

CULTURE WATCH II

## **A Call, and an Answer**

*Two recent Dartmouth grads explain why they joined the Marines*

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**W**e stood at attention on the parade deck in the oppressive Quantico heat. In the preceding weeks, along with our fellow officer candidates, we had run countless miles through the woods, tackled and retackled the obstacle course, been forced to shave twice a day, and fallen into dreamless sleeps listening to lectures on discipline and integrity. We had all endured the same persistent cough and received the same eight vaccinations. Now graduation had come at last. We stood together, sweat pouring into our fresh haircuts and perfectly rolled sleeves, listening as the colonel in charge of Officer Candidates School (OCS) told us about his own decision to join the Marines. “All of you,” he said, “are here because you felt the call to serve in a time of war. When I became a Marine during Vietnam, it was just to avoid the draft.”

The colonel was right: We had made a choice — and choices often have to be defended. This became clear to us when, after graduating from OCS, we returned for our senior year to Dartmouth College, where plans for the future — Goldman Sachs, Fulbright scholarships, Teach For America — were the topic of every conversation.

Sometimes it was easier just to avoid the question by talking about our summer plans: “I’m doing an Arabic program at Georgetown,” Ethan would say; for Michael it was “I’m doing research for a professor.” But when we did divulge our secret, it often felt as if a sheet had descended, separating us from our insouciant classmates. First came a brief stare, and then we were met with some variation of “Why are you doing that?” in a tone either brusque or reverential. We soon learned to size up our audience and respond appropriately. To people who we felt deserved an explanation, devoid of bravado or humility or caustic humor, we would start by saying, “Lots of reasons.”

Michael first thought about joining when he was in high school, but he dutifully applied to college instead. During his freshman year, which began in the fall of 2004, he returned to the idea, just as it was beginning to stir in Ethan. After meeting as freshmen, when we lived in the same dormitory, we would seek out a quiet spot in the cafeteria to pore over the *New York Times*. Reading about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we experienced intense, visceral reactions: hope, sadness, despair, anger. We both had friends from high school who had enlisted and done tours; it was our generation’s struggle, and it felt strange for our priorities to be elsewhere, caught up in academics and the trivialities of college life.

We found ourselves drawn to the study of history and government because these subjects produced in us sensations similar to those we felt reading *Times* articles. As we began to mull over a decision that would come as a shock to our families and many of our friends, we found strength in history. It was heartening to know that generations before us had accepted such challenges and faced the same sort of fear and doubt. Ethan was struck by Leo Tolstoy’s depiction of the Russian artillery crew at the Battle of Borodino in *War and Peace*, which reveals the crew’s cohesion and dedication, working to the hilt even as French artillery rapidly reduced its

ranks.

The generations of men and women who have exhibited similar courage and struggled, often selflessly, for a greater cause provided a model that we both hoped to emulate. And with the study of history came a desire to participate in history. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will have profound effects throughout the world, and by joining and serving in the armed forces, we could intertwine ourselves with history.

During our sophomore year, we developed an intellectual framework that justified and encouraged our interest in national service. An introductory political-ideas class that we took touched on Western political thought from Plato to Marx. Plato's idealism in particular spoke to us: His *Republic* rejected cynicism about human nature and its larger manifestation, politics. It was closely akin to the youthful idealism we felt welling up within ourselves. We also seized upon Plato's words, delivered through his teacher Socrates in *Crito*, on the central importance of the social contract as the foundation of a functional society.

By virtue of the upbringing that this society had allowed us, and the myriad opportunities that had been extended our way simply because we were Americans, it was incumbent upon us to offer our services to our country. The privileges we have enjoyed endow us with a responsibility, an obligation, to fulfill President Kennedy's charge: To this country that has given us so much, it is our turn to give back. We reject the pernicious belief, commonly held at our most highly esteemed institutions, that fighting our nation's battles is someone else's job.

"When you lose a Marine . . ." Our company commander's voice caught slightly, and rose with emotion. Two hundred officer candidates sat bolt upright, eyes fixed on the speaker. He was not going to say that it was all right. "And you write to his family . . ."

He was speaking of young men and women who risked their lives to promote American foreign policy and the futures of Iraq and Afghanistan. Accepting a commission into the Marine Corps is a grave responsibility. America is granting us charge of a platoon of its best young men and women, entrusting us with their safety, showing confidence in our judgment.

Many of our contemporaries also feel a call to service. In greater numbers than ever before, fresh graduates are choosing to help their country in various ways, in communities at home and across the world. But as opportunities for national service have diversified to include the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, and Teach For America, among others, there has been a steep decline in the number of graduates of elite schools who choose to serve in the military.

Many never even consider joining the armed forces — yet military service offers young graduates unparalleled opportunities. It can serve as a great equalizer, bringing together people of all different backgrounds and teaching them to work as a team. Few other entry-level positions involve so much decision-making independence; as second lieutenants, we will serve our platoons in both a leadership and a supporting role. Years later, the faces of senior officers light up as they recall the days when they were closest to the privates, corporals, and sergeants — the backbone of the Corps.

By the fourth week of OCS in Quantico, we had both been pressed beyond our breaking points. “Everyone has one,” the colonel had assured us, “and we are going to find out where yours is.” An empty threat, we thought at the time: We were in stellar physical condition and had sworn to ourselves and each other that we would not quit. But by Week Four, blisters covered Ethan’s feet, courtesy of his new boots, and the hacking cough that everyone had caught had in his case developed into a fever. He lay at his appointed spot in the defensive perimeter, shivering in the 90-degree Virginia

heat. It was his turn to lead the fire team in an impromptu attack. Mustering whatever enthusiasm he could, he tried to remember the various signals and commands that the exercise called for, but he forgot several, and the all-important “command presence” was lacking. The sergeant called Ethan over for his debriefing. “You’re struggling,” he said. “Why do you want to be here?”

“I think the country’s in a tough spot,” Ethan replied. “And everyone who has something to offer should be willing to give to help us through. I think I have something to offer.” The sergeant paused for a second; he had expected the rote answer: “Because I love my country!”

“That’s the best explanation I’ve heard. I think you do have something to offer, and I think you have what it takes.” Coming from a sergeant recently returned from a tour in Iraq, this was no idle endorsement.

On the day before our college graduation, we both took the oath to become second lieutenants in the Marine Corps. In so doing, we added our names to the long list of those before us who were similarly inspired to serve, and we are determined to uphold the high standard that they set.

**Mr. Knapp and Mr. Mefford, both second lieutenants in the Marine Corps, are 2008 graduates of Dartmouth College. They will begin further officer training this fall.**