



"One o'clock!" the crew chief shouted, pointing at three figures sprinting across the desert. [Chief Warrant Officer Jim] Crisafulli kicked the helicopter into a 180-degree turn and slammed into the ground less than fifty yards from [Master Sergeant Jeffrey] Sims.

*The two SF soldiers leaped from the bay, firing at the Iraqis with their M-16s while the door gunners swiveled from side to side, machine guns roaring. Enemy rounds pinged against the fuselage and shattered the cockpit windows. Plexiglass sprayed across the flight controls. More bullets smashed the Blackhawk's electronic jamming pod and ricocheted off two of the rotors, ripping holes in the honeycombed blades. Sims leaped aboard...Crisafulli lifted off. Wind whistled through the shattered cockpit as a final burst of tracers whizzed past. The [Sikorsky] Blackhawk pelted across the desert. Oawam al Hamzah receded from view, then dropped below the horizon. Beneath the singing of the battered rotors, nine men shrieked with joy, astonished to be alive. - Rick Atkinson, **Crusade** (1993, Houghton Mifflin)*

Long retired from Sikorsky Aircraft, Atkinson got me thinking about work again in this passage. Apart from intimate family decisions like who to marry (or not to) surely few pillars of life are more critical to most of us than our jobs - careers if we're lucky. In my case, the job and career road was bumpy albeit interesting. Some milestones included my first regular job, that of low level maintenance worker for the YMCA outside Milwaukee. I drove an open truck with no doors or seats and (yep) no gears except for low. You couldn't go over 15-20 mph or back up. Once on location, much of my work involved cleaning bathrooms for a jerky supervisor who once tossed a six-pack at my groin thinking it was funny. That was in high school. As a college kid off for the summer one year, I worked another maintenance job for a major dental equipment maker. This included hand mixing cement and assembling locker rooms in miserably hot weather.

Later employment included part-time work as a clerk in a university bookstore and research

assistant. These were followed by evening work as a college instructor in Chicago. The pay was \$800 per course in dingy classrooms with groggy students which actually covered the bulk of my non-tuition expenses back then. Fast forward ten years and plucky luck brought me to Sikorsky Aircraft in Stratford, CT. An engineering and manufacturing company famous for its Blackhawk line, they were looking for people who could handle classroom training and work with problem solving groups across the company. Enter me. Working at Sikorsky was a thrill, even for those who had been there for 30 years or more. We were immeasurably proud of the incredible Blackhawks we built and delivered to the U.S. Army as well as numerous derivatives for other service branches and overseas customers. Anytime I needed a motivational boost I would walk myself down the final assembly line and say hello to some of the hourly workers who were affixing tail cones, installing blades and performing many other critical activities leading up to transferring the aircraft (we never called them choppers) to the production hangar where they would be tested and readied for test flights and delivery to U.S. military and many other customers.

Sure we appreciated the great benefits packages - 401k savings plan, pension plan, tuition coverage, health insurance subsidies, etc. But nothing really surpassed the sheer pride of accomplishment in helping to get world class helicopters to pilots and crew who, like Jim Crisafulli above, were in the business of saving lives and supporting vital military missions. I write this paragraph on "401k autopilot" since some of my duties involved penning articles for the company newspaper in addition to countless reports. I loved it.

Today's job landscape in America is perplexing, frustrating, and encouraging - all at once. The good news includes long-term drops in unemployment rates although wages for most employees have remained largely flat. The best jobs remain stubbornly out of reach for most Americans, as they tend to go to those with college degrees and fully two thirds of American adults do not hold a four-year college degree. Yes, 66%, a landslide in politics.

College degrees were far less crucial when I was growing up and well-paying manufacturing jobs were readily available to those with only high school educations or perhaps less, like my grandfathers. In no way, though, would we ever avoid the perils associated with what I call the knucklehead factor. This problem can manifest itself at all levels of society and government. Shortly after WWII, for example, the government decided to decimate the defense infrastructure. By war's end, we had 12M men and women serving the country in uniform. Before June of 1947, barely two years later, we had dropped 87% to 1.5M. Astonishing. The defense budget dropped in parallel, from \$90.9 B to \$10.3B. Not only were the numbers off a cliff, so was the quality of servicemen and women. As the Korean War began in 1950, Army studies showed later that 43% of enlisted personnel in the Far East Command rated in the Army's bottom two categories when it came to measures of ability or intelligence. Knuckleheads making the force strength decisions, knuckleheads carrying out their

commanders' orders.

For those looking for silver linings, like me, there are increasingly positive signs all around. "New Collar" jobs are taking root and expanding. These are skills-based jobs, typically in technology, which are awarded to those often lacking four-year degrees but possessing the hands-on skills, specialty training (e.g. in cloud computing, smartphone app development and network security) and "softer" abilities such as communications and teamwork that allow them to impress potential employers with their readiness to tackle problems that customers care about and *get things done*. Often their salaries double or even triple once they get beyond traditional barriers based on degrees, recommendations and job history. Resume stuff.

My vision for American jobs is that everyone should have the opportunities that we had at Sikorsky. We were privileged, yes, but we needn't be all that unusual. And yes we were well paid, but that is far from enough for most people. A common phenomenon known as the "hedonic treadmill" posits that people's happiness remains relatively unchanged no matter how much we achieve or how many goodies we acquire - according to Chris Hampton writing recently in the *New York Times*.

This is a two edged sword, for we can likewise bounce back from terrible stresses and losses perhaps as readily as we get accustomed to a sharp increase in income. But how to we crack one of the workplace's major nuts, namely that some 30% of American workers see their work as just a job to "get them by." That figure should be zero for my money. How to get there?

For starters, families and schools can do a much better job of shaping job expectations and broadening the typical definition of "good" jobs. When people are doing things they really love to do that draw on their skills and strengths it seldom feels like work. I believe almost everyone has these special abilities but they are too often overlooked or even discouraged. Lady engineers, for example, or male nurses. Attracting our truly best and brightest into education would be a terrific start and that means paying teachers far more. Can we manage that, considering it's the best investment we can make in our future? Hooking more young people (and perhaps many older as well) into New Collar or maybe No Collar jobs would speed us along as well. No collar as in flatter organizational hierarchies where cubicles slowly disappear along with most other outward signs of job status or inequality.

Yeah, it's all in a day's work. And when that day ends, and you can get excited about your

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Written by Jack Sparacino
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customers getting great value out of your product - ☐☐ let the hedonic treadmill be damned. Let'☐☐s think vertical lift, not sideways drag. Jobs we can all benefit from.

See you on the line!