

ALIVE DAY

FINDING HOPE AND PURPOSE AFTER LOSING EVERYTHING

CAPTAIN SAM BROWN

WITH AMY BROWN



HOUNDSTOOTH
PRESS

COPYRIGHT © 2024 SAM BROWN

All rights reserved.

ALIVE DAY

Finding Hope and Purpose after Losing Everything

FIRST EDITION

ISBN 978-1-5445-4602-5 *Hardcover*

978-1-5445-4601-8 *Paperback*

978-1-5445-4600-1 *Ebook*

978-1-5445-4623-0 *Audiobook*

To my Lord Jesus Christ—the Author and Perfector of my faith

* * *

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.

HEBREWS 12:1–2

* * *

To Amy, Roman, Esther, and Ezra

May you find peace and hope through your faith—regardless of the trials and suffering this life produces. Never forget that you have a Father who loves and cares for you fully and perfectly.

* * *

Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all! Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.

ROMANS 12:9–18

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE.....	9
---------------	---

PART 1: DEATH AND DYING

1. IN COMMAND AND CONTROL	21
2. PERFECTLY PREPARED	43
3. DEATH ITSELF.....	65

PART 2: SURVIVAL

4. ALIVE DAY.....	77
5. BLIND AND BROKEN.....	91
6. VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.....	107

PART 3: LEARNING TO LIVE

7. PAINFULLY AWAKE	123
8. LIFE CONTRACTED.....	155
9. HOPE AND MIRACLES.....	183
10. AMY'S CHAPTER	209
11. SCARFACE	237
12. WOUNDED WARRIOR	271
13. CLIMBING MOUNTAINS.....	297

EPILOGUE	325
----------------	-----

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	331
----------------------	-----

ABOUT THE AUTHOR	335
------------------------	-----

WRITER'S NOTE	337
---------------------	-----

PROLOGUE



My younger brother Daniel and me in our new Christmas presents: US Army uniforms. Around 1988.

“You’re invincible.”

His voice came through clearly on my little cell phone, even though he was on the other side of the world. I slowly paced in the gravel circle of the motor pool, grateful that the sun was low enough in the sky that I could step away from the shade of our small combat outpost where the other guys were winding down. I grinned.

“I don’t know about that, brother.”

It was the first chance I’d had to touch base with Daniel in a few weeks. My younger brother and best friend, Daniel was following in my footsteps, completing his own military training at Fort Bragg. Only instead of pursuing a leadership role as an Infantry Officer, Daniel was training to be a Marine Corps Special Operations medic—formally known as a Special Amphibious Reconnaissance Corpsman (SARC). It was a perfect fit for him: from the time he was a kid, Daniel wanted to help people. He wasn’t afraid of trauma, blood, or gore. He had a calm temperament in high stress—an invaluable quality in a medic who may be tasked with saving a life under fire. But as a Special Operations Medic, he also got to fight. In fact, he would be a warfighter first and medic when necessary.

Daniel always wanted me to divulge everything about my deployment, and I had to fight to keep the details confidential. It was a new form of the competition that had defined our youth together, each of us trying to win the tug of war.

“So, what have you been up to?” he asked at the start of the conversation.

“We’re off the airfield now, interacting with some of the people in the local villages,” I said, intentionally being vague.

“Any Taliban around?” he asked, deliberately probing for more specific details.

“There’s been some ‘bad guy’ activity,” I said, enjoying the contest and countering his probe with vagueness. “Nothing too close though.” I grinned and turned the conversation. “Tell me more about what’s going on in your medic training at Fort Bragg. I expect you’re leading your class?”

As Daniel began updating me about his own experiences, I listened attentively to his descriptions of the leaders. One of the reasons that I made the leadership choices I did in my own platoon was because I wanted to support and love my guys in the way I hoped people would do for Daniel. I noted what he said about the leaders he liked and bristled when he described an officer or senior non-commissioned officer who led with insults and arrogance.

I didn't have long. "Daniel, I've got to get going," I said. "It's awesome to hear your voice and hear how things are going. Your team is going to be so blessed to have you after your training."

"Okay, wait—" he stopped me. "I've got one more thing to say to you. Nothing's going to kill you. You're invincible."

I tried to deflect the comment. Even so, he repeated himself: "I'm not worried. You're invincible."

I laughed. "Well, if you say so, it must be true. I better get going. Love you, bro. I'm so proud of you."

"Love you too. Proud of you too."

I hung up the phone and thought: *Invincible. Well—I'd better be. Can't let him down.*

My boots crunched on the gravel as I headed back toward the outpost. It was my favorite time of day in the Kandahar desert: sunset, before the chill of the night set in but after the blistering heat of the day had subsided. I took a deep breath, feeling the satisfaction and contentment I always felt after talking with Daniel.

It was the last conversation I had with him before the ambush, and the explosion, and the flames.

* * *

For most of our lives, Daniel had been the invincible one. Even though he was younger than me, he was tougher—though you could have never gotten me to admit it as a kid. We grew up in a rural area in Arkansas where our nearest neighbors were out of sight and earshot. Whenever we weren't in school, Daniel and I roamed around our

property, playing soldier, hunting or fishing, and coming up with various ways to compete with each other.

One time when we were still young kids, we were playing on our trampoline under the shade of a big oak tree. The trampoline was half broken—missing a third of the springs, and even the ones that were left were badly rusted. We didn't care. It still worked well enough for us to play Crack the Egg and have bounce battles.

About forty feet away, one of our dogs started barking at the bush hog, the grass-cutting tool hooked up to our tractor. Another dog ran up and stiffened, then joined the barking. Daniel and I stopped bouncing. Tumbling over each other, we crawled to the edge of the trampoline. "What is it, boy?!" I yelled. "What's over there?!" Whatever it was, it couldn't be good. The dogs snarled like they were facing a threat.

I was the older brother—the biggest, fastest, and strongest. But I was afraid. "Go over there," I ordered Daniel. "Figure out what they're barking at."

Dutifully, Daniel hopped off the trampoline and ran over, right up to the dogs. "Oh no!" he yelled, then began running back to the trampoline. "It's a poisonous water moccasin! It was like two feet away from me in the shade of the bush hog!"

I *hated* snakes. I still do. One of my first memories from childhood was seeing a snake slither under the gap between the front door and the floor, sliding its way into the kitchen. Scarred me for life.

Daniel jumped back onto the safety of the trampoline. "We gotta get Father!" he said.

"Well, *I'm* not getting off!" I said. I wasn't about to risk getting bitten by a poisonous snake. "*You* go inside and get him."

Again, without questioning, Daniel jumped off the trampoline and ran inside. He came out quickly, tugging Father's hand toward the tractor. Father raised his .22, aimed, and shot.

That was the end of the threat from that snake. But it was only one of many times when Daniel showed himself to be braver than me.

Daniel was sent on his first deployment when I was still early in

my journey of recovering at Brooke Army Medical Center. Like me, he was sent to Afghanistan—and, *because* of me, he went there on a blood mission, bent on revenge. Daniel looked for every opportunity to be in combat, making it his personal mission to cause as much destruction as possible to the people who had nearly succeeded in killing his brother.

He went back to Afghanistan on his second deployment. He went back again on his third. Each time, Daniel was looking for a fight. His weapon of choice was the M240B, one of the biggest machine guns an individual can carry and very unusual for a medic since they're also responsible for carrying all the medical equipment, in addition to the normal load and ammunition for their weapon. But, true to his nature, he was never afraid. He overcame every challenge to protect the men around him, always ready for a fight with the people who were responsible for nearly killing me and threatening his team.

During those three deployments, Daniel was exposed to countless blasts: grenades, mortars, recoilless rifles, and the constant concussions of the 7.62mm machine gun rounds he shot off. Those thousands and thousands of rounds had a cumulative concussive effect on his brain. The Taliban didn't get him in one fiery blast or an instantly fatal shot. But, his thirst for revenge and combat exposed him to events that wounded him in ways that could not be seen outwardly in passing.

By the time Daniel arrived home after his third deployment, he was a different person. He was deeply wounded and broken. His brain and personality were marred by what he privately confided in me was the only thing I ever knew him to fear: CTE, the neurodegenerative disease caused by repeated concussions. It caused his mind to break down, trapping him in a hellscape he couldn't wake up from. Over time, it got harder and harder for Daniel to distinguish between what his family would recognize as reality and the nightmare in his mind that he couldn't escape.

In that nightmare, Daniel was confronted with enemies. They told him he had a choice to make: either he kill himself, or—if he chose to live—his family would be murdered.

For more than a year, he lived under that threat. Over and over, he reached for rationality, telling himself that it wasn't real—that, even though he was receiving that input in his mind, it wasn't true. But it got harder and harder to separate truth from the nightmare as his brain continued to break down. In the end, he lost the ability to recognize that the threat to his family only existed in his living, delusional nightmares. He believed that everyone he loved was in imminent peril and only he could save us.

Daniel was always an active journaler. Toward the end, the entries got shorter and shorter. On July 27, 2022, in a messy scrawl, he wrote:

Said prayer to Jesus Christ to manifest to me and asked for forgiveness of my sins.

On August 1, five days later, Daniel took his life, believing it was the only way to save his family. He died as a hero to me, my family, and so many others because in the twisted reality of his deteriorating brain, he gave up his own life in exchange for ours.

* * *

For years, people have told me that my story gives them hope, that it reminds them of what the human spirit is capable of enduring. People have said they feel new strength to persevere after hearing what I've overcome.

And, for years, I let those comments pass by as simply a nice compliment or encouragement. In my mind, I deserve very little credit for enduring. I believe that the strength I've found has come entirely from God.

I've been told by some of those same people that I should write a book. I dismissed that idea for a long time too. Writing a book, to me, seemed like a vanity project. Particularly now that I've become a public figure—a politician, no less—a book seemed like a desperate attempt to show off, an obvious ploy for attention.



My brother, Daniel, during his first deployment

But the recent loss of my brother and best friend has shifted the equation for me. More than ever before, I see the importance of giving people hope who feel hopeless. More than ever before, I feel an urgency to inspire others to keep going—to persevere—to endure.

I've sought to relay my experiences as accurately as I can, although some points have been condensed for narrative clarity. Also, the accounts I share—especially around combat scenes—are told from my perspective, but I acknowledge that the fog of war is a real phenomenon and there may be other perspectives and memories that slightly differ from what I remember. I've conveyed my own memories of what transpired because ultimately it was that interpretation of my

experiences that helped me form the meaning I've described in this book. Finally, I'll note that some names, titles, and details have been changed to protect privacy.

In some ways, we all have an "Alive Day"—a moment in life that signifies the crossing of a threshold, a day when we are forever altered from who we were before. For some, that may come in the form of loss: someone we love is ripped away from us. For some, it may come in the form of illness: an apparently healthy body is found to be corrupted with disease, vulnerable to death. For some, it's a loss of innocence: the day when a child's life is first marred by abuse, or when a marriage is found to be stained with adultery. In each case, a death occurs. The life that was, is no more.

But the reason I've titled my book *Alive Day* is because we have a choice in those moments. Will we choose to survive and find hope? Will we keep going, and let the painful journey usher us into a new identity that is defined not by what we've lost, but by what we've overcome?

My own hope in telling this story is to help you understand the depth of your own resilience. When we face the toughest of circumstances, there is a way through it. And in surviving the fire of an Alive Day, those moments can end up being the genesis of an extremely meaningful and powerful life. That meaning doesn't arrive overnight; it requires that we engage with the struggle for life. But by getting through those trials, we not only memorialize the death of who we were before, we also celebrate the birth of who we can become.

I've also written this book for my brother. I thought initially that I should make this book centered around advice: "Here's how to persevere. Here's how to claim hope." A memoir felt insubstantial by itself. But as I spoke with people who have navigated other challenges in life or mental illness, I was encouraged to let my story simply stand for itself. Perhaps people walking through the darkness don't need to know how to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. In my brother's case, that may have just added pressure to the weight he was already carrying. Perhaps they just need to know they're not alone.

Hear this: you are not alone. You can keep going. There is purpose and meaning behind the trial you're in. Your story may even deliver the hope that someone else needs to choose life when all seems lost.

I wish you were reading Daniel's story instead of my own. The stories he could tell about the people he interacted with, helped, and encouraged could fill volumes. I always felt like he lived ten lives, to my one. His potential to impact the world, I believe, was greater than my own.

I have wept and mourned my brother. I grieve the loss of his impact, which was stolen from him because of his wounds. I grieve the loss of my best friend, the person I looked up to most in the world. But I also rejoice, because I know this is simply an extended goodbye. We will have an eternal reunion one day in the presence of our Creator.

In writing this book, I seek to honor him. Based on my own experience, surviving physical pain is significantly easier than enduring internal anguish. The human body can withstand physical pain. It's when we lose hope that darkness can overtake us. The thing that defeats us isn't the pain itself; it's the hopelessness.

Yet even as Daniel was losing himself, he found ultimate peace through Jesus. And in my own story, the hope that kept me going wasn't strength that came from myself, or from any temporary goal. It was in believing that the life I fought for would have purpose and meaning which went beyond my last breath.

My Alive Day happened in the dark, in the desert. My mouth was full of dust and ash; my skin was roiled and melted. Yet in the moments after my soldiers had extinguished the flames, I realized that the death which had felt so certain was delayed.

I was alive. I would *live*. And that prompted a searing realization: *I was saved for a purpose. The life I live is not my own.*

The truth is: none of us are invincible. But we can trust that the pain we endure prepares us for a purpose that goes beyond our limited days—one that extends into eternity.