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Honour. By Benjamin Aldritt

A proud Scottish chieftain sits his sons down and stares levelly into their questioning eyes. He tells them that honour is what no man can give, and no man can take away. He tells them that honour is a gift a man gives himself.

That sounds pretty cryptic to me, and it was probably rather impenetrable to Robert MacGregor's sons as well. But it is that scene from the film Rob Roy that I think of first when I hear the word honour. Perhaps it is telling that someone in the twenty-first century would think of a movie about an eighteenth century Scot before they could think of a contemporary example. Honour is a word we don't use much anymore; it sounds quaint, and maybe a little self-righteous. But is the idea of honour obsolete as well? If I looked a little harder, could I find real honour in the twenty-first century?

Absolutely.

Ehren Watada is a 28 year old American. He is also a first lieutenant in the United States Army. His unit, a mechanized infantry brigade, was ordered to Iraq in June of 2006. Lieutenant Watada, like any good officer, started to do his homework. He researched the war, from the rising tensions of 2002 to the gory quagmire of 2006. He read about why his comrades were killing and being killed on the other side of the world. Ultimately, Watada decided that he had but one choice; he refused to obey. He told his commanding officer that the war in Iraq was an illegal one; that it violated the UN Charter, the Geneva Conventions, and most importantly, the Constitution of the United States. As a commissioned officer, Watada argued, he was honour-bound to obey the law and uphold the constitution, and thus to refuse this illegal order.

MacGregor faced his own moment of decision. Following a failed cattle venture, the Scotsman found himself deeply indebted to an English lord, who would soon seize his land and remaining cattle in payment. But the English lord made MacGregor an offer – bear false witness against a rival noble, and all is forgiven. Robert MacGregor flatly refused – he would sooner turn his family out into the cold than despoil his honour.

Ehren Watada offered to fight in Afghanistan, where he believes American action is legally justified. He is not a coward. In fact, he will probably spend several years in a military prison as a result of his decision. He knew that this was the likely outcome when he first announced his position to his superiors. They tried to talk him out of it. His parents tried to talk him out of it. But Watada was steadfast; his career and his personal liberty were acceptable costs to retain his honour, both as a citizen and an officer.

The military is one of the few places left in the West where a person can still use a word like honour unselfconsciously. I know from my own experience in military culture that officers are relentlessly indoctrinated with a strict moral code. They are trained to remember that their identity as officers is every bit as important as their skill as infantrymen. Why is the military still so pre-occupied with words like honour and duty? It is because the armed forces routinely place people in morally untenable situations. In

combat, when friends are dying nearby and the veneer of civilization is burned away, it is all too easy to succumb to our basest urges. Fear, hatred, and the thirst for revenge become overwhelming, and the power to mete out violent death is only an uttered syllable or a finger twitch away. In situations such as this, all that stops decent people from committing atrocities is a strong moral identity.

This is the gift that MacGregor speaks of. People define themselves by the lines that they will not cross, no matter what happens. An honourable man does not steal, however hungry he is. He is faithful to his spouse, however distant she may be. He does not visit his wrath on unarmed civilians, however scared and grief-stricken he is. This is why the military tries so hard to connect people to their moral core. Amidst the chaos and terror, honour is what separates the soldier from the murderer, the man from the beast.

Ehren Watada is a man, but also an instrument of US policy. His life becomes much more complicated when his commanders, the architects of that policy, themselves forget where the line is. For his entire life, Watada understood his country as one that respected its own laws, one that didn't wage wars of aggression, one that didn't torture its prisoners. Watada's America is a champion of freedom, and a defender of the weak. This is the nation that Ehren Watada volunteered to serve and, if necessary, to die for. But in the fear and rage that followed 9/11, that sense of American identity was gone like a dream. This, it was said, was different. The old rules didn't apply; the old lines were quaint, maybe a little self-righteous. Americans wanted blood. They wanted revenge. And they were willing to get behind leaders who vowed to deliver it.

Five year later, the United States is in the grip of a genuine crisis of identity. The moral high ground from which Americans are accustomed to fighting has been ceded. Old allies have turned away in disgust. Despite the ostentatious displays of American might, there is a pervading sense of failure across the country, a sense that something has been lost.

No one deprived America of its honour. The Americans abandoned it, dropped it like a heavy coat that impeded their ability to fight. Ten years ago it would have been unthinkable that the US would routinely torture its prisoners. It would have been the stuff of conspiracy theories to suggest that the CIA was kidnapping innocent people and carrying them off to secret prisons in eastern Europe. Who would have thought that the US would defy and discredit the United Nations, an organization whose main objective is to promote peace and the rule of law?

Conversely, nobody can restore the American reputation overnight. It is a slow process,

built from many small choices just as it is destroyed by a few big ones. If the United States is to restore its honour, it must first remember what it means to be American, and what is “un-American.” Americans must step back over their own moral line before their gift returns. Hopefully Lt. Watada will be freed soon enough to help.