

For Lt. Col. **Greg Gadson** everything changed in one blinding-white flash. But he is living proof that it's **not what happens to you** that defines your life; it's **what you do about it.**

the golden hour

By Bill
Beausay

Photography by Micah Kandros

It's called "The Golden Hour."

If you can get an injured soldier to a hospital within one hour of a trauma, the chances of survival are dramatically increased.

But on May 7, 2007, that was the last thing on the mind of Lt. Col. Greg Gadson, commander of 2nd Battalion, 32nd Field Artillery (headquartered in Camp Liberty, Baghdad), as he returned from a memorial service for two soldiers killed in action. It had been an emotional farewell to good men. Greg felt tired as his Humvee rolled along a well-used highway on a clear spring evening.

Suddenly Greg saw a blinding-white flash and heard a muffled blast. He felt himself hurtling through open space, landing with a thud, then rolling through a nightmare of sound and dust and blood. Greg's armored Humvee, third in a convoy of four, was now rolling down the road like a smoking tin can, everyone aboard except him.



“Where’s my rifle?” was Greg’s first thought. Insurgents always shoot at dazed and wounded soldiers. He felt around. No gun.

Then the surreal scene got worse. Greg couldn’t move. His mind began to blur. He whispered, “God, I don’t want to die in this country.”

He was bleeding out.

Nearly an hour had passed since the IED (improvised explosive device) exploded. The Golden Hour was coming to a close. Through tears and terrible shaking, Greg pleaded to his brigade commander to tell his wife and kids that he loved them. Then he felt the windy backwash of a medevac helicopter hovering somewhere in the darkness overhead.

Four days later Greg was admitted to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, unconscious. When he did awake, he learned that his life had been saved numerous times, first by 1st Sgt. Frederick Johnson and Pvt. Eric C. Brown in that field back in Baghdad, then by a string of heroic physicians who kept him alive with 70 pints of Type O-positive blood and other blood products (approximately 16 gallons total), constant intensive care, and surgeries.

Thankfully Greg’s wife, Kim, was by his side, because he was about to face the worst news of all: His legs were shredded. Greg had to make unthinkable decisions about whether he wanted to face years of medical trauma with his maimed legs or have them removed. They don’t teach you how to make those decisions at West Point. Greg chose amputation.

A real-life GI Joe, Greg’s life had been a parade of commitments, hard work, and success: a West Point grad; a linebacker on the Army football team; a commissioned officer, a 20-year veteran with tours in Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq; a decorated battalion commander. As a soldier, Greg had no interest in the sort of heroism that involved getting maimed. In his own mind he was a normal and healthy 41-year-old guy who wanted to get his job done, return home, and be a husband to Kim and dad to Gabriella and Jaelen. Suddenly he was facing a lifetime of uncertainties.

Greg quickly discovered that losing his legs was a terrible and complicated recipe of bad emotions mixed with self-image and self-esteem struggles, all cooked together in a pot of self-pity and constant, excruciating pain. What prepares someone for this? The truth is, nothing can. The choice for Greg was stark: lie there and feel sorry for himself, or climb a lonely and difficult mountain.

Greg chose to climb.



Through 18 surgeries (and counting), painful rehab, the constant tingling pain of radial and ulna nerve damage in his arm, backaches, wheelchairs, prosthetic legs, and endless inconvenience, Greg climbed. And as he climbed, he learned what’s important.

“I do hope and pray that my experience has left me a better man,” Greg says. “[Before the explosion], I never considered myself an advertisement for Christ. But everybody has within the power to overcome challenges. This is promised to all of us in the Bible. I didn’t get what I wanted in my life, but you have to come to terms with God’s will, and sometimes you have to have your eyes forced open to recognize that. I remember lying there and simply asking God to let me live. I wish I could tell you that before this experience I prayed every day, but I didn’t. Yet, at the time of my injury, I had to call on God in a new way. My eyes were opened and my faith engaged. In a way, it was my real Golden Hour.

“There were very dark times,” Greg admits. “There are no shortcuts on this climb. You have to contend with whatever God has for you. Was I depressed? Of course. Did I hate? I can honestly say that I did not. I asked God why it happened, but I didn’t blame. That’s what makes Christianity different from other faiths. I released that burden from my heart, and I did it early on. To truly move on means you have to truly forgive. Just let it go.”

This letting go includes releasing expectations. “I had to adjust to a new kind of normal,” Greg explains. “You’ve gotta fight to do your best no matter what unexpected challenges you face. Your life can change in a Baghdad minute, as mine did. Tomorrow isn’t promised, so you must act to do your best with today, no matter what God has in store for you.

“Less than one percent of the population serves in the armed services, so most people have little experience understanding what goes on when someone is killed or maimed in battle,” Greg says. “The effects on a family are just as explosive as the effects that bomb had on my legs. Whenever you hear of a casualty, a family is literally missing someone. War injuries and death affect everybody and everything in those families, and the pain is exponential, rolling on like a wave for generations. It’s hard to fathom this unless you’ve been there, but these people need your help, your support, and your constant prayers. Say ‘thanks’ to them and to any wounded vet you encounter. Consider it someone’s Golden Hour — and that your action is the difference between them making it or not.”

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Heroes in Action

Below are agencies and groups that are heroes in Lt. Col. Greg Gadson’s eyes. Please support and encourage them.

- ▶ Wounded Warrior Project: woundedwarriorproject.org
- ▶ Disabled Sports USA: dsusa.org
- ▶ Vail Veterans: vailveteransprogram.com
- ▶ Segs4Vets: draft.org
- ▶ VetDogs: vetdogs.org



Eli Manning of the New York Giants celebrates with honorary captain, U.S. Army Lt. Col. Greg Gadson and son Jaelen after the Giants defeated the New England Patriots 17-14 during Super Bowl XLII on February 3, 2008.



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A Giant Influence

During the 2007-08 professional football season, the New York Giants called upon Greg Gadson to provide a series of motivational speeches for the team. He was personally invited by his friend and former Army football teammate Mike Sullivan, wide receivers coach of the Giants. Mike had recently been informed of Greg's horrific experience and thought that perhaps his words might provide some motivation to the team destined to play the undefeated New England Patriots in the Super Bowl.

Greg's words, spoken without notes, rocked the Giants: "You have an obligation not only to your employer but to each other to do your best. You're playing for each other. When you find a way to do things greater than you thought you could, something you couldn't do as an individual, a bond is formed that will last forever.

"It's not about what happens to you in life," he said. "It's about what you do about it. It's about making the most of all your opportunities, because I'm here to tell you, it can end in a flash."

You could have heard a pin drop as Greg spoke. Then a standing ovation. They named Greg honorary co-captain of the team.

The Giants went on to win Super Bowl XLII. Greg watched the game from his wheelchair with the Giants team by his side. Today he is the proud owner of a Super Bowl ring.

"Greg is a powerful man with a powerful spirit," said Giants head coach Tom Coughlin. "And that is really what he gave us: the idea that the spirit rises above all these adverse conditions." □

Lt. Col. Gadson is currently studying for a master's degree in policy management at Georgetown University and actively petitioning the U.S. Army to continue his service to our country as a fully commissioned officer.

OTHER AMERICAN HEROES



photo by CHUCK HOLTON

Life-Changing Mission

If it were not for the uniform and helmet, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Staff Sgt. Layla Elbel would have no trouble passing as the quintessential American girl. That is, until she opens her mouth and starts speaking fluent Arabic. Her parents are American missionaries, and Elbel grew up in Jerusalem,

where she attended Arabic school until the eighth grade. Elbel joined the Army after high school and was sent to Iraq as a translator.

Elbel's job gave her the opportunity to talk with Iraqi citizens on a daily basis. "Many cannot thank us enough for what the American soldiers have done in removing Saddam Hussein," she says. "They have a hope and a mission to accomplish now."

Elbel did her job so well Special Operations recruiters and government agencies wanted her. But "I've chosen against pursuing [these offers], because my faith in Christ has given me a passion for something different," Elbel says. "I've met some Iraqi women, and to the Western world they have no hope. The fact that I could not freely express to them the hope and freedom that Jesus Christ has given me has been painful." A few months after her return from Iraq, Elbel chose to leave the Army to pursue another mission — working to bring freedom of a different kind to Arabic-speaking people.



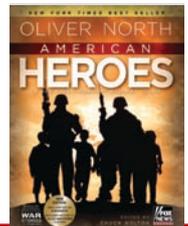
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

The Ultimate Sacrifice

Courage is often the ultimate in self-sacrifice, as the following words, taken from the Medal of Honor citation for Marine Cpl. Jason Dunham, attest:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty, Cpl. Dunham wrestled an attacking insurgent to the ground and in the ensuing struggle saw the insurgent release a grenade. Cpl. Dunham immediately alerted his fellow Marines to the threat. Aware of the imminent danger and without hesitation, Cpl. Dunham covered the grenade with his helmet and body, bearing the brunt of the explosion and shielding his Marines from the blast. In an ultimate and selfless act of bravery in which he was mortally wounded, he saved the lives of at least two fellow Marines. By his undaunted courage, intrepid fighting spirit, and unwavering devotion to duty, Cpl. Dunham gallantly gave his life for his country.

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Bill Beausay is a psychotherapist who has long been involved in psychology. He is the author of *True Greatness: Mastering the Inner Game of Business Success* (AMACON).