“Many Hands Make Light Work”

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The soldier was severely wounded in a minefield during combat against the Colombian narcoterrorist group FARC. (Photo: Colombian Air Force)

I saw the spirit of Colombia in that awakening. It was a festival morning, with radiant sun and spring breezes; a Saturday in Medellín, Antioquia. Outside, floats and horses were being decorated; inside, in the intensive-care unit in Pablo Tobón Uribe Hospital, a career National Army Soldier was lying on a bed. His face was lifeless, the left side destroyed, the eye covered by a bandage, his ear, his cheekbone, and his jaw repaired by several sutures. Beneath the sheets, the glimpse of fragile, almost terminal breathing.

The night before, while I piloted a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter that belonged to the 5th Combat Air Command (Rionegro, Antioquia), my crew received an alert for an airborne medical evacuation for a soldier wounded in a minefield during combat against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) narco-
terrorist organization. In the jungle and amid crossfire, he was aided by one of his comrades, who tore his uniform to make a tourniquet to hold the profuse bleeding. His wounds were atrocious and expelled a nauseating smell, contaminated with human waste contained in the explosive charge. His left foot hung by the tendons, and the edges of the bones had come through the skin.

It was nine in the morning when I arrived at the Tobón hospital reception desk, where a nurse informed me that the surgery was over and that the Soldier was recovering in intensive care. I took the elevator and recalled the first hours of that day, when the evacuation of that young man began. At three in the morning, I was piloting the Black Hawk on a steep descent amid the peaks of the Ayapel mountain range. I was flying with night-vision goggles, together with an AH-60 Harpy helicopter that was firing its machine guns to repel the curtain of anti-aircraft fire that the enemy had prepared for us.

When I reached the treetops, we began the final approach. The rotor wake stirred up dirt and twigs that formed a whirlwind of lights and shadows from which four soldiers emerged with the stretcher. Our combat nurse and the flight technicians received the patient and positioned him in the cargo bay. As soon as we left that clearing and shut the doors, the smell of his wounds inundated the aircraft. I turned my head to evaluate the situation, and found myself with the figure of a warrior worn down by barbarism, a person with an emaciated face; his clothes were soaked with sweat, blood, and mud.

The elevator reached the intensive-care floor, the doors opened, and I was surprised to see a corpse-like figure covered with pink sheets crossing the hallway. I made the sign of the cross without wanting to look too closely, but it was inevitable. The sheets revealed the outline of a cold, somber figure that seemed forgotten, like just another object on that floor. What if it was the soldier? That vision hit me like a stab in the heart. I couldn’t believe that our efforts would have ended like that; I couldn’t accept that idea as true. The fear made me act strangely, and I reached out to uncover the corpse’s face.

“Are you a relative?” asked a nurse, who roused me abruptly from my thoughts.

“No, no … I’m looking for a soldier we brought in this morning; he was wounded by an anti-personnel mine.”

“He’ll wake up soon,” she responded as she appointed to a room at the end of the ward. She then had covered the corpse’s face with indifference and headed off with it; disappearing at the end of the hallway. A doctor heard that conversation.

“Are you a relative of the soldier?” he asked. “No, I’m the pilot of the crew that evacuated him early this morning. I came to see him because I wanted to meet him.”

“Thank you for what all of you are doing,” said the doctor. “We get soldiers like that almost every day. This man came in half-dead; you brought him in time. Look, he’ll wake up soon. He’s in very serious condition; he’s lost a lot of blood, and we’re trying to control a severe infection caused by the contamination of his wounds. His prognosis is uncertain. We amputated his left foot, and we still don’t know whether he’ll lose the eye. He hasn’t woken up; if he does, don’t give him the news let me talk to him first.”

While we were flying, the combat nurse opened the medical kit and shook a flask, injected the contents into the patient’s arm, removed the dirty bandages and examined the wounds, took the patient’s pulse, and asked how long it would take to get to Medellín. I told him 50 minutes. In the distance, behind the mountains, the lights of the city were visible; it was 3:40 a.m. The helicopter’s motors were going at full throttle, almost at the point of blowing out. The city was preparing to celebrate the 2005 Flower Festival. What a paradox, I thought, some celebrating and others fighting steadfastly, whether wounded or unwillingly dealing out wounds in order to survive! The nurse was focused on changing bandages, injecting medicine, and cleaning wounds. I noticed that he murmured a prayer.
As I entered the room, I found the soldier unconscious and hooked up to several monitors that were controlling his vital signs. The atmosphere in the room was so thick that I felt that it was weighing on my shoulders. A glacial silence reigned, as in a tomb. His face appeared to be that of a humble fisherman. His wounds were now clean, and his stump, wrapped in bandages, stood out amid the sheets. One of his fingers moved abruptly, and a monitor began to beep. At that instant, he opened his left hand, and suddenly, with a trembling and clumsy movement, he raised his right arm to pull out the tubes that were keeping him alive. The doctor rushed forward and instructed me to help him. A nurse ran in.

His energy gradually weakened, until he became calm. His gaze moved around the room. A doctor, a nurse, a strange man, monitors, needles, and bandages surrounded him, and he quickly understood the situation. His right eye met the doctor’s gaze, and the latter, with a sorrowful air, grasped his shoulder in order to speak to him.

“Soldier, thank you! Thank you for what you’ve done for Colombia. Yesterday, you stumbled into a minefield and suffered serious wounds. One of your feet was badly hurt, and we couldn’t save it.” The soldier closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. A tear slid down his cheek. There was a silence that transfixed the walls and invaded the entire floor.

“Do you want me to call anyone and tell them that you’re here?” I asked.

“My commander. Tell him that my morale is high and I still have fight in me. That they should expect me there, that… I’ll walk again. Right, doctor?”

The doctor agreed.

“And my comrades? How are they?”

“They’re well,” I responded.

There was a distant happiness in his eyes. “Long live my National Army! We’re going to win, right? That’s my Army,” he said, and fell into uncontrollable weeping.

I felt as if something had broken within my soul.

“And your mom, do you want me to call her?” I insisted.

“No, not her… I’ll talk to her later. I don’t want to worry her.”

“Do you need me to bring you anything? Food, clothes…?”

“Yes, get me a Bible, please; I need to talk to God.”

We remained silent a long while. I had seen the spirit of Colombia in that ravaged face, in that weakened body of great spiritual strength. The courage of this soldier was not false; it was virtuous. A man removed from hypocrisy. The Colombian Air Force had saved the spirit of a valiant man, a symbol of the heroism of all Colombian soldiers. That day, I felt very proud to wear the wings of a Military pilot. I had seen how the commitment of our Air Force made us leaders in adversity and an example for all our fellow countrymen.

On the way to Rionegro, to the air base where I lived, I felt as if I had not spoken a single word in my entire life. I felt that I was unable to speak about what was most important, about the object of my deepest thoughts. I perked up my ears, I suppressed the beating of my heart, so as not to miss a single detail of that encounter; my memory needed to preserve this experience, because I would need to remember it each time
my spirits or those of a comrade flagged.

*A phrase from Homer, the name given to the Greek poet who was the author of the Iliad and the Odyssey.