

The Hero Code

What's in it for me? Learn to live like a hero.

As children, lots of us want to be heroes when we grow up. Whether we're inspired by fictional characters like Superman or real-life heroes like soldiers and firefighters, many of us nurture a burning ambition to one day be extraordinary – in other words, to be heroic. But something happens as we grow up, and little by little we lose touch with that ambition. That's where these blinks come in. Blending the first-hand military anecdotes of a real-life hero – Admiral McRaven – with accounts of heroism in civilian life which have inspired him, they remind us of the key virtues that can transform anyone into a hero. In these blinks, you'll learn

why female soldiers were crucial in Afghanistan; why integrity goes far in the Pentagon; and how a failed rescue mission turned out to be a huge success.

Heroes always strive to be courageous.

In October 2011, Admiral William H. McRaven was sitting in the command center of his Special Operations headquarters in Tampa, Florida when the daily casualty report came through, bringing word of the night's fatalities. The news was particularly bad. Overnight, a mission in Afghanistan had gone wrong. Three soldiers on a routine mission had come across a booby-trapped Taliban compound, accidentally triggering a powerful pressure-plate mine. When it exploded, all three were killed. The loss of three soldiers was a serious blow to their teams in Afghanistan – not to mention their families back home. But for McRaven, there was also a personal element to the loss; he was responsible for one of the soldiers, Lieutenant Ashley White, being in Afghanistan in the first place. To him, she'd always been a model of courage. The key message here is: Heroes always strive to be courageous. In 2008, Admiral McRaven had identified a gap in the military's strategy in Afghanistan. The vast majority of the soldiers on the ground were men – a fact which was causing trouble in dealing with some Afghan women. These women often had vital information about the Taliban's activities, but they were usually reluctant to share it with male soldiers. So McRaven established female Cultural Support Teams, tasked with collecting the vital information that servicemen struggled to secure. From the start, McRaven knew any women undertaking this role would need a lot of courage – after all, they'd be doing their jobs in live combat situations. Lieutenant White, an early volunteer, had both courage and ability in abundance. At Fort Bragg, North Carolina, she underwent intense physical and psychological training, which she took in stride. And when the time came for actual deployment, Lieutenant White's bravery never flagged. Night after night, she threw on her body armor, took hold of her gun, and journeyed into the darkness, not knowing whether, this time, she'd make it out alive. When Lieutenant White died in October 2011, America lost a promising young soldier, and her loved ones lost even more than that. But the bravery she embodied survives, a shining example to us all. Most of us are never required to show our bravery in as heroic a manner as Lieutenant White did – but we all face challenges in our lives. Whether it's the courage to face your inner demons, to provide a safe home for your family, or just to stand up for what you know is right, try taking the first step forward: that's often the most daunting part.

Heroes make sacrifices for others.

It was 1968, over halfway through the Vietnam War, when a small US reconnaissance team landed on Hill 146 in the Quan Duc Valley of Vietnam. It was a strategic position, and the Vietcong didn't want it occupied by enemy forces. In a last-ditch attempt to fend off their enemies, the Vietcong had covered what remained of the hill with mines and punji pits – deep, hidden holes harboring poison-tipped spears. But that wasn't all they had in store. When the US reconnaissance team landed, the Vietcong began a ferocious assault, using rockets, explosives, and grenades against the men. During the assault, a grenade landed near the foot of a young Black Marine, Private First Class Ralph H. Johnson. Without hesitation, Johnson threw himself on the grenade, absorbing its blast and shielding his fellow Marines from its full force, sacrificing his own life in the process. The key message here is: Heroes make sacrifices for others. Stunned by Johnson's extraordinary act of sacrifice, the Marines rallied, holding strong against the Vietcong until reinforcements arrived. For his selfless actions that day, Johnson was posthumously given the Medal of Honor, the highest military decoration that can be awarded. His deeds resulted in official recognition: In 2018, the newest destroyer in the United States Navy was named the USS Ralph Johnson. More importantly, though, Johnson's bravery also served as a powerful political symbol. The America Johnson had fought for in the late 1960s was a divided one. The country was changing, and no issue was more divisive at the time than racial politics. But Johnson's act of valor – his selfless and brave sacrifice for his fellow American servicemen – spoke with the eloquence of ten thousand speeches and editorials. His deeds argued for the dignity of all US citizens, regardless of the color of their skin. It's not enough to memorialize

Johnson in ship names and honors – we should commemorate him in our deeds, too. This young Black Marine sacrificed his life for a noble cause: protecting the men he served alongside. That willingness to sacrifice is something we can all emulate. Maybe not in quite such a dramatic fashion, no. But when you give freely of yourself day after day, it adds up. When you sacrifice your time and energy to look after an ailing relative, or just pay special attention to a friend in need, try to remember that each act of sacrifice brings you a little closer to being a hero.

A hero always acts with integrity.

Bespectacled, short, and walking with a slight limp, Navy SEAL Captain Ted Grabowsky didn't conform to most people's image of an all-American warrior. Vice Admiral Joe Metcalf, on the other hand, did. He was a straight-talking, gruff, no-nonsense serviceman. When Grabowsky proposed an ambitious two-year budget for the SEALs, the vice admiral wasn't averse to giving him an intense grilling. After all, Vietnam was over, and the Cold War was in full swing. What good were SEALs when the conflict had turned nuclear? The vice admiral scoffed his way through Grabowsky's presentation, then finally spoke: "I want to help," he growled, "but do you really need all this money?" The author waited for Grabowsky, his boss at the time, to answer. He knew Grabowsky knew the score at the Pentagon: once you'd presented your budget, you never backed down. Instead of haggling, you wanted to convey a sense of finality. But Grabowsky paused, then responded, "We can take some cuts." The key message here is: A hero always acts with integrity. Grabowsky had told the truth – and to the author, this came as a shock. Accepting cuts simply wasn't how things were done. If you wanted a decent budget, you had to play hardball and act like every cent was necessary. But for some reason, Grabowsky wasn't willing to do that. Why not? Well, Grabowsky explained himself to the author once the meeting had ended: the financial comptrollers already had a decent estimate of the resources the SEALs required, he clarified, and if he'd insisted they needed more, it would have undermined his credibility. In order to survive in the Pentagon, Captain Grabowsky had one golden rule: "You must never lie or misrepresent the truth." It wasn't just about doing the right thing – it was also a recipe for success. When you show integrity, you tell people that you're worthy of trust – and when people know you can be trusted, you'll find yourself rewarded with responsibility, love, and friendship. For that reason, heroes always demonstrate integrity. Not only do they always tell the truth, they also act on what they believe. You see, integrity can't be passive: it always involves taking the steep and thorny path to success – even when pleasant but dishonest routes seem tempting. Sometimes that might mean facing persecution for what you believe in. At others, all it takes is telling the truth about a budget.

Heroes don't give up – they persevere.

When James Patrick Allison was 11 years old, he lost his mother to cancer. Not long afterward, he lost two of his uncles to the same disease. Like anyone else, Allison grieved. But instead of brooding on his loss forever, he decided to do something. Allison was going to find a cure for cancer. As a young man, he enrolled at the University of Texas, where he studied T-cells – a type of cell in the human body that attacks infections and regulates the immune system. At the time, it occurred to him that T-cells could play a role in fighting cancer. He was right. After years of research, he managed to develop a drug that allowed T-cells to kill cancer in mice. His findings astounded him – with effects like these in animals, who knew what the effects would be in humans? To find out, Allison needed support. But getting it would require all the perseverance he could muster. The key message here is: Heroes don't give up – they persevere. Despite Allison's groundbreaking research, drug companies didn't want to hear about his research. They'd already pumped millions into failed treatments for cancer. To them, Jim Allison's promises sounded like just another pipe dream. Many people would have been discouraged and given up. Allison had already spent decades in the laboratory: after all that work, he'd finally hit on something groundbreaking – but nobody wanted to know! But Allison didn't give up. He persevered. He believed in his research, and he continued to advocate for it, despite the indifference of the pharmaceutical companies. And, eventually, someone listened: Bristol Myers Squibb, a drug company, provided the funding for human trials. The results were encouraging. The FDA approved Allison's drug in 2011, and since then over one million patients have received it. While it hasn't cured everyone, it has saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Dr. Allison's work ultimately earned him the Nobel Prize for Medicine. But had it not been for his perseverance, the world might never have heard of his medical discoveries. You see, heroes don't make history thanks to their abilities alone. For every Olympic gold medallist, there's an equally talented runner who never stuck out the grueling training. And for every Dr. Allison, there's another scientist who lost faith in his own research. The thing that distinguishes heroism from ordinary talent is perseverance.

Heroes always fulfill their duties.

The late Republican Senator John McCain hailed from a military family – a naval one, to be precise. In fact, he

was the son and grandson of top-ranking Navy four-star admirals. With relations like that, it came as no surprise when McCain graduated from the United States Naval Academy and shipped out to fight in the Vietnam War. What was staggering, though, was how seriously the young McCain took his duties. In July of 1967, the young serviceman's first year in Vietnam, a fire erupted aboard his aircraft carrier, and McCain was seriously wounded while pulling a fellow aviator to safety. As soon as he recovered from his injuries, McCain asked to ship out again. Soon afterward, though, misfortune struck for a second time. On his twenty-third bombing run over Hanoi, McCain's plane was shot down – and he was taken captive by the enemy. The key message here is: Heroes always fulfill their duties. Being captured was just the beginning of the saga for McCain. Over the ensuing months, he and his fellow prisoners of war were tortured, interrogated, and given next to no medical treatment. It was a miserable existence. That's when the North Vietnamese realized he was the son of an American admiral. Immediately, they hit on an idea: if they released McCain early because of his family and connections, it would breed disillusion among regular US troops and lower their morale. Who could have blamed McCain for leaving? He was being handed his freedom on a silver platter. But Article III of the military Code of Conduct says, "I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy." So McCain faced a stark choice: He could either fulfill his duty and endure indefinite misery far from home – or take the easy way out and break his vows. In the end, McCain wasn't going to neglect his duties. He made the hero's choice and stayed. It would be five long years before he and the other POWs were released. In life, each of us has a job to do – as a friend, as a member of a family, as a worker, as a citizen: when these duties come into conflict with our desires, it's worth remembering that all heroism depends on making the tougher choice.

It's heroic to give others hope.

Over the course of the Vietnam war, more than one thousand Americans were taken prisoner. Their treatment at the hands of their Vietnamese enemies could be brutal, as John McCain knew all too well. Kept captive for years on end, they were subjected to beatings and isolation, and sometimes were even refused food and water. As time went on, many men lost hope, and their initial faith that they'd soon return home faded with the years. But then, in November 1970, an Army Special Forces unit called the Green Berets launched a rescue operation to liberate 60 prisoners of war. The team arrived at a camp called Son Tay and engaged in a firefight that left 42 enemy soldiers dead. But after that protracted struggle, they realized they'd come too late: the prisoners had been moved. They did find out about the raid, though. So while it wasn't able to grant the prisoners their freedom, it did give them something almost as important: hope. The key message here is: It's heroic to give others hope. When the prisoners were eventually released, Texan billionaire Ross Perot hosted a reunion for them, along with their families and the Green Beret unit who'd tried to rescue them. In the intervening years, that rescue team had tormented themselves about their failure. Because they'd come too late, they reasoned, the POWs had endured another two whole years of pain and hunger. But that's not how the imprisoned men had seen things. From their point of view, the raid had still failed, of course – but they said it succeeded in restoring their hope. It showed the POWs that they hadn't been forgotten. Sure, things on the ground might have been dismal – but their dedicated fellow soldiers were still putting their lives on the line to set them free, and that meant a lot. In fact, it kept them going. That's what hope does, after all. It might not change anything concrete today, but it promises a better tomorrow – and often, that's enough. We're not all cut out to inspire hope in the way those brave Green Berets were, but we all have our own strengths: whether you're an inspiring teacher, an understanding dad, or a hard-working nurse, play to your strengths, and inspire a little hope whenever you can.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Some heroes distinguish themselves in a sudden moment of glory – but for most of us, heroism is a slower, day-to-day affair. By practicing some key virtues – like courage, integrity and perseverance – and by fulfilling our duties, making daily sacrifices, and inspiring hope, we can all come a few steps closer to being heroes. Actionable advice: Humor's a powerful tool – so make use of it. In American history, few heroes loom as large as Abraham Lincoln – but we often overlook the key role that humor played in his ability to build rapport, inspire loyalty, and defuse tensions. Being a hero doesn't mean that you have to be dry and humorless; on the contrary, making people laugh is a skill that any hero should be proud to possess. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with The Hero Code as the subject line and share your thoughts!