



Lessons from Chris

by STEVE LINDAUER

LIKE MANY OF you, I recently saw the Academy Award-nominated movie *American Sniper*. Based on the book of the same name, it tells the true story of U.S. Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, who became known as “the most lethal sniper in U.S. history” for racking up an astonishing 160 confirmed kills throughout four tours of duty in the Iraq War, shattering previous records. Tragically, Chris was shot and killed in Texas in 2013, but his story – and legacy – lives on. His book is a runaway bestseller, and the movie adaptation has grossed almost \$500 million worldwide (and still counting).

American Sniper is one of those movies that stays with you long after you leave the theater. I found myself thinking about it days, even weeks later. Some of the reasons were obvious: Chris’ story is filled with heroism, adventure and, ultimately, terrible loss. But there was something else, some other reason why I continued to dwell on it...I just had a hard time putting it into words. In fact, I didn’t figure it out until I gave a brief speech at the annual North American Iron Workers/IMPACT Labor-Management Conference in Las Vegas in February.

Our industry has always had a very close bond with the military. Many of our finest craft workers and contractors are veterans. Over the years, the rigorous and often dangerous nature of our work — coupled with the importance we place on teamwork, discipline and safety — have prompted general comparisons to military service. At the same time, we understand that no one sacrifices more than the men and women who choose to enlist. That’s one reason why TAUC

is a major supporter of Helmets to Hardhats, an organization dedicated to helping veterans launch new careers in our industry after their military service has ended.

Once I reflected on this close bond with the military, everything “clicked.” Although it may sound like a stretch to compare a sniper to a craft worker, I believe there are significant parallels between Chris Kyle’s story and the stories of the union construction and maintenance professionals who make our industry hum.

What's Your Motivation?

You may remember that shortly after the movie came out, a controversy erupted. Certain writers and Hollywood types trashed the movie. They claimed it glorified violence. They argued that Chris was filled with hate and actually enjoyed killing. Some even went so far as to call him a psychopath.

My initial reaction to these folks isn’t suitable for reprinting. Needless to say, I strongly disagree with them. But their comments proved that at least some people — maybe a lot — were confused about Chris’ motivations for enlisting in the military and becoming a Navy SEAL sniper.

I doubt most of the knuckleheads spouting off on the Internet saw the movie or read the book. But as both make clear over and over again, Chris Kyle wasn’t motivated by anger or bloodlust. He didn’t join an elite special operations force because he was looking for an excuse to kill people. His motivation was the exact opposite: he became a sniper

to protect his fellow Americans serving in the military and ensure that they returned home safely to their families. As Chris himself wrote, “I risked my life for my buddies, to protect my friends and fellow countrymen.” And he closed his book by adding, “My regrets are about the people I couldn’t save – Marines, soldiers, my buddies. I still feel their loss. I still ache for my failure to protect them.”

Later, as I stood on stage at the Iron Worker/IMPACT conference and looked out across a sea of close to a thousand faces, it hit me. I finally understood why the movie had affected me so deeply. Like Chris had done, the men and women in the crowd – as well as tens of thousands of union craft workers all across the country – show up for work every day with the same goal in mind: to protect their fellow workers. How? By making sure safety is the number one priority. It’s the fundamental element that sets us apart from the competition.

Are they also dedicated to performing their jobs flawlessly and making sure the project comes in on time and under budget? Yes! But at a foundational level, before anything else, they are always looking out for one another, making sure everyone stays safe. The only difference is that instead of totting sniper rifles, they carry power drills and hammers.

This kind of dedication ***crosses all boundaries***. Think about Chris Kyle. He was a Navy SEAL, and yet he risked his life primarily protecting U.S. Army soldiers and

Marines from all walks of life and all corners of the country. He didn’t care which branch of the military paid their salaries or where they came from. To him, those were just superficial differences. They shared a much stronger bond: they were all Americans in hostile territory, tasked with completing a very dangerous job, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to let them down.

Chris’ brand of dedication also ***transcends individuals***. Unlike the soldiers and Marines he protected, Chris was an elite sniper with years of high-level training and exotic, next-level weaponry at his disposal that no one else in the group possessed. While the troops often traveled in convoys or patrolled the streets of Iraq in close formation, Chris was rarely with them. Usually he was stationed on a rooftop hundreds of yards away, tracking their progress through his rifle scope.

In other words, Chris was special. But did he act that way? Did he think he was better than the men and women on the ground? Of course not. He saw himself as a member of the team, no better or worse than anyone else. Everyone played a different but equally important role in the mission. When he was off-duty, Chris would often skirt the rules and accompany Marines on dangerous missions so that he could teach them what he had learned and pass along

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valuable advice to keep them alive one more day. It's a vision rooted in teamwork, in the idea that a group of people working together toward a common goal is almost like a family. Likewise, the only way we can ensure the survival of our industry is to see ourselves as a single unit working together, regardless of craft affiliation, experience level or whether someone is a contractor or a journeyman. Once we start focusing on our differences rather than our similarities, we're doomed.

Think back to the best craft workers you have ever worked with – perhaps the ones you looked up to when you were starting out, the true professionals who took you under their wing and guided you along the apprenticeship path. What did they have in common? Chances are they were a lot like Chris Kyle: they didn't pull rank; they chose to focus on people's similarities rather than their differences; they worked alongside (and were friends with) members of all the different building trades, not just their own; they believed in sharing their knowledge and helping others grow. Is it a coincidence these were the guys everyone respected, from the owner on down? I don't think so.

The Road Never Ends

Finally, one more parallel I see between Chris Kyle and our craft workers is a shared sense of dedication that **extends beyond the job** and beyond safety in particular. Chris' efforts to protect his fellow Americans didn't end when he left the Navy and returned to civilian life; they simply took on a new form. While receiving treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at a VA hospital, his psychiatrist took him to meet other veterans who had lost limbs (or worse) in the war. Chris quickly decided that he needed to help them. But this time he wouldn't do it by pulling a trigger on a distant rooftop; instead he would dedicate his time and effort to providing them with the assistance, both physical and psychological,

that they needed to live productive lives. Sadly, Chris and a friend were doing just that – reaching out to a fellow veteran with PTSD – when they were both gunned down in 2013.

Like Chris, union craft workers' and contractors' commitment to one another – and the industry as a whole – doesn't end when they take off their safety harnesses and lock up their tools for the day. I've already mentioned Helmets to Hardhats as an example of this type of dedication, but that's just the beginning.

Long after he hung up his uniform, Chris did his best to honor the military he served. He knew that even though he was no longer drawing a government paycheck, he still represented the SEALs. Likewise, we need to remember that we are always representing the union construction and maintenance industry, whether we're on or off the clock. Like it or not, we are walking billboards for the building trades and their affiliated contractors. Potential clients – and potential apprentices – form their opinion based on how we conduct ourselves in our neighborhoods and communities, and on Twitter and Facebook, not just on the jobsite.

We can never determine the impact a single person will have on a union, an industry, or even an entire country. The small stuff, the big stuff, and everything in between – it all counts. If you don't believe me, just ask Chris Kyle's family – and the family of every soldier and Marine he protected in Iraq. 



Steve Lindauer is the CEO of The Association of Union Constructors and also serves as Impartial Secretary and CEO of the National Maintenance Agreements Policy Committee, Inc. (NMAPC).

"But It's Not In The Budget!"

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be everyone's responsibility, not just that of the supervisor or safety representative.

Adequately educating and training our workforce will help keep our projects safe and functioning well. Budgeting for safety will help to do the same thing.

Speaking of budgets – I'm almost out of my allotted space for this issue's article. But before I wrap up, I'd like to make a personal comment. This spring, my tenure as Chairperson

of the TAUC Safety Committee will come to an end, so this will be my last column. My responsibilities will be transferred into the very capable hands of Joe Lasky, Director of Corporate Safety, Health & Environment for Scheck Industries. I know he will do an exceptional job as the next chair of this fine committee. I want to take this opportunity to thank TAUC members, staff, the Board of Directors and especially TAUC Senior Director of

Environmental Health and Safety Wayne Creasap for their years of support, friendship and mentoring.

As always...keep safe. 



Kathleen Dobson is the TAUC Safety Committee Chairperson and Safety Director for Alberici Constructors.