

## Young Men Want To Be Heroes: Let's Help Them Do It Right

*Dr. Christopher B. Howard, President, Hampden-Sydney College*

There is a wonderful line from an old movie—where the protagonist proclaims, “This time it’s personal”—which sums up my feelings about Lea Carpenter’s somber yet moving new novel, *Eleven Days*. In many ways, her book is more ode than novel—an ode to manhood, to motherhood, to the modern warrior, and, perhaps most compelling, an ode to heroics. The personal connection comes from sitting next to Lea during our first year of graduate school, from my friendship with Casey Joyce, who served valiantly in the Battle of Mogadishu twenty years ago, and from my daily interaction with college men who yearn to act heroically. I argue we should help them do it right. But it’s personal for me mostly because it speaks to an idea that lies at the heart of the work of the Franklin Project: the concept of universal national service. I am convinced that young women share many of these aspirations; however, it is our men who seem to be struggling.

Lea, the mother of two, once told me that she wanted to raise her boys to be “good men” like her father, a decorated serviceman. At the book’s onset, we hear Sara Washington exploring the idea that her newborn son, Jason, could someday be “heroic.” At that time, Sara, a product of parents of a certain generation, limits heroic to mean only “someone who helped people or created things.” When Jason forgoes Harvard for the Naval Academy and life as a Navy SEAL, she wrestles with the idea of heroism, sacrifice, and service in a way only a mother could. Sara harbors some preconceived notions of what heroic men do, but Jason’s decision to serve in special operations challenges these notions.

Even before Lea and I were classmates, thirty years ago in a Texas town just north of Dallas, I would share rides to and from football practice with my friend Casey Joyce. We not only played the same position, running back, but we also shared the enviable fact that our fathers—at least in our eyes—were war heroes. Both had served in Vietnam, mine as a combat engineer and his in Special Forces. Casey spent a few years in college and ultimately signed up for stint with the Army Rangers. I thought of these car rides years later when, while serving as young lieutenant on special assignment at NATO headquarters, I received a phone call from my mother. Casey had been killed in action along with 17 other soldiers in Somalia. His mother asked me to speak on behalf of Casey’s high school classmates at a ceremony to rename the local VFW in his honor. Among those present that day was Master Sergeant Matt Eversmann, Casey’s platoon leader and former Student Court Chairman at Hampden-Sydney College, where I now serve as president. I can’t recall precisely what I said but I certainly sang the praises of those who choose to serve others . . . to act heroically.

As boys and even as young men, males often want to slay dragons, literally and figuratively. Comic books and video games seem to scratch an insatiable itch to address this yearning. I think the non-stop release of superhero movies also derives from this sentiment. Sara’s understanding of “heroic” was originally not of a dragon-slayer but rather “a surgeon or even architect.” With all the references to military service, some may find it ironic that I think it is quite appropriate that we as a society don’t simply confine the idea of hero to one who earns his way to significance with knives, swords, bullets, or guns. Doing so nurtures the unhealthy construct of masculinity often referred to by academics as hyper or false; you and I simply call it “macho.”

I credit Lea for her nuanced representation of today’s warrior-special operator as being thoughtful, cerebral, and team-oriented, unlike the

one-dimensional shoot-em types we see (and our sons worship) in today’s popular culture. The ethos of those willing to put their life in harm’s way for something greater than themselves does, however, deserve a privileged position on the mantel. Not every young person is destined for combat action, but each one ascends to another level of humanity when sacrificing for others. Young men regardless of their station in life want, as former Wabash College president Pat White once said, “to be their own hero in their own comic book.” The Hampden-Sydney student who ran into a burning building to save his classmate and the other who started an after-school program for at-risk middle school boys represent the desire of the millennial generation to act heroically: We can help.

As educators, parents, and mentors we ought to harness that yearning for heroics for the greater good. Let’s start by supporting one of the most important warriors of our time, General Stan McChrystal, and the Franklin Project at the Aspen Institute, where he and prominent leaders from across civil society are advocating for a National Service System to engage at least one million young adults annually as an American civic rite of passage.

A 21st Century National Service System will:

- Link military & civilian service as two sides of the same coin
- Challenge young adults (ages 18 to 28) to give a year of full-time service to their country
- Establish a national service corps
- Strengthen & expand programs like the Peace Corps, VISTA, & AmeriCorps
- Call upon the support of the private sector, industry groups, & professional associations
- Partner with colleges, community organizations, & faith-based institutions
- Ask federal departments to use national service members to accomplish their missions.

I encourage all organizations and individuals charged with raising boys and educating men to ask questions and promote understanding of the “heroic” in the broadest sense and to support this important initiative.

Lea and I were sitting next to one another in class when I received a call from the US Air Force that I had been called up from the reserves to active duty. Originally headed to Iraq, my call-up was postponed for a year, at which time I shipped out to Afghanistan. Landing on the tarmac at Bagram Air Base in a blacked-out C-130, I thought about my father, about Casey, and about being heroic. Had *Eleven Days* been written by then, I am sure I would also have been thinking about Jason and Sara too.



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