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### Living a Childhood Dream

Many children dream of becoming superheroes when they grow up; not many actually achieve those ambitions once they've reached adulthood. At age eight, Benjamin Almquist knew what he wanted to be—a United States Marine. His father was the perfect example of what it meant to be a military man giving up portions of his life to actively serve his country, living on Navy submarines, and serving as a recruiter. Mr. Almquist looked up to his father and decided that he was the kind of man he wanted to be, that he wanted to sacrifice his own life to better the lives of others. With that influence, Benjamin Almquist became a two-time graduate of The Citadel and a veteran of the United States Marine Corps.

One important aspect of Benjamin Almquist's four years of service was being on Coalition Task Force 151, a group that focused in counter-piracy off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden. He sailed on Navy ships built for Marines and traveled to places such as Guam, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. “Many Navy personnel thought that all the Marines did was eat, sleep, and work out,” he said, but this was only somewhat true. “We made it our own. They [Navy] called it their ship and we [Marines] called it our bus,” said Mr. Almquist with a wry smile.

One of his jobs while on the Coalition Task Force was Master at Arms Augmentation, otherwise known as the military police on the ship. His unit secured pirates brought on board. For the duration of his service on the task force, he was in charge of a total of ten pirates.

One of the pirates put in the custody of Mr. Almquist was involved in the successful takeover of the *Maersk Alabama* off the coast of Somalia in 2009. The pirates had successfully hijacked the vessel under Captain Richard Phillips. Once the pirates were aboard, Captain Phillips and most of the crew were captured. It was then the pirates realized they lacked the knowledge about how to steer the ship. American ships were dispatched to rescue the captain and crew, and Navy SEALs killed three of the pirates who held Captain Phillips hostage in a lifeboat. In 2010, Captain Phillips wrote a book about this experience called *A Captain's Duty*, and a movie was made in 2013 called *Captain Phillips*, starring Tom Hanks as Captain Phillips. Mr. Almquist's role in this situation started where the movie left off. Three out of the four pirates were dead, and the surviving one had been put under his charge. "At the time I didn't realize that this was the surviving pirate, that there would be a movie over the situation...I was just doing my job," Mr. Almquist said.

When asked if it was scary to be policing pirates he says, "There were jitters the first time, but after seeing them [the pirates] that went away. They didn't pose much of a threat." The men who were pirating, mostly small-framed unemployed farmers, looked at the work as a typical 9-to-5 job. The youngest pirate detained was 15 years old. After seeing these men, he and the other Marines in his task force lost their sense of fear. However, Mr. Almquist notes that, to civilians, the pirates were very much a threat. This is why the task force was so important. "It felt good to be a part of something you just knew was the right thing to do, and the whole world was behind it," Mr. Almquist said, beaming with pride. Different nations would share the role of policing the dangerous water off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden, and Mr. Almquist was able to meet officers from other nations and promote international relations through his military service.

Another experience for Benjamin Almquist's military career that involved meeting soldiers from other nations was when he cross-trained for a week with French Marines in Africa in a desert-warfare

and survival school. The aim of the training was to give the trainees different tactical and survival tools in order to be able to live and survive in the desert. He says that it was challenging because it was survival and combat together, a double-edged sword, but he welcomed the challenge boldly. “You were on a mission, but also worrying about your own personal survival in a location that was very uncomfortable,” he explained. The training course was designed to push physical limits and was one of Mr. Almquist’s favorite portions of the school. The training pushed him because of its level of difficulty, teaching him to survive with only the most basic items to aid him on missions.

A particular difficulty that Mr. Almquist encountered was the language barrier between English and French troops. “Very few Americans spoke any French. Very few of them spoke any English. We didn't interact much with the French Marines. Couldn't understand them,” Mr. Almquist said. Even with the language barrier, at the end of the training school both groups still joyfully traded pieces of uniforms and took pictures with the other unit's weapons. Overall, the desert survival and combat training with the French Marines “was a great experience,” he said. He continued in a serious tone: “I would hope that our military, our government would add more cross training to promote greater strategic skills and communication with our allies.”

It was a childhood dream that came true for Benjamin Almquist when he was able to join the Marines and serve four proud years. Benjamin Almquist wanted to emulate the admirable traits of his father’s military service, and he did so when he protected his country and those in need all over the world. “They were amazing experiences. Those are the kinds of things that when I joined the Marines I didn't anticipate at all, and they will be with me forever,” said Mr. Almquist. Now out of the service, Benjamin Almquist will always be a proud United States Marine. Semper Fi.