



The Value of Service

Commentary by Lt. Col. Mark Murphy
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8/15/2008 - **EIELSON AIR FORCE BASE, Alaska** -- I learned a big lesson on service Aug. 4, 2008, when Eielson had the rare honor of hosting President Bush on a refueling stop as he traveled to Asia.

It was an event Eielson will never forget -- a hangar full of Airmen and Soldiers getting to see the Commander in Chief up close, and perhaps even shaking his hand. An incredible amount of effort goes into presidential travel because of all of the logistics, security, protocol, etc ... so it was remarkable to see Air Force One land at Eielson on time at precisely 4:30 p.m.--however, when he left less than two hours later, the President was 15 minutes behind schedule.

That's a big slip for something so tightly choreographed, but very few people know why it happened. Here's why.

On Dec. 10, 2006, our son, Shawn, was a paratrooper deployed on the outskirts of Baghdad. He was supposed to spend the night in camp, but when a fellow soldier became ill Shawn volunteered to take his place on a nighttime patrol--in the convoy's most exposed position as turret gunner in the lead Humvee. He was killed instantly with two other soldiers when an IED ripped through their vehicle.

I was thinking about that as my family and I sat in the audience listening to the President's speech, looking at the turret on the up-armored Humvee the explosive ordnance disposal flight had put at the edge of the stage as a static display.

When the speech was over and the President was working the crowd line, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see a White House staff member. She asked me and my wife to come with her, because the President wanted to meet us.

Stunned, we grabbed our two sons that were with us and followed her back into a conference room. It was a shock to go from a crowded, noisy hangar, past all of those security people, to find ourselves suddenly alone in a quiet room.

The only thing we could hear was a cell phone vibrating, and noticed that it was coming from the jacket Senator Stevens left on a chair. We didn't answer.

A short time later, the Secret Service opened the door and President Bush walked in. I thought we might get to shake his hand as he went through. But instead, he walked up to my wife with his arms wide, pulled her in for a hug and a kiss, and said, "I wish I could heal the hole in your heart." He then grabbed me for a hug, as well as each of our sons. Then he turned and said, "Everybody out."

A few seconds later, the four of us were completely alone behind closed doors with the President of the United States and not a Secret Service agent in sight.

He said, "Come on, let's sit down and talk." He pulled up a chair at the side of the room, and we sat down next to him. He looked a little tired from his trip, and he noticed that his shoes were scuffed up from leaning over concrete barriers to shake hands and pose for photos. He slumped down the chair, completely relaxed, smiled, and suddenly was no longer the President - he was just a guy with a job, sitting around talking with us like a family member at a barbeque.

For the next 15 or 20 minutes, he talked with us about our son, Iraq, his family, faith, convictions, and shared his feelings about nearing the end of his presidency. He asked each of our teenaged sons what they wanted to do in life and counseled them to set goals, stick to their convictions, and not worry about being the "cool" guy.



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He said that he'd taken a lot of heat during his tenure and was under a lot of pressure to do what's politically expedient, but was proud to say that he never sold his soul. Sometimes he laughed, and at others he teared up. He said that what he'll miss most after leaving office will be his role as Commander in Chief.

One of the somber moments was when he thanked us for the opportunity to meet, because he feels a heavy responsibility knowing that our son died because of a decision he made. He was incredibly humble, full of warmth, and completely without pretense. We were seeing the man his family sees.

We couldn't believe how long he was talking to us, but he seemed to be in no hurry whatsoever. In the end, he thanked us again for the visit and for the opportunity to get off his feet for a few minutes. He then said, "Let's get some pictures." The doors flew open, Secret Service and the White House photographer came in, and suddenly he was the President again. We posed for individual pictures as he gave each of us one of his coins, and then he posed for family pictures. A few more thank yous, a few more hugs, and he was gone.

The remarkable thing about the whole event was that he didn't have to see us at all. If he wanted to do more, he could've just given a quick handshake and said, "Thanks for your sacrifice." But he didn't - he put everything and everyone in his life on hold to meet privately with the family of a Private First Class who gave his life in the service of his country.

What an incredible lesson on service. If the President of the United States is willing to drop everything on his plate to visit with a family, surely the rest of us can do it. No one is above serving another person, and no one is so lofty that he or she can't treat others with dignity and respect.

We often think of service in terms of sacrificing ourselves for someone in a position above us, but how often do we remember that serving someone below us can be much more important? If you're in a leadership capacity, take a good look at how you're treating your people, and remember that your role involves serving the people you rely on every day.