

# Starting Strength

## Strength in Combat

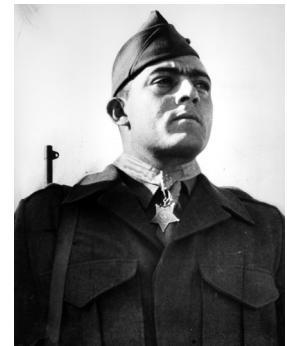
by

**Adam Lauritzen**

It is easy to accept that throughout antiquity, strength was an advantage in combat. Being physically capable of smashing your opponent's equipment and bones also contributed to a combatant's survival. Some of the American public and even members of the military are under the impression that our technological superiority will guarantee victory in the conflicts to come. This is wishful thinking at its worst. The reality is that in order to win, someone has to go somewhere and physically stop the enemy from doing whatever it is we disagree with, and this will be dependent on the strength of the individual combatant. In every modern conflict, singular acts of valor occurred, which demonstrate an ever present need for our troops to be individually strong.

### World War II

John Basilone was a machine gun section leader charged with the defense of Henderson Field, an airfield of strategic importance on the island of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. The marines had captured the airfield after encountering light resistance, but the Japanese decided they wanted it back after realizing the field's significance. Most people are aware of the unrelenting, fanatical nature of the Japanese assaults against American troops during the Second World War; this was exactly that. The Americans were at the end of their supply line, outfitted with antiquated equipment from WWI, fighting against an enemy with a reputation for being invincible in the Pacific.



On the night of October 25, Basilone earned the Congressional Medal of Honor by defending the line. Specifically, the situation had gotten so bad that in order to effectively employ a machine gun, he had to place the weapon on his forearm to traverse the area necessary to stop the assault. That particular machine gun was water cooled and weighed about 37 pounds without ammunition. He held the hot weapon on his forearm long enough to cause third degree burns. The 25th was the climax of the three-day battle for the airfield. In addition to holding the line, he braved fire to put an extra gun into position, repair another gun, and battle through hostile lines to obtain more rounds

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when ammunition was low and supply lines were cut off. Had Basilone not been up to the physical demands of the situation, we probably would not know who he was – and we'd have a different version of history, for at least that battle. His strength, and not his 5-mile-time, was the critical factor in his performance. He repeated his heroic actions during the invasion of Iwo Jima, before being killed in action. He was posthumously honored with the Navy Cross, becoming the only enlisted WWII-era Marine to receive both the Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross.

## **Korea**

During the Korean War, physical strength was again present. Once the Chinese entered the war, savage fighting with American units being outnumbered became the typical engagement. This was the case when Benjamin F. Wilson showed how useful strength can be in that kind of fight, and as a leader.

Wilson was a 1st Sgt, the highest enlisted rank that an infantry company would have had. Leaders need to be able to perform tasks one rank below and two ranks above their current rank. This ensures a few things, the first being that the leader knows to what standard and how individual tasks should be performed, and the second being that if links in the chain of command are broken they can be replaced with as little disruption as possible. A leader who is weak does not inspire confidence at any level, from junior enlisted to general officer.

As the senior enlisted in his company, Wilson showed his strength multiple times by refusing to be evacuated after receiving injuries and in a display of courage that the Army deemed appropriate to commission him as an officer. From his Medal of Honor citation: "1st Lt Wilson charged the enemy ranks and fought valiantly, killing three enemy soldiers with his rifle before it was wrested from his hands, and annihilating four others with his entrenching tool."

To clarify what happened, this man recognized a breach in the line and rushed to fill it and, in doing so, shot three Chinese with his rifle. Then, when that was taken from him, he dispatched four more with a folding shovel, after being wounded to the point that he was carried on a stretcher to be evacuated. Using brute force and violence of action, he allowed his comrades to withdraw and live to fight another day.

## **Viet Nam**

When things get really bad, being strong is something that improves not only your chances of survival, but those of your teammates' chances as well. Roy Benavidez illustrated this in the jungles of Viet Nam in 1968. When a 12-man team from his Special Forces unit requested an extraction, after receiving heavy opposition from a vastly numerically superior force, Benavidez volunteered to help.

Upon arrival at the contested landing zone, Benavidez crossed 75 meters of terrain to reach his teammates. In the process he was "wounded in his right leg, face, and head. Despite these painful injuries, he took charge, repositioning the team members and directing their fire to facilitate the landing of an extraction aircraft and the loading of wounded and dead team members. He then threw smoke canisters to direct the aircraft to the team's position. Despite his severe wounds and under intense enemy fire, he carried and dragged half of the wounded team members to the awaiting aircraft."



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While retrieving classified documents from a fallen comrade's body, things went from bad to terrible for Benavidez and everyone around him. "When he reached the leader's body, Sergeant Benavidez was severely wounded by small arms fire in the abdomen and by grenade fragments in his back. At nearly the same moment, the aircraft pilot was mortally wounded, and his helicopter crashed. Although in extremely critical condition due to his multiple wounds, Sergeant Benavidez secured the classified documents and made his way back to the wreckage, where he aided the wounded out of the overturned aircraft."

Benavidez then proceeded to load the same wounded on another helicopter and make a final check of the perimeter to ensure no one was left behind. In doing so, he was wounded yet again while engaged in hand-to-hand combat. After successfully destroying that adversary, he allowed himself to be loaded onto the helicopter for evacuation.

In 1991, Benavidez was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. During his acceptance speech, he added to what was in his citation. When they returned to the staging area, it was discovered that Benavidez had also loaded the bodies of three enemy combatants. For six hours of intense combat and while wounded, Master Sergeant Benavidez displayed physical and mental strength that saved the lives of at least eight of his teammates.

## **Afghanistan**

Technological advancements have given our modern warfighters weapons that have high capacity magazines and belt-fed automatic weapons, reducing the need to reload. Eventually, however, you will run out of rounds, maybe face-to-face with the enemy, and what then? You must use any weapon of opportunity to gain advantage over your opponent and survive the encounter.

This is exactly what happened to Corporal Clifford Wooldridge in the summer of 2010 while he was deployed to Afghanistan. Wooldridge led his fire team in flanking an enemy element of 15 fighters who were preparing an ambush. After destroying the element, Wooldridge held security while the rest of his team withdrew. At that time, he heard voices of combatants around the corner from



his position. Wooldridge turned the corner and engaged two Taliban, destroying them with his light machine gun. While reloading the belt-fed weapon, he saw the barrel of an enemy rifle coming around the corner. He seized the enemy's weapon and physically overwhelmed the combatant, bludgeoning his head and neck with the weapon, killing him. His individual actions thwarted the attack on his platoon, and his strength saved his life. Wooldridge was honored with the Navy Cross in 2012.

## **Iraq**

Strength is obviously important to the infantryman as the stories above illustrate, but it is important to every military occupational specialty (MOS) in the military. In my own experience as a Marine Corps Combat Engineer, I was fortunate to see all three sides of the Marine Corps. As a member of 1st Marine Division for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, I was attached to a tank battalion, responsible not only for performing infantry tasks, but also breaching for the unit's mobility and constructing obstacles to inhibit the enemy's mobility. Members of my squad and I carried nearly 50lbs of standard gear and anywhere from 15-35lbs of demolitions and specialized gear.

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My next unit was an Air Wing unit, in which engineers are responsible for runway repair after the airfield is attacked. While that never happened, we still trained for it. This meant using materials like concrete and enormous fiberglass mats to fill and cover practice holes in the runway – very arduous labor – as quickly as possible.

My last unit was an engineer support battalion, in which one of the tasks is bridge construction. We would typically use a medium girder bridge, which is essentially a gigantic Lego set with the smallest pieces weighing 136lbs and the largest weighing 600lbs. These pieces are big, heavy, and awkward. Each individual had to pick up these pieces multiple times, requiring endurance and strength. Every member of the team owed it to the rest to be strong so that these tasks could be performed quickly and as safely as possible.



## Today

The artillerymen must manipulate and load their cannons, and supply must move boxes of equipment. All MOSs will have a need for strength at some point, even the administrative clerk at least once per year, when every member of the military must perform some sort of annual physical fitness test. The strength portions of the tests – usually pushups or pull ups – are more easily completed if you are stronger.

Pushups and pull ups measure strength to a minimum requirement – they do not make you stronger once the minimum is met. More commonly, the weight of an individual's gear is at least 35lbs, but probably closer to 50lbs when it's time to go outside the wire. A stronger person is less burdened by the weight that is borne while doing whatever the task may be. The best way to get stronger is using barbells in a linear progression. Each base has a gym facility where this can take place.



The military trains for combat day in and day out because all possible training should be conducted BEFORE you get to combat. Being strong is no different. Each individual member of the unit owes it to his teammates to be performing at his absolute best; thus, each member must take the initiative – regardless of what the mandated physical training standards are – to get strong.

Three-mile motivational battalion runs are stupid; deadlifting twice bodyweight is not. The battalion run is stupid-easy; the deadlift will take an investment of time, and is worth the time when you can do your job better than you did before.

While our technology gives us an advantage, wars are won by people on the ground. Those people on the ground need to be strong enough to beat an enemy combatant to death with his own weapon if necessary. Another common scenario is evacuating an incapacitated comrade. This obviously requires not only the strength to move them out of harm's way, but the strength to do so quickly. So absolute strength is desirable, as is the ability to repeat feats of strength as the need arises. The supporting elements need to be strong enough to give the infantryman the advantage of that technology on demand.

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Despite our technology, strength is just as valuable now as it was for Achilles.

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