as a Fire Control Officer.

I started flying combat in February 1972. The mathematics I learned while I was recovering from cancer enabled me to compute new gun settings for the 40 mm cannons aboard our aircraft which reduced the circular error for the A-model gunship by more than 50%. That led to my being named as the flight examiner at my crew position. In June of 1972, I was shot-down and parachuted into the A Shau Valley, the most dangerous place for American airmen in South Vietnam. I landed on the ground around 8:30 PM on 18 June 1972. I was one of only three survivors from a fifteen-man crew. I was very scared, but I relied on the training I received when I attended jungle survival school in the Philippines. My instructor in that school was a very small, black man from the tribe of Negritos. I remembered what he taught us and it allowed me to survive, even though the enemy passed within 10 feet of either side of me. I remained hidden, and thirteen and one-half hours later after being shot down, I was rescued by an HH-53C Super Jolly helicopter. I continued to fly combat till the end of the conflict which occurred in February 1973. I left Southeast Asia on 25 February 1973. I believe that year of combat turned me from an adolescent to a fully developed man. I also got to experience what serving in an elite military unit, with superb leadership, was like. I served in other units over the next eight years of my military life, but it was not nearly the same.

When I left combat, my next tour of duty was to become an instructor at the Undergraduate Navigator Training (UNT). My primary specialty was teaching celestial navigation. The year I spent teaching seventh and eighth grade math taught me that students needed to know why a procedure can solve a problem…Not just the procedure itself, but why it works. During my first year as an instructor, the Air Force changed the program to one that only taught the students the 'how' to compute a celestial fix, not the 'why' it works. I wrote my own syllabus which included an unscheduled eight-hour session on a Saturday before starting celestial navigation instruction in order to teach the theory behind celestial navigation. All my students passed the UNT course and their initial check rides in their gaining commands. Students that I did not teach failed their initial check rides at an 88% rate. In the summer of 1976, a full Colonel monitored my class where I taught Lattitude by Polaris. He was so impressed by the way my students handled that class that he ordered my Wing Commander to use a new syllabus written by me for all students entering the

program in the future. Resilience, in this case, is using what one knows to work. I told the Colonel who monitored my last class that I would not use the syllabus provided by the school because it would fail in making navigators out of the students.

4 ½ years ago, I was diagnosed with stage IV, Mantle cell lymphoma. I live every day to the fullest and I don't worry about what is ahead. My psyche is firmly in the present. That has taken me many years to learn, but it is the start of wisdom. I believe that resilience comes from accepting what you cannot change, and then dealing with those things that you can. Each person has to decide that for him or herself. If any good comes out of this small essay, then it will be teaching this particular lesson.

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