

His Story, My Story, Our Story



**The Journey of a
Marine and His Son**

Foreword

“The Marines I have seen around the world have the cleanest bodies, the filthiest minds, the highest morale, and the lowest morals of any group of animals I have ever seen. Thank God for the United States Marine Corps!”

– Eleanor Roosevelt

With his Irish good looks and razor-sharp wit, Brian Ahearn, Captain, U.S.M.C., stood out in a crowd. He was the kind of man who, though you knew him only briefly, you would remember clearly more than a half-century later.

When his son, also named Brian, contacted me and asked if I would write the Foreword to this book I consented. While reading the manuscript, I realized that there was another very different side to the Marine Officer with whom I served in Vietnam. There are words that need to be spoken and lines that need to be read. This short book draws back the curtains on a man’s life revealing both his vices and virtues.

This is a work in two parts by two authors. The first part is about a man and a Marine, and what it’s like to be the son of that man and Marine. This is revealed through the eyes of his son. Therein lies its value to those who serve today and attempt to balance the fulfillment of their duties and obligations, both as Marines and as fathers.

The second part is Captain Brian Ahearn’s reflections on his service in the Marine Corps and his experiences as an infantry officer in the Republic of Vietnam. Marines who read this book will immediately realize that while many things have changed in the Corps, most have not. Like all worthy institutions, the Marine Corps has evolved. Eleanor Roosevelt’s observations about clean bodies, filthy minds, high morale, and low morals is only partially correct now. The bodies remain clean and morale is high, but morals and minds have been upgraded.

Vietnam is no longer the nation’s longest war. Its longevity has been surpassed by the decades-long conflicts in the Middle East. While weapons, missions, and the ways they are carried out have changed, the people have not. The courage and selfless

devotion to duty Brian Ahearn recalled from his time in Vietnam have been replicated in Iraq and Afghanistan. The words engraved on the Marine Corps War Memorial, “*Uncommon Valor was a Common Virtue,*” are not, and have not been, bounded by time or geography.

One point, easily missed, that strikes home and is the unifying theme for this book is the statement in Captain Ahearn’s obituary, “*Brian IS a Captain in the Marine Corps.*” His son dutifully captured the essence of being a Marine. It is a commitment that ignores the boundaries of time and earthly existence. Whether you are a Marine or not, there is much to be learned from these pages about fatherhood, sacrifice, and service.

– Charles E. Wilhelm, General (retired), United States Marine Corps

Preface

“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

– Hebrews 12:1

This book is dedicated to two groups of people. First are the men and women of the United States Marine Corps who lay everything on the line to serve our country. Not second, but right alongside them, the book is dedicated to their families who love them, support them, and quite often have to put up with them. The book is written from the perspective of the father-son relationship because that’s my experience. I don’t know what it’s like to be parented by a woman who is serving or has served in the Corps, nor do I know what it’s like to be a woman whose father served. Nonetheless, I hope the book helps with those relationships too.

My father, Brian F.X. Ahearn, Captain, United States Marine Corps, and I had a rough go of it for a number of years, but we ended up in a good place at the time of his passing in September 2020. Above all else, my father was most proud of being a Marine. He identified as a Marine before his roles as a son, a brother, a husband, a father, or anything else. Being part of the Corps was truly who he was at his core. I’m fortunate that later in life he opened up to me somewhat in conversation. Eventually he wrote about his time in the Marines and his experience in Vietnam so I could understand him better.

Let me briefly foreshadow the book. For those who are Marines, you will appreciate ***Being A Marine***, this book’s 2nd section where my father wrote about why he joined the Corps, boot camp, Officer Candidate School, his combat time in Vietnam, and his return home. Before you get to that you’ll learn about our family history and my experience growing up in his shadow. In the final section you’ll see my eulogy, my sister’s eulogy, as well as reflections from friends and family.

The book is intended to honor my father, but it’s pretty raw in many places. It has to be if it’s to be truthful. It’s never fair to paint a picture that isn’t accurate because it can leave others feeling like they could never measure up, that their issues are unique,

or that perhaps they are unforgivable. But, if one sees the flaws and brokenness, and then the changes that took place to redeem a person, hopefully many will think, *“If he can do it, maybe I can too.”*

Please keep this in mind as you read the not so flattering accounts – ***it’s not how we start the race but how we finish.*** We’re all works in progress, and I hope you’ll see my father was a different man by the end of his life.

If this book can help one Marine have a better relationship with his or her family, then it will be worth the time and effort to write it. However, being an optimist, I hope for more. I hope Marine family members will read it too, so they get a new perspective of the Marine in their lives. That’s important because relationships are a two-way street, which means building or repairing them takes effort from everyone.

Admitting mistakes and seeking forgiveness is the most powerful way to restore a relationship. But, it takes two to tango. If someone says, *“I’m sorry,”* the relationship isn’t *fully* restored until another says, *“And I forgive you.”*

The only person you can change is you. While your actions can influence another person, it’s still up to them to change. But make no mistake, your actions can help or hinder another’s progress towards positive change. Knowing this, and that relationships take time and effort on the part of both parties, forgiveness is incredibly important. Sometimes little acts can indicate a move to the middle which, if reciprocated, begin to bring people together with or without uttering, *“I forgive you.”*

Because my dad is a Marine – it’s never *“was a Marine”*, not even in death – I know he would be proud of this endeavor. He would have done *anything* to help a fellow Marine or a Marine’s family. After all, he risked his life in battle for his brothers in arms so why wouldn’t he take this next step? That’s Semper Fi. Always Faithful. I believe with all my heart my father finds joy knowing he continues to help his brothers and sisters in the Corps well beyond his time on Earth.

As I wrote this book, I also realized I want to dedicate it to our daughter Abigail. Your name means source of joy and you certainly have been that! Your impending birth and then raising you helped your mom and I rethink many aspects of life, marriage, and parenting. Your presence also helped us deal with family issues in ways we might not have otherwise. Contemplating our family history and my childhood, I came to see that

I've tried my best to stop passing along the negative aspects of our family history and sought to instill the best parts. While we were far from perfect parents, Abigail, I hope you and your children benefit from the efforts your mom and I put forth.

– Brian Ahearn, son of Marine Captain Brian F.X. Ahearn

An Unfinished Letter

*“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die, a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.”*

– Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (edited)

Dad,

I’ve been reading a book that’s had me thinking about you a lot. I decided to write because whenever I find myself talking to Jane or Abigail about it I just cry. I’m sure I’ll shed tears as I write this. If it seems like I ramble or jump around it’s because there are a lot of thoughts to process.

The book is *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk. Early on he wrote a lot about PTSD and Vietnam vets. Many aspects he wrote about, and that vets have shared, I “knew” intellectually but not as true insight. Somehow as I read this special book, it dropped down to my heart. I know that because as I lay in bed the other day thinking about it, I cried for quite some time.

As a kid, I obviously had no idea what you went through during Vietnam. I just saw you as my dad, someone who fought over there. From my earliest memories I knew you were tough because my whole life I never saw you back down from anyone over anything. Sometimes the issues were not a big deal, at least in my mind, but you would not back down if you believed you were in the right. I think I inherited that from you – do the right thing because it’s the right thing to do. Frankly, it’s why I never dabbled in recreational drugs. It was so deeply set in my mind that it was wrong. Believe me, most of my friends dabbled but I never felt “peer pressure” because my compass was set on that.

I think it’s the case for most boys to look up to their fathers and seek their approval. From what I know about you and your father, I think that was the case for you.

I remember you telling me how you overheard him tell a coworker he was only giving you six months at Fairfield because of your poor academic performance at Iona. You said that comment spurred you on to make the Dean's List routinely during college.

Given your dad's alcoholism, trying to win his approval was probably impossible as time passed because of what it does to the mind.

Something I've noticed about the Ahearn family is pride. Despite the successes you had, it was probably never within your dad to admit you'd done things he never did, maybe never could have. That's sad because I believe we should want our children to do better and be more than we are as parents. That's how the world can continually become a better place. I know Jane and I feel the world is better for Abigail coming into it because she seems to have the best traits of both of us and very few of the crappy parts.

I see that pride within me, the thought that, if I applied myself to something I could be better than anyone else.

Unfinished, August 6, 2020

Section 1: My Words

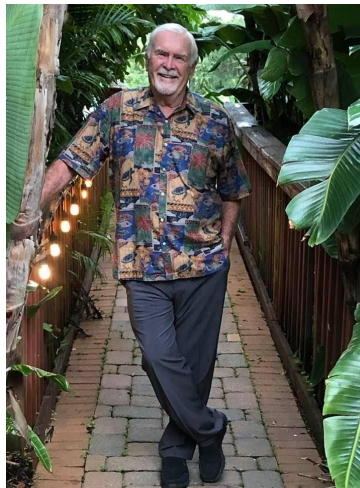
The Backstory

*“Nothing I have ever done, or ever will do,
can compare with serving in combat in
the United States Marine Corps.”*

– Brian F.X. Ahearn

September 14, 2020

Friday, September 11, 2020, I’m scrolling through my Facebook feed, and I see Dad’s picture. He didn’t post it because he rarely ever posted. He wrote lots of editorials for local newspapers, but Facebook wasn’t his thing. The picture was from Jo’s timeline. Jo is his wife, my stepmom, and September 11th was their 38th wedding anniversary. As I looked at the picture my thought was, “Damn, Dad looks good! He looks like he’s lost a little weight and he looks really happy.”



Dad on his 38th wedding anniversary
September 11, 2020

A few days later, Monday, September 14th, I was a guest on a podcast. We decided to record the episode first thing in the morning so we could jump into the rest of our day and workweek. When I finished recording, I checked my phone and noticed a call from Jo. I thought that was strange because Jo almost never calls me. She calls my wife, Jane, all the time. They're the planners when it comes to holidays, vacations, visits, etc. They turn to me and Dad for the okay, but they do all the heavy lifting.

Beyond planning, Jo and Jane are like two peas in a pod. The similarities they share are uncanny. Their first names start with J, they married men named Brian Ahearn, they love golf, they're passionate about their faith, and they share the same birthday (May 14). And that's the short list. They couldn't be more like sisters even if they had the same mother!

Jo's voicemail simply said, "Brian, this is Jo. Would you please call me as soon as you can? Thank you. Bye." I called immediately, and she told me Dad passed away that morning. She said he did his normal routine of getting up by 6 am to walk their Golden Lab, Bella. Jo walked by him when he was in his office and commented that he was back quickly. He said he hurried back because he needed to use the restroom. Moments later she heard him yell, "*Jo!*" She rushed into his office and saw he'd fallen over in his chair. It was a heart attack. Despite her efforts, and the efforts of the paramedics, he passed away at age 79. He'd had a heart procedure in February that year and seemed to be doing better than ever, often commenting how he didn't seem to lose his breath so easily anymore. Regarding the procedure he email me and my sister Carey on January 6, 2020:

"It is easier for me to email a note than text. As you may know, I have had health problems for the last three + years, starting in Ohio in 2016. Probably the climate. At the start of 2019 I became short of breath sometimes with minor exertion. Initially, they said it could be emphysema, COPD, allergies but never tied it down until I had a series of lung function tests and heart tests. The tests point to a heart problem. The latest echocardiograms indicate that the problem comes from a damaged valve-not really bad but it should be replaced. Given my

young age, they recommend a catheterization procedure vs open heart surgery. No specific date as I have to have a few more tests and a special consultation. Ironic – the diagnosis comes 54 years to the day when I stepped out of a chopper south of Danang and was blown sky high by a mortar round. It probably means I have another 54 years.”

We joked quite a bit so my response to his email was, “Given my young age’ ... compared to what? Is your doctor 95? lol Seriously, thanks for letting us know. Please let us know what you learn next, when you'll have the surgery, etc.”

His passing was surreal. It didn't seem possible that he could be gone because he was the toughest person I knew. I understood in my head that someday he would die because none of us escapes that fate. But in my heart, I never really imagined it would happen. If you're blessed to not lose a parent when you're young, the longer they live the more you assume they'll always be there. Until that day, both of my parents were alive, and I became conscious of the fact that I didn't know life apart from them. Every day of my life they'd been available to me. Even though I didn't see Dad much (usually once a year because of distance) and we didn't talk a lot on the phone, I always knew he was there if I needed him.

Like Dad, I'm a very early riser and have been most of my adult life. It's my time to run, work out, read, or walk and pray. When I do those activities, I'm by myself. Jane is never up but even though she's not with me, I don't feel alone. Knowing she is upstairs sleeping gives me a sense of peace and comfort. If she happens to be in Pennsylvania to spend time with her family, I feel alone on those mornings. That's how I suddenly felt about my father. Even though we didn't see each other often or talk much, there was a certain comfort knowing he was there, and I could reach out to him whenever I wanted to.

I said he was the toughest person I knew. He'd survived 13 months in the jungles of Vietnam during the war. He'd been in combat, was wounded by shrapnel and, although he never specifically mentioned it, I'm pretty sure he killed people during the war. You'll read more about his experiences in his own words later in the book.

A vivid memory I had of him was when I was seven or eight years old. It was the early 1970s and we lived in Southern California. My parents had my sister and me when they were very young, so Dad was only around 30 years old at the time of this memory. We spent a lot of weekends at the beach – Newport, Laguna, Malibu, and Huntington are a few I recall us going to regularly. One summer day, we were at the beach and Dad was playing a pickup game of football with some college guys. Dad was only a few years removed from his service in The Marines, so he was still in great shape and very athletic. To say he was intense about whatever he did would be an understatement. I remember hearing one of the guys say something like, “*Man, you should try out for the fucking Rams.*” The Rams have bopped around the country over the decades but at the time they were the Los Angeles Rams. As a kid they were my favorite team and their quarterback, Roman Gabriel, was my favorite player. Like many youngsters I wanted to grow up to be a professional football player so you can imagine how proud I was to hear that about Dad!

I’d heard stories about Dad shooting pool and getting in fights from his brothers and other people – how could this tough, tough person suddenly be gone?

Going through some of his old files and photos, I discovered the following that he wrote about his life shortly after turning 79 years old, less than six months from his death:

“And now I am beginning my 80th orbit of the sun. I am happy, I have wonderful memories but along came the COVID19. A virus affecting the world. Again, the world changed. Our economy and those around the world were in free fall in slightly more than thirty days. Hundreds of thousands died of the virus. Eighty years is a long time but as one man said, *‘It was in the blink of the eye.’*”