

COL Gregory D. Gadson, USA (Ret)

An Obligation to Contribute

On May 7, 2007, Colonel Greg Gadson's life changed in an instant when his vehicle was struck by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in Baghdad, Iraq. He remembers being blown from the vehicle, and he remembers thinking, before he lost consciousness, "God, I don't want to die here."

In the aftermath of the attack, Colonel Gadson went through 129 units of blood, was transferred to a hospital in Berlin and then to Walter Reed in DC, where he ultimately lost both legs above the knee and badly damaged the functionality of his right arm. But where other men might have been overcome with anger and bitterness, Colonel Gadson listened to his beloved wife, Kimberly, as she read to him from the book of Job, and felt gratitude to God for his survival.

"The injuries didn't define me," reflects Greg, "but it was my lowest moment. I wasn't able to see my future, I didn't know what my life had in store for me, but I also knew it wasn't in my character to quit. That choice is what defines me.

My faith helped me move on and helped me to be at peace. The day after my second leg amputation, I felt good and was really at peace. I had accepted this. God not only saved me, but He began healing me because the one thing that was missing was a sense of hate or anger. I was fundamentally at peace with losing my legs, and I think ultimately, that allowed me to begin to move forward almost immediately."

Although Greg didn't know what was next, he was determined not to live in the past or worry over the future. He intended to fully inhabit the present. After an injury like Greg's, almost everyone opts to take a medical retirement; only about 2% apply to return to duty. "Everyone assumed I was going to be medically retired," recalls Greg, "but I was thinking, my effectiveness is not really tied to my run time or my PT test. I felt that I still had something to give and wanted to

stay in the Army. I was committed to do whatever the Army wanted me to do. I was fairly senior in my career and knew my experience meant I had a lot left to give. However, in the Army you have to make the case that you can contribute. I told them, 'You can put me behind a desk or assign me to any project, but I know how the Army works and I understand what needs to happen.'"

At the end of 2009, Colonel Gadson made his case to the military, and in early 2010, he was accepted back into service. In August of 2010, he was promoted to Colonel. And in June 2012, he was selected to be the Garrison Commander of Fort Belvoir, overseeing the daily operations of the base. "That included the fire department, police department, social services, and housing. It all fell under me," explains Greg. "It's sort of like being a mayor or city manager. There are 50,000 people on the base, and I was responsible for making sure they had a safe, predictable environment to come to work in."



Colonel Gadson retired from the military in 2014, after a nearly 30-year long career during which he was awarded a Purple Heart, three Bronze Stars, two Legion of Merit awards, three Meritorious Service Medals, three Army Commendation Medals, and the Distinguished Service Medal. Since then, he has focused full-time on the business he began to build in the aftermath of his injuries, Patriot Strategies, LLC.

Only a few months after he was wounded, Colonel Gadson found himself taking on public speaking roles, describing both his struggles and the attitude that saw him through those hard times. It turned out that professional and college sports teams had great interest in hearing him speak. Greg had played Division I football in college during his time at West Point, and he still considers athletics to be a crucial part of his story. Less than a year after he began public speaking, he

founded Patriot Strategies in 2008 on the advice of an army lawyer. He chose the name "Patriot" because it was his call sign in the military.

His first speaking gig was at the request of an old West Point classmate and teammate, Mike Sullivan, who was then one of the coaches of the New York Giants. The team had been 0-2 thus far in the season and were about to play the Washington Redskins. Greg spoke to the team about pride, poise, and team spirit. The Giants defeated the Redskins that night and then went on an 11-game winning streak. Greg spoke to the team again that season the night before they took on the New England Patriots in Super Bowl XLII and won. Greg became an honorary Giant and was given a Super Bowl ring not just for Super Bowl XLII but also for Super Bowl XLVI when the Giants once again defeated the New England Patriots.

Motivational speaking is still important to Colonel Gadson, who today speaks not only to football teams and other athletic organizations, but also to corporate and government groups. However, Patriot Strategies has expanded far beyond this initial offering. Along with his partner, Kurt Guttierrez, another West Point teammate, Greg has expanded the business into a broad service-based consulting firm offering IT and cyber security expertise, project management, and administrative and professional services.

"We've supported the U.S. Army's War Transition Command and are there helping service military personnel who have complex medical challenges and who are wounded, injured, or ill," describes Greg. "We had a contract to support the adaptive reconditioning program, we've supported the sexual assault prevention response office, we do warrior care and policy programs, and we have been able to support cyber training at Ft. Gordon, Georgia. And we just recently won an award to do some restoration of the Yates Building here in Washington, DC. The bottom line is that we're flexible. We can do all of the things and more that I did when I was the Garrison Commander at Fort Belvoir."

Greg inherited his tireless work ethic and positive attitude from his parents. Both grew up in segregated South Carolina in the 1940s, but both overcame the odds by graduating first and second in their high school classes respectively. They married while attending Howard University.

"Growing up where and when they did,

they saw the very worst of our society," notes Greg. "Despite growing up as they did, they never taught us to hate. They could've easily planted the seeds of resentment, but they never did. That goes to the character of my parents."

Instead, they taught Greg and his younger brother and sister faith, hard work, and service. His mother was a teacher; his father was a pharmacist. One night when the family went to pick up his dad from work Greg remembers how difficult it was for him to get out the door. "My dad, invariably, was going to serve every customer," smiles Greg. "He'd be closing up shop, and some nurse runs up and says, 'I know you're getting ready to leave, but we really need this.' My dad would go back in and serve the nurse. He took care of that patient. He loved medicine, he loved people."

Although Greg was born while his parents were still studying at Howard, his mother chose to go to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, where her sister lived to give birth to Greg. His first memories are of Rochester, New York, where his father completed his residency at the University of Rochester after graduating from pharmacy school. After kindergarten, the family moved to Buffalo, where Greg's father had accepted a position as a drug salesman with E. I. Lilly & Co. "I remember walking to school in the snow," laughs Greg of his time in New York. "The snow just piled up so high, and we had to walk through the snow to the elementary school. I guess my memories of living up there are cold winters and large quantities of snow!"

By the time Greg was going into third grade, the Gadsons again relocated, this time to Norfolk, VA, where Mr. Gadson had accepted the Chief Pharmacist job at Norfolk Community Hospital. A few years after that, the family moved just down the road to Chesapeake, VA.

By this time an active 6th grader, Greg was already enamored with team sports and began to show a real talent for football. In 7th grade, he met one of his mentors, Coach Queen, who moved him from playing offense to playing defense, and pushed him to be the best he could be. Two years ago, when Greg was inducted into the Chesapeake Sportsman's Hall of Fame, it was Mr. Queen who introduced him.

Academically, Greg wasn't a star like his parents, but he was a solid B student who occasionally earned an A or a C. He devoted

himself more fully to his athletic endeavors—running track, wrestling and football. But he was always cultivating his gifts on the football field. He was determined to land a scholarship to a Division I college, play football, and end up in the NFL.

In his free time, Greg worked a paper route and later added a second, and then third paper route with his younger brother. At first, the two boys walked the neighborhood delivering papers, but as they got older and Greg got his driver's license, they began to cover more ground. He also got a part-time job on the weekend at Moore's Building Supply—a local hardware store. "Honestly, I feel it was kind of expected for us to get jobs," nods Greg. "No one had to tell me to find a job. We were middle class and if I wanted certain things or wanted some spending money in my pocket, I had to work. It wasn't rocket science!"

During his senior year, Greg was selected as an All-State football player and Captain of his high school team. His dream of getting a scholarship at a Division I school seemed poised to come true when he made a handshake deal with some assistant coaches at the University of Virginia (UVA) only to find later that the scholarship offer had fallen through. "I was devastated and I know Coach Tom O'Brien at UVA felt bad," remembers Greg. "I didn't know what would happen next. Fortunately, a college football recruiter from West Point came by to recruit another young man at my high school. It was at that time that my football coach suggested that he also take a look at me. It was all serendipitous."

Thus, Greg was initially drawn into the military by the promise of being able to play football at the highest level. But before attending West Point, Greg attended the United States Military Academy Preparatory School. There, he took more math and English classes to strengthen his academic credentials before he took the SAT and ACT exams. However, upon arrival at West Point, he encountered another challenge he hadn't counted on.

"I was about 180 pounds at that point," remembers Greg. "They told me they were going to put me at outside linebacker. I thought I was too small to play that position and kept thinking to myself that they put me there because they wanted to cut me. I felt like a cornered rat, I was fighting for my survival because I knew I needed football to stay at West Point. But I raised my intensity level and rose to the occasion. In high school, you

can get by on your ability; but this was about focusing your mental, emotional and physical energy on every down. Every single thing we did was videotaped, it was another level of accountability. There was no place for me to just cruise or glide."

Greg's position coach his freshman year, Jay Robertson, pushed him close to tears every day. But he proved to be the best mentor Greg could've asked for. He stays in close touch with Coach Robertson, who's now almost 80, and still speaks with him several times a year.

Academically, things were also tough at West Point. Greg chose to study Arabic, foreseeing way back in 1985 that that language would be the most important for the military down the road. By the beginning of his sophomore year, he was taking on an unholy course load of 3rd semester Arabic, Chemistry, 3rd semester Calculus, Economics, and a couple of other classes, all during football season. A representative of the academic office encouraged him to defer at least one of the classes, but Greg insisted he could keep up with it. "That was a huge mistake!" laughs Greg. "I almost failed out at that point. I did fail one class, and I got Ds in some of the others. So I destroyed my GPA and from then on I was literally digging out all the way until I graduated. But I did graduate on time, I just had to work very hard. I had to be a good student; because of that one semester, I had to recover!"

Ultimately, he chose to major in history, and focused specifically on Middle Eastern History. In 1989, Greg graduated, and by 1990, he was stationed in Saudi Arabia. For four years, he served at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma; from there, he went to serve five years at Ft. Bragg. A few years after that, he was stationed in Hawaii when he was deployed twice, once to Bosnia for six months, and then again for a year to Afghanistan. By this time, Greg had become a Major.

Just as he left Hawaii, he was promoted to Lt. Colonel and sent to Fort Riley, KS, where he was stationed when he was selected to command a battalion and deployed to Iraq. It was during this deployment there that he was wounded. "And four months later I was talking to groups of people I had never met before and who had nothing to do with the Army," reflects Greg. "If I had been filled with resentment and anger those opportunities would have never arisen for me. I was even given an acting role in the movie, *Battleship*."

Many may feel sorry for Colonel Gadson but Greg feels blessed, grateful and fortunate to lead the life he has. He credits his faith in God as an important factor in his growth but also adds that one of the defining moments in his life was meeting his wife, Kimberly. "I married up," Greg says proudly. "She played a vital role during my recovery by keeping me focused. She has been the fuel of my life. She was one of my classmates at West Point but she gave up her career in the Army after five years of service to support my career and our family. She is an incredible mother, wife, and human being. She transitioned into becoming a school teacher and is making an impact in the lives of the students she teaches. I can't imagine my life without Kimberly in it."

As a leader, Greg emphasizes the importance of staying present above all else, and focusing only on what you can control. "We can only control ourselves," he points out. "We don't control what's happening around us. I can control what I think, what I say, and what I do, I can own that, and that's all I can own. Particularly when people are challenged they often ask 'Why?', I've always said, 'Don't ask why, ask what?' 'Why' looks backwards, 'what' looks forward. 'What' needs to be done calls you to action, 'what' calls you to respond."

"All my life, I've tried to be part of

something bigger than myself," Colonel Gadson goes on, "whether it was high school sports, college sports, or serving in the military, or starting a company. When you do those things you're part of a team, you're part of something that's greater than you, and you can accomplish something that's greater than you can accomplish individually. I continue to push myself because I know I have an obligation to contribute. It's as simple as that: if you can do something, you do it."

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– By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CFP®, AIF®

About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

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