

From Father Carl in Afghanistan: Much More Than an 8th Grade Journal Assignment

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One of this writer's favorite activities is communicating, using various methods, with some of my former students. (I may be one of the older people to use Facebook, but I DO have more "friends" on that site than any of my own kids have.) Awhile back, I received an e-mail from one of my all-time favorite nerds. This young man, who used to hang around with the same crowd as my youngest daughter, certainly pursued a checkered path after his days in Room D-2 memorizing prepositions and writing 40-line Journals. I was often amused to hear just what he was up to. He was in the Merchant Marines, attended several colleges with an untold number of major courses of study, took off for some time on a motorcycle, traveled extensively, studied to become a priest, joined the clergy, enlisted in our military, and seemingly cheerfully, headed off into harm's way.

By now, many of you readers will recognize that the young man in question is none other than Carl Subler, VHS Class of 1993. In addition to being Carl's 8th Grade English teacher, where he kept the entire class as well as the teacher constantly entertained with his off-the-wall sense of humor, I was also his junior high track coach. There was one year back in the late 1980s when the school simply could not find someone to coach junior high boys' track. Dave Schmitz was the head track coach and twisted my arm until I agreed to fill in for a year until they could have more time to look for another victim.

Carl was an eighth grader at the time and could not run water out of a tap, much less compete with the fastest kids in the school. He was also the proverbial ninety-seven-pound weakling and could not jump high enough to clear his throat if he had a cough. So naturally, he became a hurdler. We worked together all year. He was a determined little guy and somehow developed his own peculiar style of hurdling. I recall his skinny lead leg basically draping itself over the edge of the hurdle as his trail leg flopped behind him and slithered its way AROUND the hurdle as he plodded toward the next barrier. That worked just fine until someone put hurdles in the lanes beside his. Then he had to invent a way for BOTH legs to get over the same obstacle. To his credit, he did so and, despite his lack of sprinting speed between hurdles, eventually became fairly competitive in dual meets where there were other less-than-stellar runners against whom to run.

I should have realized way back then that Carl Subler was destined to achieve great things, even if these were not the activities for which he seemed best suited. His recent e-mail to me came by way of a U.S. Military server. He is now Father Subler, a Captain in the United States Army. He is stationed in Afghanistan, where he is definitely NOT just hanging back and watching the show.

He travels by all sorts of military vehicles around most of that desolate country serving as Chaplain for our soldiers who are busy hunting for Osama and doing battle with the Taliban. What Father Carl must do virtually every day is FAR more adventurous than almost any of us back home ever experience in our entire lives.

Father Carl has been "blogging" back to his friends and relatives ever since he first went overseas. I am a fairly recent recipient of these fascinating communiques. Almost matter-of-factly, he relates serving Mass to anyone whom he can reach in the field, riding in the Stryker vehicles that may be the most popular targets for the IEDs (improvised explosive devices) that continue to be one of the greatest dangers to our troops and Afghan civilians alike, rolling off his bed to lie on the floor during mortar attacks that must be much too close-by, and lovingly administering the Sacraments to dying young men. Carl wanted me, his favorite 8th Grade English teacher and occasional newspaper writer, to tell his stories for him in our local paper, the *Versailles Policy*. I must confess that I could NEVER tell these stories as well as Father Carl tells them. No way! He is living the life; I would merely be re-telling the events.

Thus begins a series of articles about life in Afghanistan as told by a guy who knows it best. I plan to reprint some of Father Carl's e-mails, with occasional extra information provided by some of the other VHS graduates with whom he comes into contact. One of these brave young men is Dustin Kaiser, VHS Class of 2006, which just happens to be the last group of 8th graders I taught before retiring from teaching in 2002. Yes, that is Dustin, the strapping young man who is standing next to the shorter balding priest in the picture. I must say that I would have recognized Dustin much sooner than Carl. He has not changed quite so much since junior high. Sure, Dustin is quite a bit bigger now, and I do not recall him ever carrying an assault rifle into my class, but Carl, what

happened to you? I must confess that I experience a small amount of joy when I see one of my former students whose hairline has receded even farther than mine has.

I have been attempting to contact Dustin by e-mail but have not received a reply as yet.

Dustin can certainly be forgiven. He is currently classified an Infantryman, but he is more accurately described as a sniper/scout. What he does on a daily basis would scare the bejeebers out of me. There may be nearly 70,000 American troops currently in Afghanistan, but the vast majority of those braver-than-I souls would be classified as support personnel. Here it is in Carl's own words:

"Don't make the mistake of thinking there are 68,000 troops walking around hunting the Taliban. As a matter of fact, most troops are support types who never leave the relative safety of the FOB (Forward Operating Base)..we call them types FOBBITS...you know like Hobbits?...get it?

So we have a lot of troops here, but they are cooks, finance, medical, lawyers, mechanics, supply, logistics, etc. All of these troops are needed, no question, but the trigger pullers, the guys actually hunting the Taliban (like Dustin) are far fewer in number."

Father Carl is obviously downplaying his own role in this conflict. He, as well as every other American stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq, is in constant danger. Apparently, he just wanted to emphasize just how important Justin's task is. In the coming weeks, we shall hear more from Father Carl, and hopefully from Justin. And maybe we will even hear from Phil Poeppelman, VHS Class of 1996, who is also "over there" as a pilot of a C-17. Carl explained it to me thusly, *"The C-17 is the Air Force's 4 engined heavy lift transport aircraft. The Air Force uses them to drop paratroopers and bring supplies into hard to reach locations. It has unique capabilities that enables it to take off and land on very short and unimproved runways. Philip's aircraft flew the U.S. Army's Stryker (eight wheeled armored vehicles designed to move troops in and out of battle quickly) into Afghanistsan."*

As I said, Carl tells it better than I ever could. His former 8th Grade English teacher will certainly forgive his occasional grammar or spelling error. After all, I am sitting in a comfortable chair in my comfortable home in comfortable Versailles, Ohio. Carl might be writing his stuff from the back of a Stryker vehicle or in a Humvee rocking along a dirt road or while flying from camp to camp in an Army helicopter. I have retired my favorite red pen anyway.

