
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Fallen but Never Forgotten

CrossFit's Hero WODs are challenging tests of fortitude—but they also represent something greater. Russell Berger takes a closer look at workouts created to honor our fallen.

By **Russell Berger** CrossFit Hunstville

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Courtesy of the U.S. Navy

On June 28, 2005, four Navy SEALs on a reconnaissance mission in the Kunar province of Afghanistan were ambushed by an overwhelming Taliban force. Team leader **Lt. Michael Murphy**, unable to call for help from his location, walked into the center of enemy fire, where his satellite phone might work. He punched in the numbers to HQ and calmly requested reinforcements.

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Even after being knocked to his knees from a gunshot wound to his back, Murphy calmly sat back up, steadied himself and continued the call, knowing that it was the only way he might save his men. Once the call for reinforcements had been completed, he returned to the fight with an MH-47 Chinook helicopter on the way.

Outrunning its escort of attack helicopters, the Chinook rushed into the battle for a daring daylight rescue. Attempting to set down in tremendously rugged terrain filled with hostile militia, the Chinook was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. The eight SEALs and eight Army Night Stalkers aboard were killed, leaving Murphy and his men to continue the fight. When the battle ended, Murphy and all but one of his men had been mortally wounded.



Courtesy of the U.S. Navy

"Murph" was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his gallantry on June 28, 2005. Only one other serviceman has received the award while serving in Afghanistan.

Murphy was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions that day. Among those killed in the rescue attempt were Petty Officer 1st Class Jeff Taylor and Lt. Michael McGreevy. Both SEALs were posthumously awarded Bronze Stars for Valor and Purple Hearts. These men were fathers, husbands and sons. They were brothers to their fellow SEALs. They were also CrossFitters. In their actions, these men embodied the values and spirit of true heroes, and to immortalize their courage, bravery and self-sacrifice, the [CrossFit Hero workouts](#) were created.

In honor of Petty Officer 1st Class Jeff Taylor, killed June 28, 2005, in Afghanistan:

JT

21, 15 and 9 reps for time of:
Handstand push-ups
Ring dips
Push-ups

First posted July 6, 2005.

In honor of Lt. Michael McGreevy, killed June 28, 2005, in Afghanistan:

Michael

3 rounds for time of:
Run 800 meters
50 back extensions
50 sit-ups

First posted July 15, 2005.

In honor of Lt. Michael Murphy, killed June 28, 2005, in Afghanistan:

Murph

1-mile run
100 pull-ups
200 push-ups
300 squats
1-mile run

First posted Aug. 18, 2005.

A Community Honors the Fallen

To the average CrossFitter, Hero workouts are symbolic gestures of respect for our fallen. CrossFitters from all over the world, regardless of country or allegiance, throw themselves wholeheartedly at these intentionally gut-wrenching workouts that serve as a tribute to our lost protectors.

Lt. Col. Peter Andrysiak, commander of the 20th Engineer Battalion from Fort Hood, has a unique understanding of just how important the CrossFit Hero workout can be as a memorial to the friends and family of the deceased. On Nov. 5, 2009, an Islamic terrorist gunned down four of Andrysiak's soldiers at Fort Hood in an attack in which 13 were killed and 30 wounded. Andrysiak's soldiers were members of [Lumberjack CrossFit](#), a military affiliate in Fort Hood, Texas.

Teaming up with CrossFit Headquarters, Andrysiak set out to create a brutal test of fortitude to honor his men, a workout based on a template they had previously used as a readiness test for Lumberjack soldiers. It became known as the Lumberjack 20. One month after the attack at Fort Hood, the workout was posted, and in a simultaneous showing of support, the community raised over \$50,000 for wounded warriors.

"My soldiers (friends of the fallen) really appreciate what the CF community did," Andrysiak recalls. "We will do the Lumberjack 20 on 5 November this year, and the leadership in this organization will make it a tradition. Forever, these kids will remember the Lumberjack 20 and what it represents."

What Andrysiak and CrossFit created was a way to immortalize the fallen and remind ourselves that even in their untimely deaths these fellow CrossFitters were committed to the safety and freedom of the rest of us. The Lumberjack workout gave the community a way to show its support and perhaps help ease the pain of a terrible tragedy. But Andrysiak also noted that the Lumberjack 20 played an important and often-undiscussed role for those with personal connections to the victims: assisting with the healing process and helping friends and family grieve.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Hero WODs are some of CrossFit's most arduous workouts, and they serve as a fitting memorial for CrossFitters killed in the line of duty.

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—Lt. Col. Peter Andrysiak

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Every Hero workout has a special person behind it, and CrossFitters around the world struggle through the WODs in tribute to the deceased protectors.

Sharing a Soldier's Story

The Hero workout McGhee, first posted on CrossFit.com on April 15, 2010, was submitted to CrossFit headquarters by Staff Sgt. Brendan Souder to honor his friend, Cpl. Ryan McGhee, after the Army Ranger was fatally wounded by small-arms fire while operating in Central Iraq. It's hard enough to wake up in the morning and find another Hero workout posted on CrossFit.com. It can be unimaginable to think of seeing the photo and name of a friend or loved one above that workout.



Souder, like Andrysiak, is connected to Hero WODs by something more than patriotism and community.

"It was about telling Ryan's story," Souder explains. "Guys that don't even know Ryan, if they knew his story, they would love him ... The point is to let everyone know that he did something for them, and the least you can do is complete this workout to honor him."

CrossFit Hero workouts are just another expression of this sense of brotherhood, and they are uniquely suited to a unique community.

Souder and McGhee had been good friends, and Souder had been the recruiter when the high-school football star had decided to pass up college scholarships for a chance to get into Ranger Regiment. Souder helped McGhee fight for weeks to secure the difficult-to-attain Ranger contract that allowed him the chance to attend selection into Ranger Regiment.

After McGhee's death, Souder knew he needed to honor the soldier by submitting a Hero workout—something for Ryan, those close to him, and Souder himself.

"Every time you do that workout," Souder said, "you try to think about what it was like to be in that guy's shoes, everything up until the point he died Once you get over it, you need an outlet to let loose some of your frustration."

Souder also reminded that these sorts of gestures and tributes are neither new nor unusual.

"Everybody gets it," he said. "We already say, 'One for the Airborne Ranger in the sky,' and this is just one more thing."

In similar fashion, many members of the military wear KIA (killed in action) bracelets in memory of fallen comrades, and police officers often emblazon their vehicles with the badge numbers of officers killed in the line of duty. CrossFit Hero workouts are just another expression of this sense of brotherhood, and they are uniquely suited to a unique community. Even close friends and family members of the victims who have never heard of CrossFit understand a Hero WOD to be a tremendous honor.

Lest We Forget

For those of us who undertake these physical tests, the psychological effects of performing a Hero workout are tremendous. It's easy to treat these prescriptions as any workout of the day, but for those who take the time to learn about the heroes they honor, the WODs can become as spiritual and emotionally demanding as they are physically grueling.

When keeping the stories behind the real-life heroes in mind, slowing down during a Hero workout becomes harder to justify. When the pain of pushing harder becomes too great, I am reminded of the sacrifice these men made for my freedom, and my struggle becomes laughable. And when I compare my temporary suffering to the lifelong sorrow felt by the grieving families of these men, dropping the bar becomes an embarrassment to my country.

The Hero workout is more than a test of physical ability. It bridges the gap between the body and the mind, emotion and experience, and gives us the chance to do more than just remember our soldiers. It gives us the chance to sweat, bleed, suffer and grieve for our fallen heroes one rep at a time.



About the Author

Raised in Atlanta, Russell Berger spent four years in 1st Ranger Battalion and saw numerous combat deployments. After leaving the military in 2008, he moved to Alabama and opened [CrossFit Huntsville](#). He currently splits his time between running his gym, training for the CrossFit Games (he won the 2009 Dirty South Regional Qualifier), writing for CrossFit, and spending time with his family.