

**“FIVE FLAGS FLYING”**

By “Coach Gary” Micheloni

My hometown is Oceanside, CA. Ask anyone about it, and two things associated with the city come to mind: The ocean—obviously! And Camp Pendleton—of course. So, when news first surfaced of the crash in Mississippi of a KC-130T Hercules airplane, it hit our city, still a ‘Marine town’, particularly hard. Sixteen lives lost: fifteen Marines and one Navy corpsman.

The proper thing to do with my column this month might just be to end things right here and ask all of you to take a moment of silence, and pay tribute to these warriors. Maybe we will, as I honestly don’t know how this piece will end. But that’s not what my neighbors did, and I’d like to share that with you.

Directly across the street from me, a flag was flying at half-staff. I don’t have a flagpole, but do have a flag, so I went back into the house, grabbed mine, and put it up. And then, for some reason I looked around and, from my driveway on our little cul de sac, I counted five flags flying. Actually, within about a hundred yards there were a few more. I counted eight of them as I drove away to do ‘battle’ in the much-tamer world of construction.

But I should add this: as crazy as our world is today, I had no concern for the safety of my family and home because I am so aware of the presence of our military, here and abroad, providing the security we all rely upon. I’m an admirer of their dedication.

I returned home later that day none the worse for wear, and in much better shape and spirits than those of the 16 families who had just experienced the sacrifice of their loved ones upon that worthy altar of freedom.

So, a bit later I was thinking about those sacrifices, sure, and also about the long road of training that any professional—be it soldier or contractor or whatever—of preparation toward excellence. How does a guy or gal achieve those levels of skill, maturity and wisdom necessary to survive and thrive in their professions? Well, I’m just a bit prejudiced, but some of that achievement can come from coaching.

But ol’ Coach Gary is not necessarily talking about football and baseball and soccer coaches of a bygone era—athletics alone. That would be too simplistic. I’m talking about all of the coaches almost everyone

has ever had in their lives. That said, who are the 'coaches' in your life? Mine would include teachers, some family members, a couple of drill sergeants from my basic training days, a group of guys I meet with every week and not only hold me accountable, but teach me about life. How about you?

Let me make you a deal: I'll tell you about a couple of mine, but I'd like to hear from you about an important coach in your life who contributed a lot to make you the person you are today. Like you, probably, there are a couple of dozen I could single out, so it's difficult to only name one or two for your own personal 'Coach of the Year' award. But start thinking, because I'm going to introduce you to mine.

My two coaches are both men, neither one a college graduate, but I consider each to be among the wisest I have ever known. One did his best to keep me alive. The other taught me all I really needed to know about life.

Drill Sergeant Strong. My first runner-up, I met him for the first time while visiting Texas, having been invited there by my uncle. To clarify, the invitation came from my Uncle Sam who thought it would be a good idea if I would take my 20-year-old, know-it-all self, to Fort Bliss, Texas. This event was to last eight weeks, during the Texas summer, and was designed to get me into the best shape of my life.

Let me just say that I did not at all distinguish myself during basic training! Three years of college had not prepared me physically, which was a concern, because back in 1967 the Vietnam War was really heating up. The nation was fixated on the lives lost each week by U.S. military members. [Lest we forget, 58,220 of our sons and daughters were lost.]

We were losing hundreds of our military every month, so I was doing all I could to give myself the best chance I had to survive. And in the midst of all of this chaos and confusion, Drill Sergeant Strong, who had already served a combat tour in Vietnam, gathered the entire training company around him, and shared this bit of wisdom: "Remember, gentlemen, that death is a very permanent thing." He got my attention. He knew the reality of war and had a passion to make us as prepared for it as he possibly could. You can't ask for more in a coach than that.

Number one on my list is my Uncle Bud, probably the most practical man I have ever known. Wise beyond words, he came from the 'Greatest Generation'. As such, he valued savings, hated debt. Never bought a new car in his life, allowing him to support a number of worthy causes which, in turn, changed the lives of many others. He was so physically fit, even well into his retirement it was amazing. In fact, he was near 90, paddling his kayak, when a stroke took him.

But he had a teachable moment, which has stayed with me some 40 years now. He taught me not only the meaning of life, but even the importance of the meaning of words. Funny, because this self-made man, with barely a high school education, schooled me on something this college boy should have known. In this case, it was the meaning of the word 'prejudice'.

We were having a discussion on the politics of the day and that word came up. Uncle Bud asked me if I even knew the meaning of it. "Gary, what does prejudice mean?" Sheepishly, I came up with a definition hardly worthy of a middle-schooler, fixating on its use as a pejorative term. Frustrated, he said, "Gary, it simply means that you have made up your mind before you have even seen the evidence." I was such an idiot. His common sense trumped my bachelor's degree, for sure! Just one small example out of many—trust me.

It comforts me to know, deep in my heart, that all of these tragically lost had a "Drill Sergeant Strong or an Uncle Bud" in their own lives. Likely, they each had a full chorus of supporting coaches, teachers, family and friends, as well, otherwise the Sixteen wouldn't have become the fine people they doubtlessly were.