



Letters on Leadership #20: Doug Zembiec (The Memorial Day Edition)

On May 11th, 2007, Major Doug Zembiec (USMC) lost his life while fighting insurgents in Iraq. The following are excerpts from his eulogy as delivered by The Program's Founder and President, Eric Kapitulik. This Letter on Leadership is respectfully submitted to all of those whose lives we celebrate this Memorial Day weekend. The Program can't thank them or their families enough for their sacrifices. You are not forgotten...

Good Morning. I am Eric Kapitulik, one of Doug's very good friends. And he had many. This is one of my life's greatest privilege to speak to you today in remembering him and I would like to thank Pamela [Doug's widow] and Fallyn [his daughter] for giving me the honor to do so. I have



done numerous public speeches and typically, I wait till I finish before I gauge how good a job I have done.... I do not need to do so today. Before I even begin, let me start by saying that I'm sorry. This eulogy just isn't very good. Please believe me when I tell you that it was not from lack of effort. Simply, it was from lack of imagination and a very limited lexicon. And although I am sure that there are others who may have done it better, I am equally confident that no one would have gotten it just right. It is a tough task to explain who Doug Zembiec was. His name became a descriptive word unto itself.

For those poor and timid souls who know neither the glory of victory nor the agony of defeat, specifically, exactly the type of people that Doug did not associate with, they might describe a larger than life event or individual as "crazy, or ridiculous, or even unbelievable." For those of us who knew him well, when describing Doug or one of his many accomplishments or adventures, we instead used to simply shake our heads, pause briefly and say, "Zembiec." Nothing more was needed. And everyone knew exactly what we meant.

Let me tell you what "Zembiec" meant to one young enlisted Marine: Shortly after returning from Iraq and the Battle of Fallujah, Mr. and Mrs. Zembiec went out to visit Doug. Mr. Zembiec and Doug went to base for a visit and one of Doug's Marines who was with him in Fallujah, the bloodiest battle during the entire War, was manning the main gate checking I.D.s of cars that were entering Camp Pendleton. When the Marine saw Doug and then saw the gentlemen sitting with him, the Marine asked if he were Doug's Father. After replying yes, the young Marine looked at Mr. Zembiec and said, "I was with your son in Fallujah. He was my Company Commander. If we had to go back in there, I would follow him there with a spoon."

Today, as I have said, I am the most privileged man in the world. Not only because I have the opportunity to tell you what he meant to me, but, seeing the warriors who are assembled here today to honor him, I realize how lucky I was to call him my best friend, if only for 17 very short years. As I have already said, regardless of how hard I have tried and how much time I have spent in writing this speech, it has still proven to be quite a challenge. And as I have also already mentioned, this is quite a congregation to eulogize in front of. Maybe not since Gettysburg, or



Normandy, Hue, or more recently, Fallujah, has there been a commensurate number of American war heroes in one place. Of course, equally impressive, is the number of Naval Academy demerits represented here. This is a regular “who’s who” of detention hall. Just in the first three rows, I see men who have accumulated well over 1500 hours of detention!

Father, I understand that this is mass and you have to talk about Zembiec’s “moral courage,” and morality, but Father, as you can see from the company that Major Zembiec kept, he was our hero, but he was no Saint. I have had the privilege of spending a lot of time this past week with Colonel John Ripley, a Navy Cross recipient and the only man that Doug held in the same esteem as his own father. To quote Colonel Ripley, “Kap, Doug has done that one thing that very few people have ever accomplished: he has made himself into one of the few people that regardless of people involved, subject covered, or agenda to be discussed, eventually, the conversation will always turn into Zembiec stories.” Father, although you may not have had the same opportunity as the rest of us, let me however try to best describe him to you. As the congregation will attest, Doug had this annoying habit of writing down everything that you said. He was going to put it all into a book on leadership that he was going to write when he retired from the Marine Corps. And apparently, according to his many filled notebooks, he was going to write this novel in his free time, between starting a leadership consulting business, climbing Denali, and, I quote, “take Pam on an African Safari.” Now, some may say that this act of writing down your thoughts on leadership and life would be the highest form of flattery and I guess maybe it would be. But Father, I have been a Captain of a team or held some other leadership position for almost my entire 34 years. I have known Doug for 17 of them and we have had ample opportunity to sit around and talk for hours. Over the past week, I have read every single notebook that man has ever filled... And I have exactly one, ONE entry to my credit. And, it had to do with massaging your scalp to stimulate your hair follicles! Further, for all those who ever saw Z without his shirt on, and that was a regular occurrence, we all know that he had to have copied the damn thing down wrong! The only place that Warrior didn’t have hair was on his head! And although his physical presence was undeniable, it is also well documented and there is little reason to tell anyone here that Doug Zembiec is the toughest man



in the house. Rather than talk about those aspects of Doug, instead I want to touch on other parts of Douglas's life.

The description of me that I hold most dear is simply: "Zembiec's best friend." And to be Zembiec's best friend, you have got to be a pretty confident person. However, #1 on Doug's priority list was and always has been his family. Originally, that was Mr. and Mrs. Zembiec and John. When we were 17 and we met, all of Doug's friends will attest that wrestling was securely #2. And outside of wrestling, Zembiec only associated with two people: Bo Mansfield and Ray Lipsky. Doug always used to say that "it wasn't about how many men you brought to the battle, but who they are." And for all of us who know those two guys, we know that they are the equivalent of a Marine Infantry Battalion. When Doug and I graduated and entered the Marine Corps together, I fell even further on the priority list as the Marine Corps inserted itself into the #2 position. Following The Basic School and Infantry Officer's Course, Doug took his over first command of men and if he led a 21 man platoon, then, as they should, all 21 of those men would now occupy 21 positions above the best friend's rank. But, truthfully, all of this was ok by me. As Doug was going through this time period, my life was mirroring his. Like Doug, I love my family. When he was wrestling, I was playing lacrosse. We both entered the Marine Corps together, went through Marine Corps training together, entered the Fleet Marine Force together, took command of our respective platoons together etc. etc. etc. And Zembiec and Kapitulik's best friendship rolled smoothly along. But then,... Doug... met Pam. And although I do believe that Doug and I are very similar people, we do differ in at least one way. I am not a man of superlatives. I don't say I'm starving, I say that I am hungry. I don't say that I am freezing, I say that I am cold. Zembiec, however, lived his life way out on the superlatives. And if we were talking about cold or hungry, it wouldn't be so bad for a best friend. But when after years of talking battle tactics and bench press workouts, our dinner conversations turn to stories about his "Nordic Ice Princess," a best friend can quickly become disillusioned. But Pam, I am glad that he blew me off. I know that he made you, like all of us, a better person. He did. But you made him a better man too. Every friend of Doug who has known him both before and after you will attest, that he was a better person after having met you. And not that I should play the fashion police, but you also turned him into one hell of a better dresser. Finally, little did I know that my priority



ranking was about to fall even further and it would fall like a meteor. But as soon as Fallyn Justice Zembiec entered Doug's life, I could have been King Leonides, Ronald Reagan and Dan Daly rolled into one, ringing his doorbell, and if he was on the floor playing with Fallyn, that door was not going to be answered. One of the many great things about Doug, though, is that we were all Doug's best friend. And Doug's enthusiasm and limitless positive energy allowed him to play the role for all of us. I may have been more fortunate than some in the amount of time I spent with Doug, but that is a wasted measure when talking about him. 4 minutes, 4 months or 34 years, you would leave him knowing exactly who Doug Zembiec was and what he represented. Although, I may have been misquoted, let me read you one of Doug's quotes that he got right: "Be a man of Principle. Fight for what you believe in. Keep your word. Live with integrity. Be brave. Believe in something bigger than yourself. Serve your country. Teach. Mentor. Give something back to society. Lead from the front. Conquer your fears. Be a good friend. Be humble, but be self-confident. Appreciate your friends and family. Be a leader, not a follower. Be valorous on the field of battle. Take responsibility for your actions." It is the most fitting description of Doug that I have ever read or heard. And it should be. He knew its author longest. Some quotes in Douglas's books had people's names that the quotes belonged to, some did not. After this quote, simply – "Principles my father taught me."

And having had the pleasure of reading so many of Zembiec's writings this past week, I have really just got to share at least a few other Zembiec thoughts. No one could describe Doug, other than maybe Pam or his Mom, as well as Doug can for himself, so I would like to take the opportunity to share some of Doug's quotes, goals and favorite sayings with you. First, some of his friends' favorite quotes:

"You can't feed a lion a lettuce." – John Sanchez

"God throws curve balls. You've got to learn how to hit them sooner or later." – Chris O'Connor

"Boundless Motivation and Enthusiasm is a leadership Trait. Think about it." – Tommy Donovan



“Where a goat can go, a man can go. But a man can bring a rifle.” – Capt Fischer, SPC, TBS

“If you don’t love your wife, someone else will.” – Anonymous

Z always used to say that Mike McGee taught him how to be a friend. Col Mike Dean taught him how to be an officer and Col Bristol taught him how to be a leader. This final quote is from Col Bristol and is so fitting now: “Never forget those that were killed. Never let rest those that killed them.” (Long Pause) Finally, and my personal favorite by Zembiec, “I want to be like Dr. Saulk and the polio vaccine.... For Muslim extremists.”

As we all know, Doug was also hands down the most positive energy person in any room, crowd, city or state. To others and for himself. As such, he was also a huge believer in the power of positive affirmations. Here are a few:

“Prepare as if no one will ever help you.”

“Everyday, look forward to it as if you are about to embark on a great adventure.”

“Desire challenge and thrive on adversity.”

“If it doesn’t make you stronger, it makes you weaker.”

“I’d rather live one day as a lion, than 100 years as a dog.”

And of course, this is Doug we are talking about, “Alpha males get what they want from life.... And in a wife.”

Doug also had lists upon lists of goals: Goals of the day, goals of the week, month, year, life. Here are some of them: “Celebrate faith in life, God, your Marines, your friends and yourself.” “Live with honor, integrity and honesty.” “Workout religiously.” “Become the greatest husband and father ever!” Then, three lines down, as if he had a follow-on thought, “who compliments his wife.” “Read an hour a day.” “Sleep at least 7 hours a day.” And, just to show that the little kid was never lost in Douglas, “Eat breakfast, lunch and dinner... And a snack.”



Late last night, after dropping my family off at their hotel, I went back to the funeral home to visit with Zembiec one last time and to say goodbye to him. When I was there, I did not want to and could not look at him lying in his casket. It is not Doug's body that I loved. Admittedly, although his body and physical presence were without peer, I wanted to visit with what you and I loved about him most; his spirit. And you do not now see Doug's spirit in his body, but you do see it in the pictures of him. And the spirit you see in those photos, manifests itself in each one of us that he touched. Last week, Doug Zembiec sacrificed his life for his country and for each one of us. But he did not sacrifice his spirit!!! Only we can do that. And shame on us if we do. Instead, be a man of principle. Fight for what you believe in. Serve your country. Be brave. Teach. Mentor. Give something back to society. Conquer your fears. Be a good friend. Appreciate your friends and family. Set goals and accomplish them. Tell your friends "I love you," before getting off the phone with them. Live as if you are either getting better or you are getting worst, and not just "maintaining." Compliment your friends and compliment their girlfriends and wives even more. Cry while toasting loved ones and lead your men, not by the rank you wear on your shoulders, but the one you wear in your heart. And if we do, we will have done him our honor and though he may no longer be with us in body, he will surely not be dead either.

A few years ago, I lost some very dear friends of mine in a helicopter crash while training for our upcoming deployment to the Persian Gulf. At the end of one of the Marine's funerals, I stood behind the parents of the fallen warrior as the congregation filed out. My parents had attended the service and as my Father stepped in front of the fallen Marine's Father, he shook his hand and said simply, "Congratulations." The Father, startled, looked up and said, "for what?" My Dad, never losing eye contact, or the firmness of his grip replied, "for raising your son to be a man."

Marines! Warriors! Friends and family. Mr. and Mrs. Slunt, Mr. and Mrs. Zembiec and John, and of course, Pamela and Fallyn..... "Congratulations."



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