

BULLET-PROOF FREEMASONRY

What I learned about the Craft in Afghanistan

A first-person account of Masonry in a deployed military lodge that will explore a few lessons the modern Mason and Lodge could learn from this now-rare tradition.

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For those of you that have read my papers or heard me speak before, this is something a little different. I won't be telling any stories, or relaying any anecdotes from my time in Canada Lodge in Kandahar, Afghanistan. What I would like to do here instead is to highlight some of the lessons that I've taken away from my time there. I believe they can be useful and relatable to Masonry in our Lodges back here in Canada.

I've only been in the Craft a few short years, and so I don't pretend to be an expert on its Excellencies as you distinguished brethren no doubt are. What I hope to do here is to merely relay my personal education in the Craft that I received through my own unique (in modern times) experience as a member of a Military Lodge. I would anticipate however, that my personal understanding would not be out of line with what you learned brethren have established in your own Masonic careers.

Here then is a short compilation of some of the lessons I learned in the Craft in Afghanistan, in no particular order.

Keep your sense of Humour.

One of my favourite passages from the VSL is found in the book of Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 verses 1 through 8:

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.”

This passage speaks to the importance of recognizing and maintaining a balance in life. It is necessary for our physical and mental health. War is dark and evil thing for anyone at any time, but especially so for this Canadian boy who grew up in the privileged bubble that is rural Ontario life. For eight long months that felt like eight long years, I lived the evil that is war. This



affects everyone differently. Every time I left the base on a patrol, we would stop just before leaving the gate; we would load our weapons, prepare our grenades, turn on our Electric Counter Measures and prepare to step off. I would look around at the men in my patrol and see how they were prepared emotionally to go out there. I saw a few big grown men, seasoned soldiers shaking like a leaf, not just the first time, but the 50th time and the 100th time out. I was always calm, cool and collected – not because I have nerves of steel, not because I'm stronger mentally, but because of my coping mechanism. You see, in my mind I was already dead. When I stepped onto the aircraft heading to Afghanistan I knew I wasn't coming home. It was only a matter of time until an Improvised Explosive Device got me, whether it was this time or the next time out didn't matter. You can't hurt a dead man. I recently had a conversation with another officer in my unit about how he dealt with the stress of going on foot patrols in Taliban territory. His method was the exact opposite of mine, but to the same effect: he told himself that he was Superman, and that nothing could hurt him. So he too freed his mind to focus on the task at hand. The result was that we were better mentally prepared to focus on the mission at hand and not be distracted by mortal fears. This is a helpful ploy in the situation – but it is clearly delusional, a part of the insanity of war. So where then does the balance come in? For many soldiers there is no balance to be had, and the resulting Operational Stress Injuries (including sometimes PTSD from critical traumatic incidents) are inevitable. I would be lying to you if I told you I came home with no degree of Operational Stress Injury (in fact I think any soldier who has been on operations in a theatre of war would be lying to you if they told you they had no Operational Stress Injury), but I think the degree of my injury was less than it could have been, and the recovery quicker because I was able to find that balance in Lodge. The only laughter I remember from those eight months was with my lodge brethren. Lodge was a world away from everything else there. It was a safe retreat. We chided and teased each other, laughed at ourselves and one another, and regained some of our humanity.

To the Grand Lodge Officers here today I say this: the best support you can ever give to the Canadian Armed Forces is to ensure that we are never deployed again without being afforded the privilege of meeting in a military lodge.

So keep your sense of humour. Bullet-proof Freemasonry is Masonry that reminds us to laugh. Here in Canada too we too often become unbalanced. We are too easily indulged in ourselves, our lives, our work, even with the work of the evening; but when we take time to laugh together we increase the bonds of fellowship. When we laugh at ourselves we break the bonds of narcissism. When we laugh with each other we realize the Chief Point of Masonry which is to be happy ourselves, and to communicate that happiness to others.

Be Flexible

The Worshipful Master is asked at his installation to agree that it is not in the power of man, or any body of men, to make innovations in the Body of Masonry. I say the following carefully, so please hear me out before objecting. There is room for “flexibility” in Masonry without the threat of “innovation” in Masonry.

We have the tendency sometimes to become very rigid in our traditions, which is not necessarily a bad thing, but is not always a good thing either. Sometimes the answer to “why do we do it this way?” is simply “because we always have”. I'm not talking here about our ritual, or our constitution. Of course we did not improvise without Dispensation from Grand Lodge where necessary. Let me give you some examples of how we improvised in Canada Lodge:



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- None of us were there long enough to be elected to and pass Chairs. Solution: the Worshipful appointed Master Masons to serve as required. We had Dispensation for this.
- We didn't have suits and tuxedos. Solution: we wore combat uniforms.
- We could not disarm: Solution: we had our weapons in lodge.
- We had to defend the building in an attack. Solution: we tyled the lodge with an assault rifle instead of a sword.
- We needed to be in contact with our Chain of Command. Solution: we had our cell phones on in lodge.
- We didn't have a hoodwink or a cable tow. Solution: we used a piece of cloth and a rope.
- We didn't have a "convenient room adjoining the lodge". Solution: we put the candidate behind a curtain and had him wear ear phones.

Sometimes we can get hung up on process and forget about results. Bullet-proof Freemasonry is goal oriented, flexible in its approach, all the while staying within due bounds and respecting the ancient landmarks. Masonry has a history of being flexible, but sometimes we forget that fact. If I were to suggest, and don't mistake me here for actually suggesting this, that we hold our next Lodge meeting at the local pub I would fully expect to get several aghast looks and many objections. But in the early days of the Craft that is exactly where many lodges met.

Masonry was spread over the face of the earth my military lodges that would only partially resemble the lodges we know today. These early military lodges were formed by issuing a Warrant to the Commanding Officer of a Regiment, and membership was initially restricted to officers of the regiment. The lodge furniture, ornaments, jewels etc. were limited to what could fit into one chest in order to be transportable as the Regiment deployed to various campaigns. They certainly did not have all the furnishing we enjoy in our lodge rooms today.

Masonry became global because soldiers in military lodges talked to good men about being Masons. We don't recruit, but it's OK to talk about being a Mason. Many of us wear Masonic jewelry, and I find it is often a conversation starter. The fist candidate that was initiated in to Canada Lodge started down the path to initiation when he inquired about my ring. The second candidate similarly started the conversation with another brother. We were not shy of talking about the Craft. Sometimes we don't talk about Masonry because we aren't sure what to say, or how much to say. If we just talk about the parts of it that we really like on a personal level, chances are we'll do just fine. I digress.

My message here is not new or revolutionary. Stay flexible, on a personal and a lodge level, and always with our goal in mind. At the end of the day, if we are doing justice to work and to the Candidate we cannot err.

Live in the Moment

I had the privilege in Canada Lodge of some very deep, personal, real conversations with some incredible men. The bond of brotherhood affords us the luxury of skipping over the superficial, nonconversation conversations and getting right to what truly matters to us as men – our hopes and dreams, our fears and troubles, our weaknesses and shortcomings, and best of all our insights and musings. In short, we can bare our soul on the F. P. of F. to a brother with trust it will be appreciated, safe-guarded and reciprocated. Some of the most beautiful



memories I have of my time in Afghanistan were moments like these, when we lived in the moment.

I want to keep this light, so I won't go on here to tell you the stories of the times when following a genuine heart-to-heart conversation I never saw a brother again, but I do wish to highlight the fact that it happened to convey a point. I never once regretting taking the time to be there in the moment, in fact (quite the opposite) the sting of loss was sometimes lessened because I could without regrets recall our deepest conversations and cherish them.

Perhaps it was easier in the environment of a deployed Lodge to be in the moment. Our minds were sharply trained to remain singularly focused by the task of war at hand, and perhaps when we took our reprieve in lodge or in fellowship we were better able to maintain that focus. This is a habit that I have tried to carry on back home.

We live in a multi-tasking world. There are always multiple proverbial irons in the fire and we are continuously planning our next move(s). Many times I have caught myself in conversation with someone only half listening, all the while solving a pressing issue or planning the next day. I believe we are all guilty of this from time to time.

Bullet-proof Masonry teaches us to stay in the moment. Time moves too quickly as it is. We go through so many motions throughout our daily lives, and looking back we wonder where the time went because we were hardly there to remember it. When the senses are heightened by danger, when milliseconds count, time slows down and we are forced to be present in the moment. When we open lodge we go through a group meditative process of singularly focusing on the same thing. It brings us together – into the moment. How much more meaningful would our personal encounters, connections and friendships be if we made a habit of carrying this single-minded focus forward and employing it when we engage in fellowship. We will only live this life once. Rather than hurling ourselves mentally ever forward to tomorrow's self we can be a more complete fulfillment of this present self by living in the moment.

Employ and Instruct the Brethren in Masonry

Master Masons want to be put to work in the Craft, and they want to be instructed in the Mysteries and Privileges of Ancient Freemasonry. We were very lucky in Kandahar to have a Worshipful Master who put us to work. If you were a Master Mason attending Canada Lodge, without fail you would be assigned degree work, assigned a chair for the meeting, assigned as Secretary, assigned as a Mentor and more. Sometimes we didn't know at the time that we wanted the work, but in retrospect I wouldn't have had it any other way. We have a natural propensity to sit back and watch, thinking that we can learn all we need to know by watching others do the work; and while we can certainly learn some things by watching others work, we learn the most by doing the work ourselves. One can certainly learn a lot about cutting, squaring and laying stone by watching someone else do it, but one will certainly not become an expert workman until practicing it for oneself.

One of the risks that we face when we let our Master Masons sit on the side is that they can sort of peak in terms of their progression in Masonic knowledge and the value they are getting for attending lodge, and they can start to drift away. How many potential William Mercer Wilson recipients, how many Worshipful Masters and District Deputy Grand Masters have we let drift away from our Lodges because we didn't engage them, challenge them, and set them to work? You don't have to take "No" for an answer if you don't offer it as an option. Don't ask for volunteers or ask for work to be completed in a way that can be answered with a binary positive



or negative response! Those of us in leadership positions in our professional lives delegate, supervise and follow up. Why should we approach leadership in the lodge any differently?

Let me be clear here on what I am advocating. I am not advocating that we force our members to become officers in the lodge and progress through the chairs. Officers in the lodge should be chosen by a combination of self-identification as well as by the senior leadership of the lodge identifying leadership potential in a member and mentoring that leadership. What I am advocating is that every member of the lodge possible be assigned to a committee, be assigned degree work, be assigned research.

The experience of living Masonry in a war zone has provided the extreme example of the exercise of Masonry, the lessons of which can be applied here at home in a more moderate sense. If every member of the lodge does not engage, the lodge cannot exist. Conversely, if every member of the lodge is engaged it is guaranteed to result in an experience which has no parallel in the profane world. This is the burden of leadership. We, the Master Masons of the Craft, look to the Masters of our lodges for leadership. Employ and Instruct us in Masonry. Look well to the East.

Masonry, and Masons, Thrive under Pressure

Most of us don't like pressure, or at least we think we don't like pressure, but pressure can be a good thing sometimes and Masons have shown that they excel in this environment. When we absolutely must do something we find a way to make it happen. Canada Lodge as a whole was a great example of this, and so were its individual members. This is perhaps good point to follow on the last one. Masons can learn the Junior Wardens lecture and the Final Charge in a matter of a couple of days, Masons who don't really speak English can learn work and participate in a degree in English, Masons can deliver on-demand a piece of work they haven't delivered in years, Masons can conduct degrees in the middle of firefights. I know this because I have seen it happen.

Masonry is a journey of self discovery. In the Second Degree we learn that there is a sacred symbol located in the Centre. While there certainly is a sacred symbol located in the centre of our lodge room, this however represents our Centre. Over the doors of the ancient mystery temples were often the words enscribed "know thyself", and so Masonry, like the ancient mysteries is a journey to one's own Centre. On this journey of self discovery we find the Divine spark at our Centre. We find that we have a strength within us that we were previously unaware that we possessed. The possible becomes possible, "I can't" becomes "I must", and in situations where others might shy away and give up the Mason grounded within himself perseveres, carries on and triumphs. What greater a moment of self discovery than to accomplish something you did not think possible before? You have all no doubt seen this before in your lodges: the man who could not previously stand and speak without being overcome by the terror of it now boldly stands and commands our attention, the man who before could not remember a line is now an accomplished ritualist. Masonry makes good men better, not because it imparts some outside influence or power, but because it encourages him to harness the power he already possesses within.

Sometimes a little pressure is a good thing because it forces us out of our comfort zone and prompts us to make that journey to our Centre. Masonry thrives when Masons thrive, and they do that best under pressure.



Summary

I trust I have not introduced you to any new concepts today, as this was simply not my intent. Rather I hope I have reinforced for you some of the Beauties of Masonry that you are already expert in. I hope that if I have left you with anything it is an impression of how Masonry in a combat zone has given me a new appreciation for and understanding of our Gentle Craft. I hope also that it can give you a new zeal and passion for Masonry at home, in your lodge.

~ THE END ~

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Brother Curry is a Member of The Beaches Lodge No. 473 in Toronto. He also belongs to a number of concordant Masonic bodies. He was a founding member of Canada Lodge UD, GRC, a military lodge in Kandahar, and was the first Junior Warden of that lodge. He can be reached at Joseph.Curry1@gmail.com

