trolyte abnormalities. Although alcohol-related calls may seem routine, they often prove challenging in the prehospital environment. If you approach your chronic alcoholic patients mindful that they tend to have co-morbid disease at higher rates than the general population, have greater dietary deficiencies and are more prone to environmental factors overall (assault, inclement weather, lack of access to medical care, etc.)—and then provide them with a thorough history and physical examination—you may prevent the next intox run from being your patient’s last call.

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References

wake up!” Still no response. I gently kicked his foot (usually a maneuver that would incite him to fight). Still no response, I reached down and felt for a carotid pulse. There was none. Isaac was dead. I thought to myself, “This is too bad, but one thing’s for sure, I’ll never have to haul Isaac to the hospital again.”

We radioed dispatch and requested police support and the medical examiner. We secured the scene. Jerry, the police officer who drove the car out front, was in another part of the building breaking up a fight between two drunks who both claimed they had rights to a particular cot. Jerry was a friend of ours in his mid-to late 50s who worked the day shift downtown. He was kind to all the mission’s residents. The minister found Jerry and brought him to the room. I approached him and said, “Jerry, Isaac’s dead.” He looked over my shoulder at the heap of humanity on the floor and quietly said, “I bless his heart.” The minister began to cry.

Before long, the hallway had filled with Union Gospel Mission residents who wanted to see what the excitement was about. Other police officers and an investigator from the medical examiner’s office soon arrived.

We stood in the door and gazed at Isaac’s worldly possessions. They couldn’t have been worth more than a few dollars. In addition to the dirty comforter, there was a guitar with only four strings, a black-and-white picture of a young woman in a frame with broken glass, a half-smoked pack of Camel cigarettes and a tattered Bible.

Representatives from a nearby funeral home came and removed the body. We helped them carry Isaac down the old stairs to the waiting hearse. I went back upstairs, where I saw the medical examiner’s investigator and the minister cataloging Isaac’s possessions. They had discovered an old, brown House of Windsor cigar box under the dirty comforter. They opened it and found it packed full of papers, empty prescription bottles, pictures and other items. As they went through the box, they came across a military ID card, further evidence that Isaac had been a Marine. He was honorably discharged May 5, 1968, with a rank of “MG.” Unaware of what the initials stood for, I said, “Old Isaac must have been a gunny sergeant.”

In addition to being a police officer, Jerry was also a Vietnam veteran. His response was, “No Bryan, MG means major general—a two-star general.”

I said, “Are you kidding me? Isaac was a major general?”

Jerry went over to the box and examined its contents. He found an old velvet cloth and opened it. When he did so, several ribbons and military insignia fell to the floor. I watched as Jerry picked up a medal with a long blue ribbon attached to it. He looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, “Son of a bitch. A Congressional Medal of Honor.” He looked at the tarnished medal and found an inscription on the back: CPT Isaac Roberts, USMC, Solomon Islands, 1944.

Jerry went through the remainder of the military insignia and explained them all to us. There were two purple hearts, a Bronze Star and several other medals. A USMC hat near the bottom of the box displayed two silver stars, indicating the rank of major general. The last item removed from the box was a set of dog tags and an old tattered U.S. Naval Academy diploma.

We stood there in silence, looking at the prized possessions of a person we only thought we knew. Who were the young kids in the black-and-white pictures? Who was the young woman who looked like she could have been a World War II pinup? But most of all we wondered, “What could take a man such as this, with such a brilliant career, and allow him to die in squalor without any family or friends?”

Jerry was a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and made several phone calls. The VFW arranged to cover Isaac’s funeral expenses. Jerry also located an estranged wife and family members in Athens, Ga.

I remember going by the funeral home with my partner. Lying serene in a silver metal casket was Major General Isaac Roberts. He wore a dress USMC uniform, his face was shaven, his hair combed and his color enhanced by the embalmer’s skills. He didn’t look anything like the Isaac we knew—and abused. The VFW members had arranged his medals and ribbons in the appropriate order and placed the tattered Congressional Medal of Honor around his neck. At each end of the casket a VFW member stood at attention to honor Isaac.

The funeral was the next day. Several other fire department members and I decided to attend. Because his dog tags revealed he was Roman Catholic, Isaac received a Mass of Christian Burial at the Church of the Holy Cross. The Bishop of the diocese was the celebrant. A hearse took Isaac to Rose Hill cemetery. With only a small band of people and no family members present, he was laid to rest with full military honors. A USMC Brigadier General presented the flag from Isaac’s casket to the minister from the Union Gospel Mission—probably Isaac’s only friend.

After the bugler played a slow and somber version of Taps, we quietly walked to our cars with a lump in our throats that kept us from swallowing, much less speaking.

As I left that cemetery, I swore to myself I would never look at a drunk the same way again. Most importantly, I swore I would never treat a drunk in a manner that was less human than I would treat a beloved member of my own family. That’s a promise that, to this day, I have kept.