

# More Than a Soldier

## The Hero Who Walked With Me Through War and Life

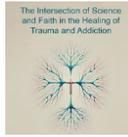


By Dr. Jeffrey E. Hansen

**Everybody needs a hero. Mine was MAJ Al Johnson.**



Let me explain. It was 1992, and I had been activated for deployment to Somalia with the 62nd Medical Group. At the time, I was a pediatric psychologist, most of my Army career spent safely within the walls of medical centers. I knew little to nothing about the basic tasks of soldiering, especially in combat situations. I had volunteered to go, envisioning myself handing out candy bars to kids in a humanitarian mission. I had no idea what I was walking into.



**More Than a Soldier**  
– Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

Then came Al. MAJ Al Johnson. A soldier's soldier. Steeped in experience, calm under fire, sharp as a tack, and full of quiet wisdom. He had seen combat before and somehow, by mercy or instinct, decided to take me under his wing. And take me under his wing he did.

Our first firefight happened not long after we landed. I wasn't even sure what was going on. I wasn't a warfighter; I was more at risk of shooting myself with my Beretta than defending anyone. The chaos erupted around us, and before I could even process it, Al had dashed through incoming fire to retrieve my flak jacket and helmet. He ran back, tossed them into my hands, and said, "Here, put these on." Al was not just a shield, but a center. In the nights of firefights and uncertainty, he anchored me. I joke that my biggest accomplishment was a perfect 10.0 dive under a table during our first firefight, but it was Al who kept me intact. Body, mind, and spirit.

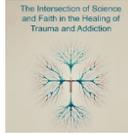


From that moment on, I followed Al like a shadow. When Al looked confident, I felt safe. When Al showed caution, I stopped dead in my tracks. He taught me how to read the cues that meant danger, how to steady my nerves, and how to survive, physically, mentally, and spiritually. One day I heard a strange noise zip past my head. I barely reacted. Al turned and said, "Did you hear that?" I answered casually, "Yeah." He said, "Jeff, that was a round that barely

missed us." He never let me forget the serious...

Our unit had taken over a once-beautiful university in Mogadishu. Somalia, tragically, had been stripped of almost everything. No electricity, no running water, no glass in the windows, no wires on the poles. Even the ceramic caps had been torn off the telephone poles. People bathed in the streets. Cardboard and tin shacks lined the roads. And warlords like General Aidid controlled it all, starving children to death while aid trickled through under threat of attack. The stench of despair was everywhere. ...





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I remember our flight home vividly. We boarded a massive C-5 Galaxy, grateful to be alive. But barely an hour into the flight, we hit turbulence like I had never experienced. And I'm the son of a pilot; I've had more than a few white-knuckle flights. But this? This was different. Even the flight crew looked spooked. And that's when Al turned to me and said, "Jeff, do you pray? If so, now would be a good time." And we prayed together in silence. Few words. Much faith. As always, I followed his lead.

After Somalia, our friendship only deepened. Al was brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. He read voraciously, thought deeply, and could have a conversation about quantum mechanics, ancient philosophy, military strategy, or the inner workings of the human soul, all over coffee. He was endlessly curious, but never arrogant. He loved his wife, Marty, with all his heart, and he beamed with pride every time he talked about his son, JJ.

He was my sounding board for clinical cases, my guide through military matters, and my sparring partner in all things intellectual and philosophical. I had more years planned with him, more late-night conversations, more "downloads" on the big questions of life. But those years won't come on this side of eternity.

Since Al's passing, I've had the pleasure of getting to know JJ—Al Johnson, Jr.—who is a living tribute to his father. The resemblance is uncanny. He has the same rich, Southern voice, the same cadence, the same warm prosody, and that same thoughtful presence that Al carried with such ease. Talking with JJ brings a sense of closeness, almost like Al is still walking beside me. Al, my buddy, you did good. You raised a son who carries your legacy with strength and grace. And JJ lives for you.

So I write this with a heart full of gratitude and sorrow. I miss my buddy. I miss my hero. And I thank God for the divine mercy that put us together in the middle of a war zone.

Al, as you fly to heaven, I know you'll figure things out up there in no time. You'll probably meet everyone within the first week. And when it's my turn, I know you'll be waiting to give me the skinny, just like always.

Until then, enjoy the company in God's kingdom. You never did meet a stranger.

With deep love,  
Your buddy forever,  
Jeff