

The Whiskey Journal is a daily account of the life of a Sailor deployed to the Role III Hospital in Kandahar, Afghanistan, during its last rotation and the height of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic.

**The Whiskey Journal:
Definitely Not a NATO Role III MMU Publication**

By C.W. Rastall

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**A Hospital Corpsman's personal journey at the last rotation
of the Navy's longest-serving combat hospital**

C.W. Rastall

**INCLUDING ALL
10 ISSUES OF
THE THIRSTY CAMEL**

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PROLOGUE

That August day in 2019 started like any other. I drove into work bored, frustrated, and burnt-out. Hardly the winning combination for the makings of a success story, but there I was enjoying another fine Navy day. At the time I didn't have much going for me except for the realization that I would be slugging out another one and half more years at Naval Branch Health Clinic Sasebo for a nearly unprecedented five years. Since checking into the command in April 2017, there was nothing conventional about my time there. Then again there was nothing conventional about my time in the Navy to begin with.

April 2017 was the mark of the beginning of my end. I was entering my second duty station as a Second Class Petty Officer, or the rank of E-5, and was growing long in the tooth when it came to being promoted. I remembered when I first came into the Navy back in 2008 and heard the stories of career-serving Sailors retiring at 20 years as an E-3. By my generation, that era had long come to pass, and it was almost mythical to see a retiree's ID card saying they were anything less than an E-6. Due to a retention program called High Year Tenure, or HYT, the Navy, because I can't speak for the other armed service branches, set restrictions on service past a certain year provided you were not a specific rank or above. In 2017, that magic number was 14 years or you prepared to perform the seabag drag on a one-way ticket back home. There I was into my 11th year.

It was fine though, I had it all mapped out. I was only a handful of classes from graduating with two bachelor's degrees that I felt were diversified enough to get my foot in the door across a spectrum of platforms no matter how entry-level they were. I'd carry with me over a decade of military experiences, and I had a load of veteran benefits awaiting me on the other side. My family was young enough to survive the trauma of short-term unemployment and small enough to still crash in a basement of a family member back in Wisconsin until I could get back on my feet.

So, for the next three years, the original length of my assignment to Sasebo, I was going to pack it in, think of only myself, and prepare for the great transition back into the civilian workforce. There are plenty of successful people who make the leap and I was going to be one of them. It was easy for me to imagine being so selfish. I felt I was terribly wronged at my previous command when it came to evaluation rankings, so trying to please the boss was not going to be my first concern anymore. Those junior Sailors would survive without my presence just like the Navy did and will continue to do after I'm long out of the picture.

My plan had hiccups from the beginning though. The first problem was I was spiritually dead from not being a positive member to my community. Serving has always been my thing. My first intended major at the University of Wisconsin - Green Bay was public administration because I wanted to be part of public service. To willfully retract my involvement and talent from my community caused a downward spiral in my mind. This feeling did not take long to drag my soul down to a very low place. It wasn't until a friend of mine, Petty Officer Matt Crosson, called me from my previous duty station and asked me to pin him to the next higher paygrade that I decided to change. He had recently been promoted and thought high enough of the impact I had on his life to request I make the journey to "frock" him to my current paygrade, E-5. This was the same guy who I first met as a lowly E-3, so to see his journey was a real joy.

The second problem was a fact of life. We uphold the highest traditions and customs in my home, aptly named Camp Rastall, or NAVCOMCMRSTL, and that includes a multigenerational home. Since we were back living in Japan and Saori, my wife, had a divorced mother, she started living with us in 2014. The concept of a mother-in-law living with them could make any American husband cringe with anxiety, but for the most part it really worked out. Miyuki, or "Okasan," helped with the household chores, and when we added onto the family, starting with our first-born Josiah in 2015, it mattered a great deal that she was with us. It was all good until the stomach pain started.

It was the winter of 2016, and Miyuki started getting terrible stomach pains. The first doctor brushed off the worst symptoms. Pain management is almost non-existent in Japan. My wife had a cesarean section with our child, was given an indomethacin suppository, and told

to lay still. Indomethacin is a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug, or NSAID, which is in the same drug class as ibuprofen. The pain in Okasan's stomach would not go away, and eventually she went to another doctor where she was diagnosed with stage 3 pancreatic cancer in December. This is the same cancer that took Patrick Swayze and Alex Trebeck. To have this condition means you have less than a 5% chance of living past five years. The countdown was on.

At the same time, I received verbal orders to Naval Hospital Yokosuka, Japan. A little farther north from where I was in Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, (both on the same island of Honshu) but it was in the opposite direction from Sasebo, Japan, (on the southern island of Kyushu) and where Saori was from. To compound the situation, Saori was pregnant with our second son, Atticus. With all the news, Miyuki made the decision that she wanted to move back to the home where she raised her family to essentially die. My wife, not one to leave her mother, told me this and went on to explain that she wasn't going to abandon her mother. It was presented to me that I could head up to Yokosuka without my wife, two-year-old son, dying mother-in-law, and unborn child, or I could try to find a way to come back to Sasebo, my first-ever duty station that I served at from 2009 to 2011.

Despite these setbacks both personally and professionally, I had made up my mind that I wanted to put care and effort into my career. Miyuki's good health lingered longer than any of us expected, and I realized that I had to extend my stay in Sasebo to care for her. One extension turned into two, and that is when I received the text message. It was from my co-worker Yanara Lopez, who did nothing except excel at everything she did. To be fair, she paid the price for it in terms of ridiculous working hours and exhaustion, but she could flat outperform anyone else. Because I decided to be difficult so early in my tour, (we had arrived about a week apart from one another) I spent the better part of three years hanging onto her coattails. We had always been amicable, and when she asked me if I wanted to go to Afghanistan, it changed the trajectory of my life probably forever.

I remember parking my car, doing my daily routine to prepare for the morning, and then heading straight into our Senior Enlisted Leader's (SEL) office, Master Chief Lorenzo Branch. I let him know that I heard the rumor about a pharmacy technician being needed to go to

Afghanistan, and if the rumor was true to please consider me for the shortlist. Master Chief has a talent I do not have. He can show an excellent poker face, and to this day I can't figure out what he may have been thinking at that time. My hope is he appreciated the initiative and enthusiasm to chase "the hard job." What he did was simply tell me that he'd let me know.

Fast forward to Labor Day weekend, I get a phone call from him to formally ask me if I wanted to accept the deployment. Because it was just me going and not a unit, it is called an "Individual Augmentee" or IA. Without hesitation I leapt at the chance. This was my chance to deploy, and not just anywhere, but to Afghanistan at the longest-serving Navy combat hospital. What lies next is my journey from the day I left to the day I returned home. Every day wasn't easy, but I was blessed more than many others if only for the fact that I came home at all to write about it.

17 Feb 2020

Day 1

As I write this, I am at the Narita Airport awaiting my flight to Dallas/Ft. Worth on American Airlines Flight 176. I left not one but two Leatherman multi-tools in my carry-on. This was a result of hastily packing the night before against my wife's superior judgment. Needless to say, airport security in Fukuoka had some questions for me, and I was last to board on my flight to Tokyo while \$200 worth of multi-tools stayed behind.

There were a few really good going away dinners and parties. This past Saturday I went out to the bars and took my first ever beer bong, and it was worth my troubles. Jack Adams and Dennis Lebling, who were there, are two friends I hope to know for a long time.

The hardest part in all of this was saying goodbye to the boys. Because of time, we were rushed to begin with, but the tears started coming the farther in the security line I was. The levees broke when I was almost to

the security counter and I heard Josey yell, “Bye Papa!” That was much harder than I ever anticipated.

Of course, I did not accomplish every goal I had, and I doubt I would have anyway. There’s never enough time. Prior to leaving I found it hard for me to concentrate, and I often became lost in fits of daydreaming. Normally, I’m trying to think about problems and solving them in my head as far as my imagination or logic will allow.

I hope to sleep a lot on the plane. Will write more when I can and I’m thankful to Kevin Pham for this journal. I suppose I’ll be transcribing too.

Postscript: No amount of time would have prepared me to leave. I was first given the greenlight for this deployment on Labor Day weekend, 2019, and on the day I was at the airport, I still felt hurried and rushed. Perhaps that is human nature, but to me it showed the reality that although your own life is getting tossed upside down, everyone else around you is still trying to run their own race and get through the struggles of their own day.

17 Feb 2020

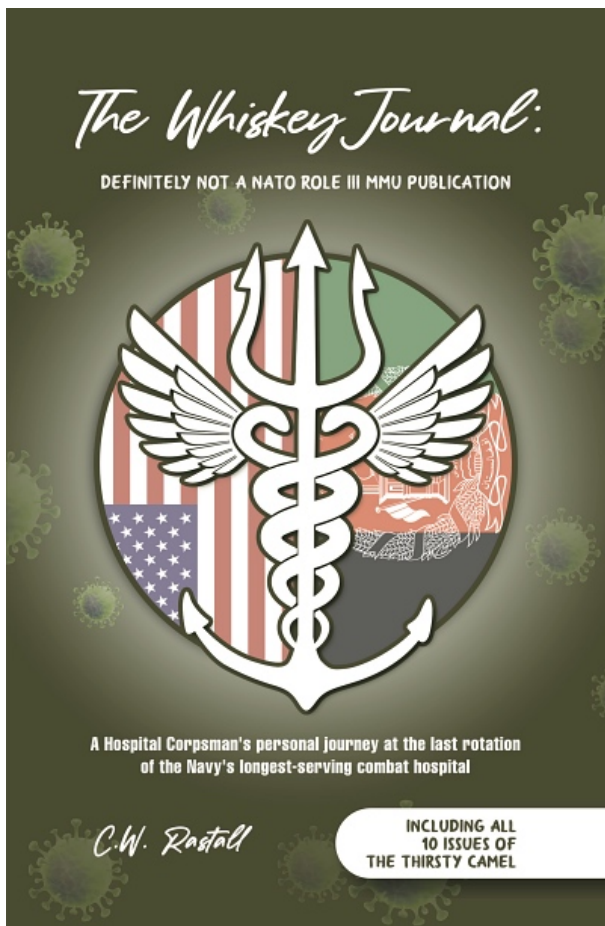
Via Facebook Messenger

Hey buddy,

I miss you. Thank you for all the lessons you’ve taught me and I’m grateful for all the lessons we’ve learned together. I appreciate you always having my back and being someone I can vent to; in many ways you were like an older brother-uncle hybrid and you’ve guided me seamlessly through some obstacles. I’m glad we’ve been able to laugh and create memories that I’ll be telling my kids about; like how I lifted a piano, one-handed, onto an 8ft-tall truck bed, and their Great-Uncle Cal was there recording (unfortunately the film got lost over the years, haha). Your absence will be truly felt, not just at home by your wife and two little munchkins, but for the little folk like me who just happened to have orders to Sasebo. I love you buddy, and I hope over the years to come we always stay in touch.

Yours to count on,

Travon [Martin]



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