

Tattoos, Ralph Willsey

Fancy scars. They're just fancy scars filled with ink. Some folks get them because they look cool. Some because they want to count coup. I do it to tell a story. The important parts of my life are scribed on my body in the most indelible of inks. The friends I'll see on the other side. The things I want to remember. The demons I must never forget.

Probably the best place to start is at the beginning. I decided to get a tattoo sometime in junior high. The ideas changed with the years, until I finally settled on my family crest in my senior year. My dad had found it in a book on the Wiltze family: a puffin and a Moor's head on an orange shield with a wreath. My ancestors were some bad people. They were one of the few Barbarian tribes to actually defeat the Roman legions in combat—repeatedly. Later, during the Crusades, they kept the Moors from moving through the Pyrenees mountains in to France. At some point between those eras, a portion of them immigrated to Ireland. My sister paid for my first ritual scarring. A very permanent graduation present, I think.

The second came from a discussion with my friend, Tony. We were going over Chinese philosophy and martial arts while working out. He told me about the Chinese belief that the sword is a demon to be contained. To that end, the swordsmiths would engrave the hilt and scabbard of each sword with the Yin and Yang, along with the eight walls of protection. I pondered that for a time, thinking about the good and evil in man, that sort of thing. After a while I decided it would make a nifty piece of artwork for my shoulder. I came home on leave, wrangled up my dad and my buddy Duncan, and headed to Erie Boulevard. I can't remember the name of the shop, sadly. Their work wasn't stellar by any stretch of the imagination. Despite that, Dad and Duncan walked out with their first tattoos, and I with my second. I have used the physical reminder to keep my temper in check more times than I can recall. I'm quite sure it's kept me from being demoted a couple of times.

The third one was started after my first tour in Iraq. It memorializes an event that caused a couple of people to get physical scars to go with the emotional ones. What happened is not something I like to talk about, but we lost a squad that day. Billy Rose got dog tags inked on his arm to keep our friends always by his side. I got the date: May sixth. It is a day I remember every year with sadness and anger. I originally thought it was enough, but something wanted to add to it. I had *Vis Viris et Fides* and *Dei Belli* carved around the initial bit. They're the platoon and company mottos, respectively: "Strength and Honor" and "Gods of War." That way I'll always remember the Gladiators we lost: Romeo, Harkins, Alexander, Purcel, Vaughn, Bradshaw, Lewis and Crazy Ivan.

During my second tour, my father passed. He was the man I strive to be like: personable, quick with a joke, slow to anger. He had been in AA longer than I've been alive. When I was younger, I'd go with him to the holiday and anniversary meetings. The anniversaries were my favorite because you got to see people getting their new chips to

mark how long they'd been in the program and sober. And there was cake. Can't forget the cake. It was *really* good. But I digress. Dad always gave of himself, and he never asked for much in return. I didn't talk and visit with him near as much as I wish I had. So many stories I wish he'd shared. Guess I'll ask when I see him again. When I do, I'll show him the coin Jesse scribbled on my arm to mark his passing. It's not done yet; I have to get the tails side done under my arm. I think Dad'll like it.

Also during my second tour, Shay and Selge went off a bridge. Two more of my brothers, taken from me by fate and war. They were good men. Todd Selge was one of the best squad leaders I've known. He didn't brook any crap, took good care of his soldiers, and went head first into everything. Whether it was finishing up the day's paperwork or taking a house, Selge was always the first one to try to get it done and done right. Jordan Shay I watched him grow from a shiny new private in Iraq into one hell of a team leader. He matured under Selge's wing, and he listened to the experienced guys. He was also our beer pong champion. I put their memories on my arms, embedded in dogs of war: Todd on the left and Jordan the right. The night they passed was the first time I cried in years. I mourned their passing with my tradition of blood and ink.

Bear with me for a moment while I side track a bit. Todd and Jordan passed in September of 2009. Dad didn't go until May of 2010. Now, it seems like the last two bits are out of order. They aren't because I'm going by when I actually got the tattoos. I actually got the coin before I got the others. I knew exactly what I would get for my father. It took some time and some serious thinking to figure out what best fit for Jordan and Todd.

The latest is an old Greek saying, "MOLON LABE." If you know the story of Thermopylae, then you know that when the Persians told the Spartans, "Put down your arms," the Greeks replied, "Come and take them." That reply in the old Greek is, "MOLON LABE." This was my first tattoo in a long time that didn't mark the passage of a friend or loved one. It was for me, to mark my beliefs before the eyes of God and man. Now, I'm not going to get into a political or philosophical debate over government, gun ownership, and the like, but I'm right along with Charlton Heston when he said, "From my cold, dead hands." That's the way I feel, so it now adorns my shoulders in black.

I have a new one being drawn up: it's Beaker dressed as the Comedian from "Watchmen." For those who know my absurd, almost schizophrenic, sense of humor, the two sides are reflected in the idea. Beaker is all the silliness and childish, simple humor. The Comedian is something else entirely. Malicious and loathsome, laughing at a joke no one else gets. Knowing that if you don't laugh at the darkness in the world and in yourself, it will consume you without an afterthought. Well, maybe, "He was tasty," but not much else. A lot of my friends think the idea is stupid, but it doesn't mean anything to them. It doesn't have to, it just has to have meaning for me. And if they don't get the joke, well, they're missing out then.

So that's the meaning of my doodle. I fully plan on getting more. I've currently no ideas for what's next. I do have one precept, though: no names. That ruins relationships. When the next big thing happens, or the next idea strikes me upside the head, I'll

scratch it down and ponder it. I figure life marks you as you go, why not show the world what it did and who was there? I've got a lot of canvas left to fill.