

My Bouncy Ball

By Nicholas Rader

There are a few objects that I owned, while I was in the military, that I often reflect upon. Yet whenever I do, there is one object that always reminds me of the complexities of maintaining one's sanity while on deployment – because sometimes a crazy path can lead to sanity.

I was standing at attention one day in a random hallway, waiting for the space to be inspected by an officer for cleanliness. In this hallway though, there was a doorway to a room that I had never gone in, where a stranger was also having his space inspected. I remember watching in my periphery, as that inspecting officer looked under some equipment, when the stranger's eyes darted to the floor behind the officer. As I watched, the stranger quickly picked up an object, looked at it, looked at the officer who was still turned away, and then to me. The stranger then quickly bounced a small rubber ball through the open doorway to me. I caught it – at attention – and the two men carried on, as I slipped the ball into my pocket and continued waiting.

The weird or crazy part of this story is that I carried that ball around in my pocket for the rest of that deployment. While I was being given orders or waiting in lines for food, I would randomly bounce it a few times, then back into my pocket it went. And I kept that ball in my pocket because if I ever saw that stranger again, I was going to bounce it right back to him.

It didn't make much sense to me at the time, but now that many years have passed my obsession with bouncing the ball back to that stranger has become clearer. I wanted to bounce it back because the randomness of the entire situation was a reflection of what I was experiencing overseas. We were at war, but something as arbitrary as a bouncy ball could mean real trouble, for a routine inspection. And such equivocations (bouncy ball = trouble) always perplexed me. So when the stranger bounced his problem to me, a tiny war was waged, and I waited five months for retaliation. I was going to bounce it back, to achieve some sense of completion in all of the randomness and perplexities.

And as fate would have it, I did just that.

I was heading to bed one night and the stranger and I finally crossed paths again, in a dimly lit hallway. It was just the two of us and when I saw that it was him, I froze. And because everyone was on edge, he saw me freeze and he froze. We stared at each other for a moment, while his face conveyed that he had no idea who I was. So I calmly reached into my pocket and bounced that damn ball right back to him.

He caught it, as his confusion intensified, and I just pushed passed him with an air of victory. And that was the end of it. No words were spoken.

Now, I don't know if the stranger ever connected the dots, all the way back to that inspection, but I knew what happened – I won the bouncy ball war.

So this is my crazy story about bouncy ball vengeance. It was silly to me then, but for five months I carried that ball around to distract myself with some sense of purpose. I was going to bounce it back. The ball was like the war that I was fighting, which I didn't understand. And the stranger was some kind of enemy, which I also didn't understand. And even though I still have trouble wrapping my head around such concepts as wars and enemies, the moment I bounced that ball back to that stranger is one of the few moments of victory that I felt, throughout my three deployments. Therefore, that ball is still one of my favorite objects that I've ever owned – even if it was never really mine.