The Point: Combat Survival School

by Bill Handren

“Through humor, you can soften some of the worst blows that life delivers. And once you find laughter, no matter how painful your situation might be, you can survive it.”.....Bill Cosby

Fort Sill. The rocky foothills of Oklahoma. Geronimo was a prisoner of war here. Home to rattlesnakes, scorpions, and the site for USAF Combat Survival School. It was the last two days of the course: SERE. Survival, Escape, Resistance and Evasion. Not a fun time. The goal of SERE was to avoid capture, but the cards were stacked against the teams. We were given pre-determined checkpoints which we had to reach without being captured and we had to make the checkpoints by a certain time. But, no one ever made it to all the checkpoints. Our team did pretty well, being the last team captured. Now, it was off to the concentration camp to be interrogated.
The goal of interrogation was to make the prisoner sign a confession to war crimes. I asked someone who had gone though the training as to how many sign the confession. He said everyone eventually does. When I asked what happens after that, he said nothing happens - the interrogators just release you and you get some hot food, coffee, cigarettes and sit around a campfire to warm up.

There was no sense of time in these last two days, only exhaustion. All I knew was it was very early in the morning, maybe two a.m. when we were tossed out of the truck like unwanted luggage. I noticed the campfire was rather crowded. About a third of those captured had signed the confessions while another third was being tortured. We made up part of the final third and were to stand at attention with a few others as we waited for the Camp Commandant to "greet" us.

Then it happened, the smell of coffee coming from the campfire. Really, really good smelling coffee. That's when the Maxwell House Coffee jingle started playing in my head. Many will remember the famous jingle which was part of a national ad campaign in the sixties. The music notes matched the drops of coffee as they percolated.

We stood at attention for maybe an hour before the Commandant opened his tent, making a grand entrance. He was wearing a uniform with so much decoration, he looked as if he'd spent a thousand dollars buying medals at the military surplus store.

The Commandant launched into a tirade; "You @#$% Airmen. You come to our country pretending to be our friends. You aren't our @#$% friends. You are our enemies." He worked in profanity like an artist works in watercolors. "Friends? Ha! Just a bunch of @#$% thugs and devils who say they want to be our friends."

Standing next to me was a little guy who was shaking. I couldn't figure out why at the time, it wasn't really that cold. It didn't dawn on me he was terrified.

The Maxwell House jingle kept playing, the Commandant kept screaming, the little guy kept shaking.

Suddenly, after twenty minutes of profane ridicule, the Commandant grew quiet. "I'm not a bad man. I really am lonely. I long for peace....for friendship. Does anyone want to be my friend? Anyone? Anyone?" He moved up and down the lines of we prisoners asking for a friend.

To my horror, the little shaking guy was leaning forward trying to get the Commandant's attention. "No!!," I thought to myself. The Commandant was hunting for his first victim; someone to make an example of. I started to reach for the little guy when all of a sudden, his eyes as big as silver dollars shining in the moonlight, and at the top of his lungs, my co-prisoner shouted: "I'll be your friend!!!!"

I lost it. I busted out laughing. Not a little laugh. A full blown knee-slapper. A laugh that echoed off the giant boulders in this God forsaken place. Uh, oh. Big mistake.

Four Air Combat Controllers were on me in an instant, screaming at the top of their lungs. "You think this is @#$% funny?" The Maxwell House jingle kept playing in my head. "Do you know how many Airmen are prisoners of war, you stupid @#$%?" Another whiff of coffee. I really tried hard to keep a straight face, but it happened again - I started laughing. The Commandant was livid. I thought his head would explode any minute as he screamed in my face. Nope, I just couldn't stop - every few seconds, a suppressed laugh sneaked out. Funny thing, was two of the instructors had to turn their heads because they had started to laugh as well.

Ok, so what does this have to do with karate? Nothing really. It has to do with seeing humor in dire times. It's knowing hard times are temporary and if one tries hard enough, humor can be found in the circumstance. And that laughter becomes contagious in a way.

Last month, four Air Combat Controllers lost their lives along with several members of SEAL Team Six when their helicopter was shot down over Afghanistan. I was reminded of how different my life could have turned out. Of how fortunate I was.

What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger.

Karate has been my anchor through many a storm. A constant where I can lose myself. A moment where I sort those things which will pass from those things which are truly important. I would never trade the hard times. They give me the ability to put things in perspective. The loss of a job, a home or a fortune can all be replaced. As long as you have your loved ones, hard times are only a temporary inconvenience.