

### Book Review

#### ***You Are Worth It: Building A Life Worth Fighting For***

**By Kyle Carpenter and Don Yaeger  
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#### **Author Note**

The insights or views expressed in this review are those of the author. They do not reflect official policy of any of the institutions the author serves. The author has no conflicts of interest.

#### **To Begin...**

*If we don't spend time on this earth looking out for one another,  
what are we really doing with our lives?*

– Kyle Carpenter, *You Are Worth It*

William Kyle Carpenter is the son of James and Robin Carpenter and the older brother of Price and Payton Carpenter. He is the youngest living Congressional Medal of Honor recipient and the eighth living recipient to be awarded the Medal of Honor for actions in Afghanistan. In the book, *You Are Worth It*, Kyle Carpenter and Don Yaeger meticulously describe the events leading up to the heroic actions performed by Kyle in Marjah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, that resulted in Kyle receiving the Purple Heart and the Medal Of Honor.

The story that Kyle Carpenter and Don Yaeger tells is humbling, moving and inspiring. And this review presents the many aspects of this powerful story of Kyle Carpenter's service, life and significance for us all. Kyle was born in Jackson, Mississippi, but the family moved multiple times throughout Kyle's upbringing. When Kyle was in the second grade, the family moved to Gainesville, Georgia, where they lived for six years before moving to Savannah, Tennessee. As a child Kyle was very active with his church youth group and he enjoyed going on mission trips. Before Kyle could play on his high school football team, the family moved to South Carolina, where he spent the remainder of his childhood. After arriving in South Carolina, Kyle began



attending a large high school with over 900 students per class. However, it was after his parents transferred him to King Academy that he began to thrive. Upon enrolling at King Academy, Kyle found that it “immediately felt like home.” He joined the baseball team and felt like a person with a purpose. He stated it “felt like there was already a place for me there.” One day Kyle attended an event at King Academy where he heard a Vietnam Veteran named Clebe McClary speak. Clebe had served in the Marine Corps in 1968 and heavy shrapnel from a grenade had cost him his left

eye and left arm below the elbow. Despite these challenges, Clebe was now running a nonprofit organization that helped military families navigate the stresses of deployment and combat injuries. Mr. McClary “remained active, engaged and dynamic in advanced age” and “created an indelible life, not just in spite of, but because of his injuries.” Clebe McClary would go on to become one of Kyle’s heroes and inspirations for joining the Marines.

Kyle credits his parents for teaching him and his brothers to be functional, rational and contributing members of society. His parents taught him the importance of being involved in the community and also helped him to develop character, humility and resilience. After graduating from high school, Kyle wanted to join the Marines. However, to honor his parents, he decided to go to community college for one semester “to give it a try.” Although Kyle was enrolled in school, he felt called to serve and made that clear to his parents. Although his parents were initially concerned about him joining the Marines, they ultimately supported him 100%. Kyle describes his decision to go into the Marines by saying:

Too often we focus on keeping our word to others while neglecting the value of keeping our word to ourselves. In the course of not letting others down, we may limit ourselves. One of the most difficult actions we can do is move past someone else’s outdated and imperfect idea of who we are to be. Likewise one of the most difficult actions for someone we love is to accept that new vision of who we are.

Kyle went to boot camp at Parris Island in South Carolina where he officially earned the title of United States Marine. He embraced the Marine Corps motto “Semper Fidelis” (i.e. “Always Faithful”) and said he wanted to be a leader who would always be faithful to the people with whom he served. He then went to the School of Infantry, where he was assigned to Fox Company, Second Battalion, Ninth Marines, also known as the 2/9. As Kyle prepared for his first deployment, he keenly observed that the military go through a great deal of training and

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preparation to know what to expect during deployment and have an idea of how to handle various situations. However, it can be argued that troop families are not similarly prepared in their support roles.

Kyle arrived in Afghanistan in the fall of 2010. He described well the amazing care Hospital Corpsmen provided for the Afghan locals. They took their jobs very seriously. "The corpsmen saw the patients and they saw the need. They didn't see the political divisions or tribal affiliation or social standing of the people in front of them." This served as a great reminder of the oath that health care professionals take to provide care to patients without any form of bias or prejudice.

### Experiencing the Ministry of Presence

On November 21, 2010, at 8: 30 AM, Kyle Carpenter's life changed forever. He was at Patrol Base Dakota in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. According to government records, Kyle threw himself on a grenade to save the life of his good friend, Nick Eufrazio. The Medical Evacuation Helicopter (MEDEVAC) arrived in 12 minutes to evacuate Kyle. Kyle's heart stopped twice during the evacuation. After he was stabilized, he was ultimately transferred to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center (LRMC) in Germany. Here we got the opportunity to learn about the patient-centered care offered at LRMC. A chaplain meets and prays for each service member as they arrive on the tarmac. This was considered an important part of respecting the humanity of every service member. Air Force Master Sergeant Chuck Williams from South Carolina made sure he would be the one to greet Kyle as he arrived because he felt it would be beneficial for Kyle to have a familiar accent praying for him at his bedside. After Kyle arrived, Master Sergeant Williams introduced himself, prayed for Kyle, and then Kyle was taken straight to the operating room.

Throughout the history of many religious faiths, the ministry of presence plays an important role. The ministry of presence continues to be one of the most important ministries in chaplaincy. The ministry of presence ultimately played a very important role in Kyle's recovery, particularly during his time at LRMC. Master Sergeant Williams went beyond greeting and praying for Kyle on the tarmac. He subsequently stopped by Kyle's room each day, spoke with Kyle, and prayed with him despite his being in a coma. There was a special young woman named Tawny who was the wife of an Army flight medic deployed to Helmand Province the same time as Kyle. She regularly came to Kyle's bedside and when she first came to his bedside in the ICU she placed her hand on his unbandaged hand. She connected with Kyle's family back home and gave them constant updates on his condition. One of the most remarkable and touching aspects of this book was Kyle's trip from Germany to the United States. A woman named Jennifer had come to Landstuhl to say goodbye to her son Ryan. Ryan survived and so they were on the same plane as Kyle headed to the U.S. on November 28, 2010. During the flight, she heard Kyle saying "Mom." She then situated herself between Kyle and Ryan and held both their hands the entire flight home.

Many other people had a tremendous impact on Kyle's recovery while he was in Landstuhl, but the three mentioned above were remarkable examples of the ministry of presence with one demonstrating the great worth of another person. Kyle later commented that "Chaplain Williams had provided one of the most beautiful ministries possible: He was home for me when I couldn't be at home. Funny how something you don't remember can also be something you will never forget."

### Wounds and Scars: The Purple Heart

The survival of wounded combat personnel is very high once home. After arriving at Bethesda, it took 13 hours and several surgeries to save Kyle's right arm. His parents would not leave his bedside as he went through this ordeal. As he began his recovery, he reported being driven by three things:

1. The simple fact that he could not undo his injuries;
2. The desire to be strong for everyone around him who were struggling with how to support him;
3. Being motivated not to let his injuries or the Taliban have power over him for the sake of every Marine who had gone before him and for those still fighting.

As Kyle awakened, he began having recurrent nightmares. In one nightmare he watched his own funeral, and nobody was in attendance besides the pastor holding a Bible and standing at the head of his grave. He believed that the Marines he left in Afghanistan were so disappointed he left them that they did not come to the funeral. Another nightmare was of his father attacking the hospital because he thought Kyle would be discharged and could not afford the hospital bills. He also had nightmares of having both arms amputated and wooden stick arms. He went from nightmares to paranoid ideation and delusions that events from the nightmares were true. This made for a psychologically taxing early recovery process.

Of particular note: On December 30, 2010, General James Amos, Commandant of the United States Marine Corps, and Carlton Kent, Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, visited Kyle in the hospital and awarded him the Purple Heart.

Kyle decided that he would have to make peace with his wounds and accept them for what they were. He made the keen observation: "Our injuries happened. Nothing would ever change that. Our wounds were a part of our bodies. We were the ones who would get to choose what role they would play in our stories." With regards to the other soldiers recovering with him in Bethesda, he commented: "We were reclaiming our lives and learning how to be our fullest selves because of our injuries, not in spite of our injuries."

He was subsequently transferred to the Veterans Administration Hospital in Richmond, Virginia. He underwent 24 surgeries over the course of 12 weeks. Despite the many hours he spent under the knife and in recovery, Kyle tried to find joy in everything he did. He felt that "circumstances may be bad, but you are not your circumstances;" and "the way you choose to ride them out will set the tone for everything that follows." He was finally given the option to go home for recovery. He had a hero's parade style welcome. However, after the celebration, the reality of his injuries set in: "Right eye missing, healing tracheostomy site, no teeth on bottom jaw, shrapnel embedded throughout body, black lined face tattooed by gunpowder that seared across it, Right arm heavily bandaged and fragile..." among other injuries. Kyle found that the more aware he became about the extent of his injuries, the more he realized what a miracle it was that he was alive at all.

Throughout his upbringing, Kyle has always found ways to connect with people from all walks of life. His multiple injuries showed him a new way that he connects with people, namely

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through his scars. He commented on meeting gang members through a fellow Marine and he found that scars bridged the gap between him and the gang members. He went on to proclaim that scars are a universal language and connected him to people who would have been invisible to him. This includes people who were homeless or on parole among many other realities. He felt they all understood pain and brokenness, and that they had a clear bond through their scars.

He recalls exchanging scar stories with Kenny, a homeless gentleman on the street. He concluded that we should embrace the stories that made the scars and that the scars are a reminder of something that went wrong and something that went right because scars only heal if you are alive. Furthermore, he believes that scars represent a beautiful resilience and are evidence of healing. Most importantly, the scars give others hope that one day their wounds may become scars, too. He later decided that “wounds are part of our bodies, but we decide what part they play in our story.”

### His Caregivers

Throughout the book, Kyle regularly recognized his caregivers for the phenomenal care they provided. He refers to his large number of caregivers as the unsung heroes. He regularly commented on the great care provided by his family in taking care of him, including his parents missing his two younger brothers' birthdays so they could care for him at the bedside at the former Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. He remarked on a young doctor at the Naval Hospital who went far out of his way to find blankets to make him comfortable one evening while he was staying there. He recalls the great care provided by a nurse at the VA who meticulously worked on his feet to make it so it was less painful for him to walk, which led to him being more ambulatory. Later when Kyle was recovering at the Richmond VA, friends from 2/9 came to visit him and brought him his combat action ribbon. They spent two days visiting with him in Richmond. This helped him to see they did not see him as abandoning them. He recalled his friends from the Marine Corps who came from out of town and visited him to give his mother some respite. Those friends took the time to learn his needed wound care and really provided help. Ever introspective, Kyle acknowledged as he had earlier in the book that although he had enlisted, now his family was serving alongside him. He further refers to his caregivers and all caregivers as the unsung heroes who make great sacrifices for the people for whom they deeply care.

Once Kyle had recovered enough, he made sure to do what he could to thank as many of his caregivers as possible. Indeed, he reminds us of the great importance of saying “Thank you.” He participated in “Operation Proper Exit” sponsored by the Troops First Foundation. This is a program that allows service members to leave the battle zone on their own terms instead of by MEDEVAC. This way the service member has an opportunity to have closure. While Kyle was visiting Afghanistan, he went back to thank the people currently working at the facilities where he was cared for. Through the Semper Fi fund he was able to go back to LRMC and he again thanked all the staff and let them know how valuable was the work they are doing. Even if the people who worked on him and with him were not there, he felt that the current workers can see how much their work is appreciated. He was even reunited with the MEDEVAC team that rescued him after the grenade explosion, and he thanked them as well.

When Kyle was being honored at the South Carolina legislature, he learned that Master Sergeant Williams, the chaplain who originally greeted him on the tarmac in Landstuhl, worked

as the Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms for the South Carolina State Senate. In preparation for the chance to meet Chaplain Williams, he painstakingly wrote a moving inscription inside a devotional book that he gifted Chaplain Williams that day: "People meet in terrible wonderful ways. I'm thankful we did. With love, Kyle. Thank you. Believe in purpose."

### A New Beginning

One of the most remarkable scenes in the book occurred after an exhausting day of physical therapy. Kyle was sitting at a kitchen counter and struggling to eat a bowl of cereal, a task that was so simple before his injuries. He suddenly felt something inside him break. He found that every emotion, every fear, every effort to be brave to protect his family from his pain "came pouring out faster than the cereal he couldn't chew." At that very moment his mom walked in and she wrapped her arms around him. That is when he said: "Look at me. Who is ever going to love me again?" He immediately regretted saying those words. She responded: "I promise you are going to get through this and things are going to get better. Someday someone will love you and you will be happy for the rest of your life." That is when he had the realization that he could spend his life sitting at a counter, or he could get up and live. That happened only five months after the grenade attack and he decided to start a new life.

He felt a shift. He decided he could be honest about his pain, that he could let go of pretense and roles he thought he had to play. He realized that he did not have to pretend to be strong if he did not feel that way. He saw that he could move forward boldly and honestly. He could now allow his family to feel with him and to cry with him. He realized that if he kept pretending everything was fine, he would not be able to move forward. His trajectory for his future changed that night. From then on, occupational therapy was not about recovering motor skills lost but about challenging himself to see what abilities he could master.

In the midst of this realization, he decided he would now "fight for his future instead of against his past," that "there was not just life on the other side of this battle but in the middle of the battle" as well, that "recovery will never be over and that it would be best that he focus on the life that he was given." He decided that his past may have shaped him; but he will not let his past control him because you cannot change what is behind you but only what lies ahead. He added, "Too often we fall into the trap of thinking we have to have everything figured out before we can act...You just have to be willing to move and leave the past behind." As Kyle reflected on that moment in the kitchen, he stated that this was:

... when I resolved not to be controlled by the worst moment of my life. If I had given in, I'd essentially of been giving my future over to the enemy who threw that grenade on the roof. And he had already taken enough from me. My life and my future belong only to me and I made the decision that I was worth fighting for.

He decided that he was going to fight for his future instead of chasing his past.

Kyle went on to cut the ribbon opening the new Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC) on September 15, 2011, and was part of the Wounded Warrior Regiment on the base. Being part of the regiment made Kyle start to feel like a Marine again. He made the decision that he would try something he never would have tried before his injury. He believes that this was necessary for a true rebirth. Kyle went on to participate in skydiving through the

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program “Jumping for a Purpose” despite his fear of heights. He commented that he refused to let fears make choices for him. Tackling his prior fears was a way to “force yourself back into life” and he went on to say he reclaimed his life unapologetically and that “the only limitations are the ones you put on yourself.” He ultimately ran three marathons, one of which was within a few months of his discharge from WRNMMC in 2013. He also went on to enroll and graduate with his bachelor’s degree from the University of South Carolina. Indeed Kyle Carpenter gradually transformed himself into a combat survivor who did far more than survive. He continued to fight to live and he succeeded, claiming victories every day.

### In Closing...

President Barack Obama called Kyle to inform him he would receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. The official announcement was made on May 19, 2014, and the official ceremony took place one month later on June 19. Kyle makes it clear that the Medal of Honor is not an individual award but rather it represents every person who has taken up arms against true injustice, standing as a beacon of hope for struggling and oppressed people around the world who risk their lives to save one another. He also makes it clear that there are no Medal of Honor winners; there are only Medal of Honor recipients. As Kyle continues to go through the healing process, he now sees the grenade explosion was part of a chain of events preparing him for life. “A life of purpose, service, leading and worth fighting for.”

What Kyle Carpenter masterfully did in this book was remind those of us who are doing any form of work serving others, that the reason we continue to do this work day in and day out is because the people we are serving are worth it. The book opened with Kyle commenting on a taxi ride in which he told the driver his story. They both got to know each other quite well during that ride and bonded over many of their life stories. At the conclusion of the ride, the

driver thanked Kyle for his service and Kyle responded: "You are worth it." He had never said this to anyone before but found it to be the appropriate response at that time. Indeed as we get to know Kyle through this book we can see humanism at its finest and he is able to masterfully drive home the point that every human being on this planet is worth our time and sacrifice. Our families are worth it, our patients are worth it, our clients are worth it, our students and educators are worth it. Indeed, it is the great inherent worth of humankind that drives many of us each and every day to do what we do for the service of others. You are worth it, too.



*Looking Out For One Another: The Never-Ending Call to Honor*