

From Skip's Story

Chapter 3 | FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

Grace as a theological concept is interesting; as an experience, it's life-changing. ANONYMOUS

Following two semesters at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, my vocational future remained a blank. As a junior I had to select a major, but with no clear direction, and after receiving a notice from my draft board, I decided to let Uncle Sam pay me to figure out my calling in life. I volunteered for the draft, went through Basic and Advanced Infantry Training at Fort Ord, California, and then started officer training.

On a hot August day in 1964, 225 new Officer Candidate School (OCS) students filed into the auditorium of the Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Taking our seats in the tiered rows of plastic chairs with their fold-down Formica desktops, we focused our curious eyes on the stage below and the uniformed man standing behind the podium. After welcoming us, the commanding officer of the Infantry School continued, "Take a look at the person on your left and on your right. On graduation day, one of you is not going to be here. You will either quit because the program is too hard, or you'll be sent back to the ranks because we've decided you're not leadership material."

A shaft of fear shot through me. What if they find out? I had led coed groups in school and youth groups in church, but this wasn't school, and this wasn't church, and the group I was being trained to lead was definitely not coed. We're now talking about men, many of whom would be tougher and stronger than me and even some who would be older, and I was supposed to lead them? My concept of a *leader of men* was someone like a tall, strong, and unflappable John Wayne of twentieth-century movie renown, or a brilliant, rough, and driven General ("blood and guts") George Patton of World War II fame. I was neither of them. I felt like a soft and easygoing Robin Williams auditioning for the lead in a muscle-bound Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. Lured by the status, pay, and responsibility of an officer, I had neglected to process intellectually what was now revealing itself emotionally: I wasn't prepared for this job. Having embarked on it, I wouldn't quit, but I was scared they'd discover what I already knew: I *wasn't* a leader of men.

During our six-month course, everyone in our platoon of fifty men would be a squad leader four or five times, but a platoon leader and assistant platoon leader only once. After our stints, those over us and under us evaluated our performances, but only our tactical officer saw those evaluations.

I had no problem being a squad leader since I simply passed on the orders of the platoon leader. It was the same with the position of assistant platoon leader. Two-thirds of the way through the course, however, my stomach tightened when I saw the assignments for the next three days: Platoon Leader—Skip Schwarz. No more conveying someone else's orders, I would be in charge.

The night before I took over, I called my squad leaders together. *Initiative* would be on my leadership evaluations. *If I can ace that*, I thought, *I just might make it*.

"Okay men, here's what we're going to do," I said, enthusiasm masking my fears.

"First of all, we're going to spit-shine the floors of our rooms like we used to do. Secondly, I want cardboard inserts put back in the sleeves of the fatigue shirts hanging in our lockers so that the creases will be sharp for inspections. Thirdly, I'm going to have some charts made up showing how we're organized and how everyone is progressing in their qualifications. Fourthly, it's been a while since we've painted the stairwell, so I thought it'd look great if we did that again."

I expected my enthusiasm to be contagious. Whenever someone did this on TV or in the movies, people could hardly wait to follow. Instead, my ideas evoked a collective groan. "What?" "Are you kidding?" "Do we *have* to?" These ideas weren't new—we'd already done them at the beginning of the course. Our initial zeal, however, had long since fallen victim to sixteen-hour days filled with physical training, marches, running,

classes, studying, plus the ever-present harassment (“Why are you looking at me like that, Candidate Schwarz? Is there something wrong with my looks, Candidate Schwarz? You don’t *like* my looks, Candidate Schwarz? Drop and give me twenty. Now! Too slow, Schwarz, make that forty!”). Now in our sixteenth week—two-thirds of the way through the course—our initial zeal had long since fallen victim to exhaustion.

“Okay,” I said to my squad leaders, “let me think it over. I’ll get back to you in the morning.”

After they left, I walked down the hall to the small meditation room on every floor. I used to go in there, pray, and come out with a smile on my face because Christians were supposed to be happy. Sitting down in a large vinyl upholstered chair, I pondered my options. I could either please the tactical officer or please the men. With embarrassing clarity, I remember my decision: *The tactical officer keeps me in the program, the men don’t, so I’ll go after him, and to hell with the men.*

The next morning I called my squad leaders together and told them that my ideas were now orders. I expected reluctant compliance, but instead there arose a chorus of dissent. I tried to quell the storm with pep talks, but my unwillingness to bend guaranteed their failure. A strategy designed to keep me *in* the program now threatened to get me kicked out. I panicked. As stated in one evaluation, “He got on his horse and rode off in all directions at once.” I responded to the men’s anger with my own, and by the time my three-day tour was up, I had successfully alienated the whole platoon. I’d walk up to a group, and they’d walk away. I’d sit next to someone in the cafeteria, and he’d move down a few feet. It sent chills up my spine. The only person who talked to me—because he had to—was my roommate. It was my first experience with group rejection. My response? *If that’s the way they want to be about it, then to hell with them, I don’t need them anyway.* Or so I thought.

One afternoon a couple of weeks later, we were out in the field on maneuvers. I went through the chow line, found a large tree and sat down, propping my back against the trunk. After a couple of bites, I looked up. Walking across the field in my direction, tray in hand, was one of the two natural leaders in our platoon. Several years older than the rest of us, and with years of army life behind him, Joseph Pojmanski had the maturity, experience, and personality that commanded respect. Seeing his rugged, bull-like features approaching, I knew what was coming. I’d seen him chew out others when they messed up, and now it was my turn.

Pojmanski sat down next to me and opened the conversation with a comment about the field problem we were running, and I waited. Next, we talked about the weather, and I waited. Then we talked about home, a bit unusual since we weren’t that close, and I waited. Ten minutes later, he got up and walked away without having said anything about the mess I had made. There was no scolding, no reprimand, no chewing out—nothing! I deserved a tongue-lashing; I received a friendly conversation. I deserved rejection; I received acceptance. As I watched his back disappear across the field, a surprising warmth flooded over me. To quote John Wesley, the eighteenth-century Billy Graham of England, “My heart was strangely warmed.” That warmth was powerful, overwhelming, and life-changing. For the first time in my life, I saw my self-centeredness. I remember thinking, *Putting myself first has brought me as close as I’ve ever come to hell. From now on, others first, and myself, second.* In the years since, this change of heart has remained, even on those too-frequent occasions when I’ve strayed off course.

As I expected, the rest of the members of the platoon, with a couple of exceptions, followed Joe’s example. They now talked to me, no longer moved away when I sat down, and no longer dispersed when I approached. There remained, however, an all-consuming question: what did 28-year-old Polish Catholic Joseph Pojmanski do to provoke such a profound change?

Upon entering OCS, a doubt and a question plagued my faith. I wouldn’t have admitted it, but I had a gnawing feeling that my faith might simply be the product of my weakness, that if I were *strong*, I wouldn’t need God. Never mind that such a distinction quickly disappears in any objective study of the lives of the

greatest believers. Second, and theologically more serious, was a question: what does the death of a man on a cross two thousand years ago have to do with me today? As far as I could see, nothing.

Several days later, while still pondering what Joe had done, years of sitting in church on Sunday mornings unexpectedly paid off. A Scripture verse flashed into my mind. “While we were still sinners,” said St. Paul, “Christ Jesus died for us” (Romans 5:8).

It was an epiphany. *I* was the person Paul was talking about, my self-centeredness placing me firmly in the category of “sinners.” No more thinking I was such a good guy because of what I *didn’t* do—because I never smoked, drank, swore, etc. No more thinking that God must be glad to have someone as good as me on his side (I still wince at that one). I was a sinner, pure and simple. The way I treated the men in my platoon left little doubt. However, the Bible says, “While we were *still* sinners, Christ died for us.” In a flash, it came together. Christ gave his life for us—the greatest gift anyone can give—not as a reward for our good behavior, but while we were “*still sinners*.” That was me! I had received Christ’s forgiveness *before* confessing, repenting, or turning over a new leaf. I had done nothing to deserve it. Now it was clear: God used Joseph Pojmanski to show me the forgiveness of Christ. Paradoxically, I didn’t even *know* I needed it until *after* I received it. It wasn’t the normal sequence of *seeing the light* and then asking for God’s forgiveness; I didn’t even *view* what I had done as a sin until *after* I was forgiven. *So that’s the difference the cross makes*, I thought, *and that’s the forgiveness I received through Joe*. There’s a word in the Bible for what happened. It’s called “grace,” as in the well-titled hymn, “Amazing Grace.”

In the years following, I had two regrets. First, that I didn’t apologize to the men. To their credit, they didn’t demand it; to my regret, I never gave it. Second, I never told Joe how God had used him. Twenty-five years later, I tried to find him on the internet but failed. Then, fifty years later, I tried again. An internet search produced two invalid addresses and phone numbers, followed by a notification. They had email addresses for a Joseph Pojmanski that I could access for a small fee. I received two; neither looked promising. Nevertheless, I emailed both. A few days later, I received a response.

“This is Joseph Pojmanski. I don’t know if I remember you, but OCS comes to mind.” That was in January of 2014. We’ve been in touch ever since, becoming much closer friends now than we ever were fifty years ago.

Despite the self-inflicted damage, I still graduated from OCS. Since we weren’t shown our evaluation forms, some might wonder how I knew of the comment written on mine about “getting on his horse and going off in all directions at once.” Confession time. Toward the end of the course, I was cleaning our tactical officer’s office. No one was around, and his file drawers were open. I found my evaluations and looked at my leadership rankings. Much to my surprise and chagrin, when I took over as platoon leader, there was no cause for worry.

I walked away from OCS with a Second Lieutenant’s bars pinned on my shoulders. What I left with on the inside, however, lasted much longer. The “I belong here” feeling in the pulpit of my dad’s old church during the college choir tour? Now with a message to share, that feeling became a calling.

From Chapter 12 of Steve Hoekstra’s Story

After Steve left Vail for Aspen, he kept in touch with several close friends he had left behind, including Marc Wentworth. “If you were to describe Steve to someone who didn’t know him,” I asked Marc, “what words would you choose?” It was a question I put to all those I interviewed, but Marc’s response left me stunned.

A Prayer and a Miracle

“Let me answer that with a pretty personal story,” Marc begins. “In January of 1992, my wife Glenda had a stroke. She was thirty-two years old and working at the Vail Chapel as the preschool director. We later discovered a major artery in her brain was ninety-eight percent blocked, and the arteries in her neck were fifty

percent blocked. Having moved to Estes Park a couple of years before, Steve wasn't around. The ambulance took Glenda to the local hospital, and I was right behind it. Dr. Petrie, our general practitioner and friend, met us there. The emergency room staff didn't need him, but he was there in the corner of the room, down on his knees with a nurse beside him, and they were praying. This was my first sign that . . .” Marc paused to regain his composure. “At the time, I thought his praying was overdoing it, that her stroke wasn't that big of a deal, but in looking back, praying was the best thing he could have done.

“Glenda was flown to Denver. There wasn't any room for me in the helicopter, so Mike Ricks—our interim pastor—drove me to Swedish Hospital, the neurological trauma center for Western Colorado.

“Now the miracles start piling up. Dr. Miller, the best neurosurgeon in Colorado, happened to be in the hospital when Glenda arrived. The radiologist said he and another neurosurgeon had just returned from a conference where they had attended a workshop on a new procedure for dissolving blood clots in the brain. Of course, they had never done it before, but they thought this new procedure might save Glenda. They asked me to sign a consent form. I asked what would happen if we did nothing.

“‘In that case,’ Dr. Miller replied, ‘you can go in now and be with her because she's not going to make it.’

“So, of course, I signed the paper, and Mike Ricks and I began praying. A woman serving as the hospital chaplain came in and showed us to a private room where we prayed and talked for about an hour. Mike was making phone calls all the time, and one of them was to Steve Hoekstra. After awhile, Dr. Miller came down to tell us they had finished the surgery, and there was no hemorrhaging. That was their biggest concern. Pulling up a chair, he continued, ‘She has a five percent chance of living through this and a zero percent chance of living without major disabilities. You can see her if you'd like, but she doesn't look good.’

“I said I'd like to, so we walked down the hallway. The doors to the procedure room opened, and they wheeled her out on a gurney. I was walking up to her when at that very moment Steve appeared. He pushed me out of the way along with Dr. Miller and an attending nurse at the head of the gurney. I can't say this without breaking down . . . [pausing] . . . Steve put his hands on her head, and he prayed for her healing right there, invoking Christ and in his name. It wasn't a long, loud, or dramatic prayer, and if you heard him, you'd think he was just talking to Glenda. As Steve was praying, I felt the Holy Spirit. It sent shivers down my spine, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. When it left, I was filled with hope. Steve finished, and they wheeled her to the ICU. They were very brusque about it. They didn't want us to see her or interfere anymore because she was basically dying. Steve drove back to Estes Park, but I stayed the night. They said I could see her at eight the next morning. I was there at seven.

“I went in to see my wife, and there she was, sitting up in bed eating a breakfast of eggs. Her eyes weren't coordinated—one of them was pointing away—but she knew who I was, and she wanted to go home. After a week, she did go home, and ten years later she ran the Chicago Marathon. She has to wear glasses now, but her bad eye corrected itself. She has the tiniest bit of dyslexia, but she's learned to deal with it and runs five miles a day.

“I know Dr. Miller did a great job and had been prepared for that, but I also know that Steve Hoekstra's faith in Christ is why I have my wife today. There's no question in my mind. I've told some people who look at me with a smirk and make fun of the idea of God healing people and that kind of thing. All I know is that Steve brought Christ into that hallway; his faith and the purity of his belief saved my wife's life.”

Steve's memory of the event is striking for what he *didn't* know at the time. “It was a pretty intense time,” he recalls. “When I got the call, I was in Estes Park and remember driving down the canyon praying for Glenda. It wasn't until later that I realized how serious things were. When I prayed for her at the hospital, I had no idea she was at death's door.”