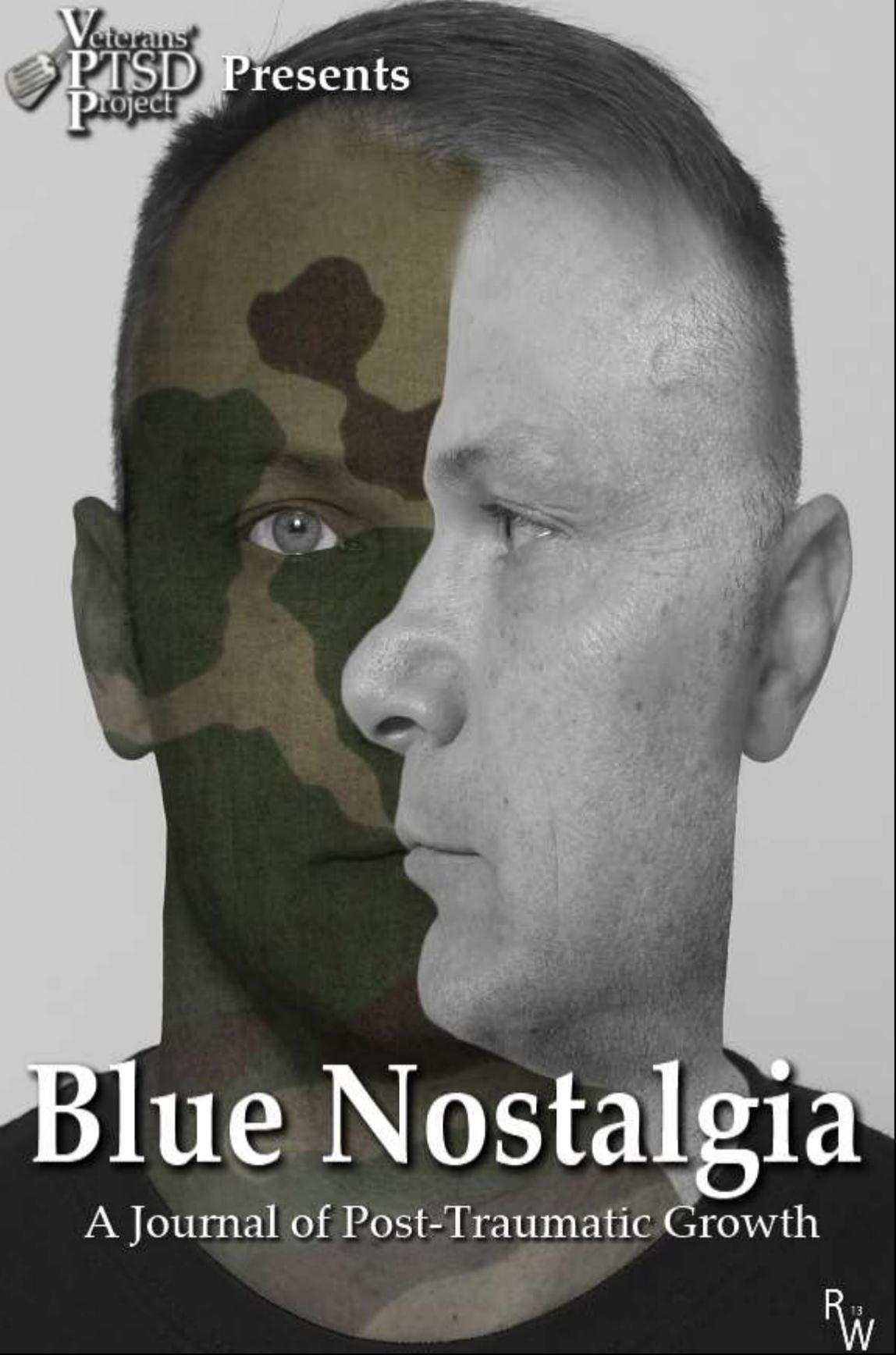




Veterans
PTSD
Project

Presents



Blue Nostalgia

A Journal of Post-Traumatic Growth

The Veterans' PTSD Project Presents

Blue Nostalgia

A Journal of Post-Traumatic Growth

Volume I

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MEA is a non-profit, volunteer-run organization whose primary mission is to work with veterans and their families to publish creative prose, poetry, and artwork. We also work with scholars to publish articles related to veterans' issues in the humanities and social sciences. Our publications include: *The Journal of Military Experience*, *Blue Streak: A Journal of Military Poetry*, *The Blue Falcon Review*, and *The Veterans' PTSD Project*.

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Introduction: On Nostalgia



Joseph R. Miller

In the U.S. Congress on December 26th, 1799, Colonel Richard Henry Lee delivered a eulogy of George Washington that included a letter written by Tobias Lear, Washington's personal secretary, who was present at his death:

First in war—first in peace—and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in the humble and enduring scenes of private life; pious, just, humane, temperate, and sincere; uniform, dignified, and commanding, his example was as edifying to all around him as were the effects of that example lasting. To his equals he was condescending, to his inferiors kind, and to the dear object of his affections exemplarily tender; correct throughout, vice shuddered in his presence, and virtue always felt his fostering hand; the purity of his private character gave effulgence to his public virtues. His last scene comported with the whole tenor of his life—although in extreme pain, not a sigh, not a groan escaped him; and with undisturbed serenity he closed his well-spent life. Such was the man America has lost—such was the man for whom our nation mourns.

Ideas have changed over time and made it hard to recognize the fact that the nation's founding father was a powerful symbol of transitioning from military to civil life. The hero of the American Revolution was also an enduring symbol of Post-Traumatic Growth long before psychology was a recognized intellectual endeavor.

It is also fitting to note that, though Washington was a symbol of seamless transition from war to civil life, Henry Lee's life was much more troubled. Commonly referred to as Light Horse Harry Lee and the father of Robert E. Lee, he was a successful and noteworthy figure immediately following the Revolution. But when he was injured in a riot during the War of 1812, he was permanently disabled and forced to seek a better climate in the West Indies. His memoirs came from a debtors' prison and became popular only when his more noteworthy son edited them. Still, his memoirs are an impressive account of the Revolution and can serve as an example of someone channeling trauma's effect into a lasting and valuable collective memory of his experiences. Lee's words, like Washington's transition, illustrate how Post-Traumatic Growth has been central to the American experience of war, and life in general.

Nostalgia was an American Civil War condition that scholars have recognized as a predecessor to Shell Shock. Historians like Eric Dean Jr. and Dianne Miller Sommerville are not only expanding our understanding of conditions like PTSD, but also providing a better understanding of soldiers' experience in the

Civil War. However, while there are certainly some reified and socially constructed aspects of the syndrome in the present, most of its central problems are ahistorical and timeless.

There are two influential, socially constructed ideas of the war veteran. One says that war is the ultimate experience and the veteran's experiences triumphs over any other human endeavor. The other narrative is of the vagabond veterans who fail to cope with war and trauma: they commit suicide; they are homeless; they do not control their anger; or they are helpless against the force of PTSD. Like all popular images, these have power and some veterans conform to the mold set for them. Even the complicated essays you will read in this volume could, in some ways, be fit into one of these powerful narratives, if that were this publication's objective. Instead, what you will read is much more fractured and temporal. Surviving war and rape is hell, and PTSD is very difficult; yet these authors have found a way to grow. Exposure therapy or writing about trauma helps foster strength in PTSD survivors. We create the environment in which growth can occur.

PTSD may not be the right diagnosis for every one of these authors; the common bonds between our authors are survival, loss, difficulty in life after the military, and the shared strength of accepting the way violence has shaped them. Tragedy and trauma in uniform takes many forms, and each author's path toward growth is both an idiosyncratic representation of self and a story of survival. Our authors have found growth through things as diverse as faith in Jesus Christ to the love of their children, among other

routes. They all have taken ownership of their traumatic pasts through the process of writing and revision. The road has been hard, but by writing they have faced their memories. We hope that what you read will forever be a source of growth and strength. Hopefully, this volume can inspire our readers to grow through the difficult, but valuable process of writing, if only in a journal or private computer file.

The Looking Glass



David P. Ervin

It was killing Iraqis and losing friends that transformed me. Having to kill was hurtful in its own way, but losing best friends was unbearable. I had to bury the emotions deep to survive and stay sane. I found that I had to dehumanize myself to get through my deployment. I become a robot, a rock, a hollow shell. When I returned from war, I didn't revive my former ability to love or experience joy. I had walled everybody off who would make me feel. All that remained was fear and anxiety because those were the only two emotions necessary to survive as a grunt. Looking at the world and my relationships through this darkened lens caused pain for everyone around me, especially those who tried to get close. Chances were that if you made me feel, I'd pop smoke and disappear. It was what it was.

One of the hardest days of my life started out like countless other patrols. It was a hot day in May. I was with half my platoon on a route clearance in Humvees. I sat in my usual spot behind my platoon leader, Lieutenant Brad Kelley, listening to the battalion radio frequency. A good friend, Mark Steppe, was on the gun. As usual, he was keeping an eye out and ready to pounce on any approaching vehicle. Our jokey driver, Steve Wantz, was keeping a

fast pace. We'd taken a lot of casualties in the past few weeks, and it seemed to happen quickly. I'd lost two best friends and a commanding officer in mere weeks. So we were pretty subdued on this patrol. We were tired and hot, and just wanted the patrol and the day over. We weren't so lucky.

The explosion was several hundred meters away, but it still shook our truck. My heart dropped, and the tension surged.

Oh shit, I thought. *Someone got fucked up again*. The nervous energy was palpable in our truck. My lieutenant peered back at me enough for me to see the sweat on his brows.

"Sergeant Ervin, was that a controlled detonation? Talk to me. What's squadron saying?" he asked in his deep voice.

"Wait one, sir, nothing yet." As soon as I'd finished saying it a frantic voice broke the silence of the radio. A Charlie company soldier was saying one of their vehicles had been hit. It was on fire, and they couldn't get close enough to figure out casualties.

"It's bad, sir. They're not calling a medevac. They're just east of checkpoint four on Route Jackson."

We were very close, and I knew our platoon leader would have us out there soon. I radioed squadron and told them we were on the way. Without a word, Wantz gunned the accelerator. Steppe hunkered down a little further in the turret. This one was bad, and we could probably expect to be hit on the way out. It was a short but tense ride to the site of the attack.

When we pulled up, the fireball was all I could see. A thick, black plume of smoke was curling into the sky. Some of the soldiers from the other Humvees in their patrol were crouched

around taking cover. I dismounted. There were screams and ammunition cooking off mingling with the hiss and whine of the flames. I told myself the sounds were just the flames. I went to grab the fire extinguisher but the lieutenant stopped me.

“We need to secure a perimeter out further. Hop in with your squad leader.”

I followed orders and mounted another Humvee. We all exchanged glances, but didn't say much. We took our time clearing the outlying buildings before we returned. We all knew what was coming.

A few vehicles had showed up by the time we got back. Several soldiers were scouring the area on a police call. It wasn't cigarette butts we'd be looking for, though, and nobody had to tell us what to do once we dismounted. There were four body bags laid out in a row. Two of them contained the burnt hulks of soldiers. The other two just had bits of flesh. That sweet, sickly smell of burnt meat filled my nose as I approached the medic standing by the body bags. He gave me a grim look as he handed me one glove.

“Sorry, sergeant, we're short on gloves. Just fill the other two bags evenly if you can't tell what's what.” He pointed to an area to search, and I nodded. So, I thought, that's how this goes down.

I searched the ground and felt happy that I didn't know these Charlie company guys. At that, it didn't seem like the two I was picking up suffered much. They were what we called “pink misted” by the blast. I told myself I wasn't really picking up people. The small bits of flesh glinted in the sunlight, and I made my way back to the body bags when my hands filled with the burned flesh. It

didn't bother me too badly. When I'd heard the blast an hour before, I'd shut myself down. I was getting good at going stone cold. The detail was over before I knew it. I was smoking cigarettes in a bunker afterward, and the only remarks I made were that it had been "a bad fucking day."

A week later we were manning a checkpoint. I was dismantled, but Wantz, Steppe, and the lieutenant were in their usual spots in a Bradley this time. Something had happened down on the other end of our position, and Steppe began shooting at a truck that was speeding away. I started shooting, too. It was so easy to walk down there, drag the Iraqi's still-gasping, bullet-hole riddled body out of the truck, and conduct a search. The smells were still evil, but I was used to them by then. It was simply an unpleasant and disgusting task, which I desired to be done with quickly. That day wasn't over yet, though.

One of our patrols en route to help an hour later was hit by an IED. I lost another friend. No kind of anger or sadness overwhelmed me. It was just another day in Iraq.

What had happened to me started early in my deployment with my first kill. The attempt at numbness started right away. It was difficult at first, but eventually it became as comforting as seeing an old friend.

A van came through a checkpoint we manned, and we shot it up and killed its three occupants. I was horrified when I searched the vehicle that time. I couldn't even do it, really. The smells were overwhelming and the sight of shredded human bodies was a shock to see. I vomited, fought back tears, and couldn't sleep for

days. I was angry at the Iraqis for not stopping. I was ashamed of myself for pulling the trigger even though I knew I had no choice. I felt pity for them. I just kept imagining what it would have been like to be inside that van. I couldn't convince myself that they weren't humans. I couldn't make myself stop feeling.

I couldn't turn it off when they killed my best friend, either. He was our first casualty. It hit close to home. I'd known Kevin for years. We'd had plenty of fun together and shared a lot about our lives. I could call him a brother. Rage and sadness overtook me upon hearing the news and I became ready to kill. When we did a mission at the site of his death the next day, I became a savage. I destroyed the insides of Iraqi homes and terrified the people. I was frustrated that they were unarmed because I couldn't blow them away. By the end of that day, I was still ashamed of myself. It still hurt.

After we lost our commanding officer to a car bomb, then losing another best friend the following week, I realized the emotions of life and death were too much for me, so I shut down my emotional connection with the world. My moral paradox with the decision to shoot at people or not had been relegated to the impersonal Rules of Engagement. I didn't have to love or hate; I just had to *do*. I was a real grunt after that. *That* is how I'd been able to pick up those guys without flipping out. I felt strong in that I'd forcefully buried all that pain and grief. In essence, I had dehumanized myself. I would later learn that feelings in general were the essence of life.

Upon homecoming, I transitioned from combatant to college student. I was pretty happy because I knew I wouldn't have to experience the horrors of war again. I was free to pursue my studies and the career of my choosing. I reconnected with people from whom I'd been separated for four years and even had some fun. But that unfeeling, emotionless person followed me home. There was no off-switch besides a superficial one in which I grew my hair out and stopped rising at dawn. I didn't understand what had happened, though. It took time to learn what that transformation did to me. It was another rough road.

I knew something was wrong almost immediately. The anxiety and tension of being ready for combat never really went away. Not sleeping exacerbated the anxiety and usually left me in a dark mood. I started feeling the edges of the anger and hurt over all that loss. I was quick to lose a temper I never had before. I tried my best to keep it buried and to keep on going like normal. Soon, I started to struggle. The pain was readily visible to the people closest to me. When they tried to enter my headspace and help me out of that miserable place, I came to realize my most serious problem.

The harder people tried to reach out to me, the harder I pushed them away. Just like I had in the war, I made myself an emotional island. I felt no connection with people and had no idea how they could ever help me. I couldn't talk to them about what I was feeling because I didn't believe they had the slightest frame of reference with which to shape an understanding. I was afraid to

talk about what I had done over there, much less what was going on inside. I hardly understood myself, but certain patterns emerged. Again, its beginning was distinct, and again it was painful. This time it wasn't ending a life that started it, but the slow, agonizing sabotage of a loving relationship.

We were together in high school for a time, and we reconnected once when I was home on leave once. We fell in love and started a relationship that lasted through the war. I moved in with her after the war, and we planned on getting married. But only a part of me returned. The man she fell in love with had changed. I went through the motions, more or less. I was distant and often in a bad mood. As time went on, I became apathetic and indifferent to our relationship entirely. While I didn't try to hurt her, I also didn't try to help her understand or to meet her halfway emotionally. It had the same effect. As I watched her become more and more miserable, I knew my lack of empathy would destroy her. It was time to let her go. I could deal with losing her. That was nothing new to me. I just couldn't maintain an emotional bond.

For a long time I kept my emotional distance from people. I didn't care to take on a truly meaningful role in anyone's life or let anyone do the same for me. It didn't matter if they were family, friends, or girlfriends. I acted the part of a real person and went through the motions to avoid uncomfortable questions. In relationships I always pushed away when things got serious. I really was just a shell of a person. I lacked passion in anything I did and I couldn't enjoy anything. At most, I could be content, but

that contentedness was measured only by the absence of anything terrible. Over time, even being content became a struggle.

With the lack of any positive counterbalance the darkness took over. I was left with crushing anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, frustration, anger, and a general sense of malaise. I'd have several days of intense anxiety and anger followed by days of the despair produced from dealing with all of that. As this continued, I realized I wasn't living. I was just surviving. I asked myself if I had really died in the war. I had no idea how to restore myself, but I kept going. I just put one foot in front of the other. It led me down a path which led to another process altogether.

It took years of an increasingly miserable state of being to learn something I'd heard often but never quite believed—that knowledge made a difference. I'd heard the term "avoidance" from my therapists and counselors quite a bit. I argued that those terrible memories were consistently at the front of my mind, so I didn't see how I was *avoiding* anything. I wished I could. I came to understand the meaning of the concept. It was a coping mechanism that I had employed since that first kill and I had perfected it along the way. I learned that the remedy was finally *feeling* the emotions that were repressed for so long. There's no simple way to do this, but it's exactly what I ended up doing, but quite unintentionally.

I decided to write the story of my war. I did it to purge the memories, but it had the same effect as reliving them. I recorded every terrible thing that happened in the war in detail. I wrote about the killing, the violence, the intense fear, and the maddening

frustration. I had to force myself to recall the emotional content that was buried for so long. It wasn't easy. Dredging up those details and facing their full force was horrifying at times. I did it for the sake of the story because I knew its effectiveness depended on emotional honesty. When I got toward the end, I realized what I'd done.

After I penned the last line of the memoir, I was overwhelmed for weeks. There was a torrent of virtually every emotion that exists and they were stronger than anything I'd ever felt. I let myself cry over my lost friends, and I allowed myself empathy for those we'd killed. I felt the intensity of the fear and anger over the frustration. I saw the contours of the mental transformation I'd undergone to protect my sanity. I saw how I'd shut it all down and never turned it back on. I understood what happened to me emotionally as well as physically. By forcing myself to re-experience these things with emotion, it allowed me to recreate the experience in a manner which could allow for the healing process to begin.

The opening of those floodgates did many things. Some were good, others bad. The darkness of what I became in the war is much more real to me now, and it is more haunting. But the lens of my perspective has widened. I'm finally experiencing the brighter side of life again. I've smiled with simple pleasure. I've come to tears that could be called "happy" ones. I've felt the warmth of a hug again. These emotions are intense to me after being so long buried. No doubt, it will be another long process to get used to them. That process will include addressing the pain of

living in that shell for so long as well. I regret many things about life since the war. While I'm learning how to manage these things, I'm also realizing their tremendous value.

In my life, the meaning of the war hides in how it rearranged my emotions, making my perspective clearer. I appreciate the value of feeling as a human being *because* I've felt the absence of that aspect of my personality. Tears, smiles, nervous butterflies, happiness, excitement, and even sadness are what give our existence real meaning. I have learned that we must allow ourselves to become close to others and to share those emotions. They make the difference between surviving and living. I'll never take nervous butterflies for granted again. If learning the significance and beauty of this life took the misery of war, then maybe it was all worth it.

“That’s good, Conn, come on back”

‡

Michael Conn

Patched up concrete, bags of trash, bridges, large crowds. All now teem with imminent destruction. I often sink into nostalgic stupors, thinking about times when I would loiter for hours in my favorite bookstore, perfectly content in that familiar and welcoming environment. Hours passed without concern as I ventured through the weaves of literary tapestry. To stretch my legs I'd stroll between the loaded shelves, adding books to my ever-expanding mental reading list. I'd sip coffee at the café and eat a snack while watching my fellow patrons, trying to read moods and body language, and guessing the kinds of people they might be.

But in the months after my homecoming from Afghanistan, what were once relaxing visits to my favorite bookstore became marred by constant pauses in reading. I would scrutinize everyone who passed too close. I sat in a state of hyper-vigilance when really all I wished to do was read, do homework, or simply enjoy the bookstore as I used to.

I would never have thought I would not be able to sit still and focus for more than five minutes at a time reading a book. I loved reading for hours at a time. I sought solace in books. I sought

adventure and thrill. But all that, for the most part, now seems lost to me.

My ability to maintain any sense of normalcy, according to my wife, appears to be non-existent. Now I'm obsessed with situational awareness and maintaining my 5's and 25's—a method we used to check the ground around us by starting at 5 meters and working out to 25 meters. I am stuck in “Battle Mind”—that once coveted mindset of heightened awareness my commanding officer said we needed to maintain.

But this Battle Mind is simply no good in my life today. I am jumpy and moody, and I've been told I seem unapproachable, as though I'm about to have some kind of violent outburst. These are just a few of the facets that make my present persona dysfunctional. I am a healthcare worker, and these problems are no good to someone in this profession. I need to be able to deal with a myriad of situations and while hyper-vigilance can work in some cases—like paying attention to details and catching an otherwise unnoticed symptom in a patient—it is ultimately detrimental. My inability to swallow criticisms from patients and family members is not good for them, my employer, or me. All in all, I am ultimately a “no-go” in my present state, but I am coping and am leading a fairly normal life despite my past.

These changes, both psychological and physiological, were an absolute necessity at the time of my traumatic experiences. They enabled me to survive in a world in which, if I were not in the right state of mind, I would be taking a very rough ride atop pounds and pounds of high explosives.

In 2008, my unit, the 206th Engineer Battalion, deployed to Afghanistan to conduct Route Clearance Patrols (RCPs). RCPs are pretty much what the words suggest: patrols to clear routes of travel used by NATO forces of any obstruction. This is not to be confused with things like stacked tires, debris, or an object laid across the road to impede progress; the obstacles I refer to are much more effective. They will blow a massive crater in an asphalt road and take the persons who were on the spot during detonation on a fatal ride. RCPs are tasked with clearing Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). These could be anything from old rockets and anti-tank mines to .50-caliber ammo cans packed with a homemade explosive (HME). And one other catch: in Afghanistan 95 percent of IEDs are buried in the ground with two activation methods—pressure plate and wire. *Bummer.*

These obstructions are meant to impede us, destroy our vehicles, and—for the full bounty the Taliban pays locals if this should happen—kill us.

We were fortunate enough to have the proper Counter-IED assets. MRAPs (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) are heavily armored troop carriers and gun trucks. The Buffalo, which we called the “Cadillac” because of its awesome seats and massive frame, used an extending arm to sweep possible IED spots with a pronged fork and a claw to dig up the bombs.

And last—but by no means least—we had the Husky, an armored vehicle that resembles a road grater, but instead of the blade fitted just under the cab of the grater, we had two retractable

panels. When extended down, they sit under the cab and scan the ground with a kind of radar. All of these vehicles have V-shaped, mono-hull chasses that deflect blasts outward and greatly increase survival for the occupants.

One of the first lessons I learned was that it is simply the nature of the beast that, as a husky operator, you are most certainly going to hit an IED. Once you are at peace with that, you will be prepared to perform your duties effectively and not feel constant fear looming just above conscious thought. I found that peace long before my number was drawn, so as I stepped into the “Purple Heart Box” that morning, I was ready.

I had just hit an IED the day before, which had disabled the vehicle. The backup Husky had also been disabled by a blast. It had rolled over a pressure plate, and the explosion blew off its ground-penetrating radar system. We stayed overnight in an impromptu camp so that the vehicles could be repaired.

Because I had hit an IED, I was supposed to have an easy day in the second Husky position. But the IED had been nothing more than what I dubbed a “toe popper” that blew off a tire, filled my cockpit with dust, and lifted the front end of the vehicle off the ground a few feet. By the standards of what we had encountered to that point, the 12 pounds of homemade explosive in an American .50-caliber ammo can was nothing. This was my first direct IED strike, but compared to the other guys’ first bombs, it was kind of lame. Many of them had taken much bigger blasts. So at our pre-mission briefing when the platoon sergeant asked who wanted to take over the Husky, I readily volunteered.

With my iPod bud inserted into my left ear playing the second Harry Potter audio book and with my mine detection speaker turned on high near my right ear, we rolled out around 6:30 a.m. Hours passed, and with a chill that spread all over my body, I noticed we were approaching the hottest spot on the route to Kooshmond.

The infamous wadi, or dried creek bed, had an IED buried beneath its sand-filled bottom every time we passed through. I realigned my wheels and pressed the brake to get myself into a more comfortable position. I ratcheted down my harness on my right side, allowing me to look down at the right panel to see my back wheel placement. After a swift bout of expletives, I took a cleansing breath, let off the brake, and inched forward.

Sweat poured down my face. My toes were white knuckled in my boots as I worked the brake pedal. I delicately handled the stirring wheel as I slowly went down into the wadi. I knew that a forceful correction or adjustment in the wheels position could trigger a detonation due to the sudden shifting in dirt around a pressure plate, or through the wheel itself depressing it.

My front wheels reached the bed of the wadi without incident, but I did not breathe easier. As I gazed out in front of me, I could tell that the dirt all along the trail had been disturbed, but I dared to hope that the disturbance was from a recent rainfall, or something natural like that. My vehicle continued to level out as I inched forward. As I crossed the center of the wadi, my detector let out a high frequency tone. I crept a bit further up, listening for changes in the sound. Once it started to lessen, I stopped,

reversed, and awaited again the tone's pinnacle. When I hit it once more, I stopped and engaged the Husky's marking system, a hose that descends from a reservoir of highly resilient and bright red ink to the panels below. The hit was on my left panel so I marked it accordingly and called to the Buffalo to alert them.

"Hey, Bonecrusher," I said. "Got a solid-toned hit here on my left panel. I've marked it and will continue."

"Roger, Conn, sweep on up to the other side there and stop."

"Roger, Bonecrusher."

I was confident that I had just found our IED, which bolstered my resolve. I continued forward ever so slowly. In the next three minutes that it took me to reach the other side of the wadi, I marked another six spots with low tones. I knew these were of little concern. As a sapper, you learn the language of the detectors. But I figured it was better to be safe than sorry. I was once more clinching my toes. This must have been the longest two minutes of my life as I ascended the hill of moon dust, but my vehicle soon leveled out on the other side, unscathed.

"Ok, that's good, Conn, come on back," Bonecrusher said.

For a brief moment, as I engaged the reverse, I felt at peace with everything, anything, and anyone; I had no idea why. As I shook out of my stupor, I did find the order to "come on back" to be a bit odd. But, then again, this whole situation was fucked up so I paid no heed to the oddity of the order.

As my Husky inched backwards, I felt the rear end slipping out of the tracks I had made coming up, so I corrected ever so carefully, continuing my journey backward. The rear of the vehicle

evened out as I moved onto the flat riverbed and I slowed even more. After another moment of *minute* adjustments to my steering wheel, my attention was drawn away from my mirrors; because of the thick moon dust, my front wheels were now sliding out of the tracks.

“Damn it,” I said, and stopped my vehicle. I made what I hoped would be the right adjustment to land the wheels back into the track and slowly let off my brake pedal. The vehicle inched back, but the wheels continued to dig out a new track. I cursed again. My best course of action at that point was to simply angle my wheels shallow and to allow them to slowly come back on track as I reversed. Another gut-wrenching moment passed, but my wheels finally made it back into the tracks. I stopped to take a breath and to wipe the sweat from my face and eyes. I let my head drop against my right window and closed my eyes, gathering myself and said, “Almost done here.” I snapped my head back up, patted my face and shook my head.

I let off the brake and felt the vehicle continue its reverse motion. And then an intense pressure engulfed me and the cab around me went black. I felt my body being forced upward with my vehicle through an unimaginably violent force. I thought my helmet would be ripped from my head and through the top hatch. My cabin filled with dust. Before passing out from the pressure, I yelled out one word to the world as blackness overcame me: “Damn!”

I came to a minute or so after the blast; some of the dust had dissipated in the air. Dirt mixed with the iron taste of blood in my

mouth, which had apparently been busted open by the upward pressure of my helmet and the chinstrap forcing my mouth shut. My head had come to rest on my right shoulder. I allowed myself a moment in that position to run something of a diagnostic on myself, but I stopped, realizing that I needed to alert the others that I was okay. I straightened my head and was nearly overwhelmed by a wave of dizziness—made worse by my swimming vision. I fought through the oncoming nausea and disorientation to find my hand mic, which I tried to key up. Nothing. The blast had taken out my radio. I looked up and groaned.

My head and neck really hurt when I changed position to put my sight in line with the hatches above me, but I fought through the pain and forced my arms upward. I placed my clenched fists against each hatch and pushed with all my might. In my weakened state, the already heavy hatches were nearly impossible for me to push. But push them I did. A gust of cool air rushed into my cabin and it felt amazing.

I spit out dust and blood and felt the back of my vehicle shift a bit, as one of our gun trucks softly came bumper to bumper with me, which was our SOP for this kind of situation. I could hear liquid somewhere in the engine compartment leaking heavily, like water from a jug. I began to fear fire, or another explosion. Panic crept up on me and threatened to take hold over me. But as quickly as it rose, I forced myself to dismiss it, because at that point, I didn't care, I just wanted to sleep. I occupied myself by cursing the Taliban while waiting for my extraction; their jihad

had come calling in my Husky, and it had called loudly.

I survived the remainder of my deployment relatively unscathed, even though I had remained at the forefront of our route clearance missions. We returned to our mobilization station for our out-processing. We were subjected to a multitude of both physical and psychological testing to ascertain whether we were ready to be released from active duty and the Army's responsibility.

We put our best feet forward. None of us wanted to be delayed on our return home. I regret my choice in playing the tough, stoic, and unaffected soldier fresh from an eventful combat deployment. The immediate help I could have received from the Army might have saved me a lot of grief and money. The problem with that thought, however, is that while I played it tough and denied having problems, I actually believed myself to be okay. But I was wrong. I was so excited to return to what I remembered as normalcy that my mind blocked out any introspection that might have triggered a conscious awareness of actually needing assistance.

And so I returned home to much excitement and fanfare, friends, and family. The first three months of being home I found myself struggling to re-acclimate to basic, adult living tasks. I had not paid for groceries in over a year. I had not paid for housing, gas, healthcare, clothing, or transportation, and these basic aspects of life now seemed completely foreign and nearly beyond my ability to negotiate. I was appalled at the prices of living commodities—appalled, but entirely willing to spend. And I spent

lavishly. I wonder now, as I think back, if that was a subconscious coping mechanism to keep my mind distracted from the latent problems trying to surface in my thoughts. Regardless, I bought myself many frivolous goodies.

After those initial months passed, my material distractions began to lose their appeal. I had never been much of a drinker, but as toys lost my interest and the local university's semester started back up, I picked up on it. I attended many parties, and as party etiquette demanded, I partook heavily. As the weeks passed, my drinking increased; I drank outside of social gatherings and soon dropped my attendance at them altogether. Drinking became more than just an expected social behavior to me. I found myself growing very fond of it, much like my discarded, expensive toys. I drank to escape from the mounting frustrations of the daily grind. I developed an extreme annoyance with people around me and their irrelevant and asinine interests and concerns, and soon it spread to my friends and family.

I became an irritable and angry hermit, venturing out only to restock my daily depleted stores of Grey Goose. During each session of consumption, my mind grew more critical of everything and everyone; the one and only friend I would permit to share in my ventures was becoming wary of me. It seemed that each time we drank, my drunken mind would embark on rants, uncomfortable diatribes of criticisms and expletives. I remember in those times—and embarrassingly so as I write this and recall the memories of doing such—I would verbally destroy those who had not served in the armed forces, labeling them as drones, as

worthless and inconsequential.

I was stupid, of course. But as I would come to find out, I was also a tortured person. During my brief moments of lucidity, I had begun to realize it. As the months continued, my mind often strayed back to the battlefield and my experiences there, and soon my drunken ventures turned into a means of escaping from myself. I would get crazy and spend hours blasting music as a respite from my ever-looming and disturbing memories. Those escapes, great while they lasted, had time limits, and came with an undesired eventuality. Toward the end of each episode, my intoxication would fail me utterly and allow my demons to manifest in more violent and vivid forms, often resulting in fits of rage and despair. I would awake the next day to find my apartment in ruins.

While I was drinking, I denied myself female companionship. I was rational enough to know that I was unfit for intimacy; I continued to keep to myself. I denied the subtle suggestions of my subconscious self that I might need help, that my problems were spiraling out of control, and that I was beyond my own ability to regulate mounting self-destruction. I spent thousands of dollars on flashy electronics and other indulgences; similarly, I spent just as much on my expensive and self-debilitating addiction to alcohol. I stopped maintaining my friendships and personal health, and I gained a lot of weight.

I reached the point of deep depression. I grew tired of my drinking and myself, but I couldn't quit. I needed alcohol to sleep. I was trapped, and worse, I knew it.

It was not until one particularly bad night, in which I had again destroyed my apartment and nearly attacked a friend—as was told to me later—that my self-inflicted spell was broken. As my friends hurriedly made their exit from my apartment, they turned and looked at me—just before they slammed my door—and said three words: “You need help.”

Those words struck me. They hurt me. They embarrassed me. And they were the kick in the ass I needed to go and seek help. The next day I went to the local VA hospital, unsure of myself and nervous. The initial appointment was the first of many to come, and it was the beginning of a long and arduous journey, one that I am still trying to complete today.

It has been nearly four years since I returned home from Afghanistan, but my senses still seem to be aligned to that place. I can sometimes feel the heat or the bitter cold. Sometimes I feel the contour of the steering wheels I handled. Worse, I often smell melted glass and steel, burning flesh and bone. I can see the mountains of Afghanistan in all their majestic, rustic beauty. And I vividly recall the uncountable numbers of blast craters in the roads we traveled. Those memories always cause my blood to quicken, even now. The craters served as a constant reminder of where I was and what the devices that created them were emplaced to do.

My treatment has been extensive, long, and continuous; this is a good thing. Surely the work I have done and the measures the VA has taken to better my quality of life have been for the best. I have no doubt about it. I am better able to cope with the constant

assaults the Taliban continue to unleash on me today, thousands of miles away and years out, than I was when I had only vodka to help fight the good fight. It is a testament to the horrors of war that the battles continue to be fought by the combat veterans who have long since departed the battlefield.

Some days I am deeply saddened to learn that somewhere another veteran has lost the fight with their demons, that they have exploded in fits of rage, or drowned in a flood of depression, costing them their lives. But we are steadily beating out the stigma of PTSD. These days I hear about more and more veterans leading successful and fulfilling lives, proof that it *is* possible to come out from under the oppressive weight of traumatic experiences. I have done it myself. I acknowledge my condition; I know that it's there. In times when I feel weak and vulnerable, I use my rational acknowledgement of my condition as a re-affirming foundation through which I can steady myself and recover.

I liken my PTSD to a giant slab of rock being held up by pillars. The shadow of the slab is an ever-looming reminder of the slippery journey to this point in my life. The pillars are my solace and security. They represent those who have helped get me to this point, and the strongest of those is my wife, to whom I feel I owe nearly everything.

Be encouraged, my fellow combat veterans; there will always be people to lift you up when you need it. You can live, happily so, as one of those who has seen more than most people will in their lifetimes.

PTSD from Military Sexual Trauma

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Heather Littles

I wish my chain of command could have felt my fear and loneliness as I stared at their office building in the distance. I wanted my first sergeant to feel the pain and bruises that I wore underneath my flack vest. I hated them and was determined not to cry in front of them. I wanted to go home, but I had to finish my deployment. My attacker was charged with breaking and entering.

I'll never forget the day my shop sergeant informed me that he would be my new leader. He asked me if I had a problem. I stood there as everything kept spinning, and I felt the heat from the Iraqi sun burning with the burden.

Our chaplain sat on a stool in front of me as he came to speak to me after the rape. Deep down I wanted to believe someone cared enough to ask how I was doing. I asked the chaplain why it felt like hell. He said because God had condemned that entire part of the world. I often wonder if God condemns the places occupied by a devil that thrives to destroy the livelihood of unsuspecting soldiers. *Does every foxhole have a demon waiting inside?*

My demon from Balad, Iraq, nearly ten years ago has followed me around since. He was dark-haired and pudgy in the middle.

His bulbous figure plagued my dreams, looming over me every night—during every waking moment. I could not get rid of him; the shock was wearing off, forcing me to deal with my rape before I was ready. After my numbness faded, the prickling reminded me that I was still alive. I started to feel the pain and wanted to die. The pain took over my mind and body, and all I could feel was an overwhelming suffocation. I tried desperately to make it stop, but it was a fight I could not win.

I constantly thought about being violated and how my body was no longer my own. A greedy man with no regard for life had stolen the only thing that was truly mine. I could not understand why I had failed to kill him. I wanted so desperately to go back to that night and reach for my weapon. Over and over I thought about what I would have done differently. Each time I remembered that I had not defended myself. I sat in agony, waiting for the pain to subside. Sometimes I would stand in a hot shower for hours until I could not feel my skin anymore. I wanted the numbness back.

My nightmares began immediately when I came home to the states. Closing my eyes would transport me back to my room in Iraq—with him standing over me. I could smell his rancid breath in my face when he said that there was no reason to be afraid. I woke up in the mornings rushing to the bathroom to vomit; his disgusting breath lingered in my nostrils as I expelled what little food was left in my stomach. I threw up so much my mouth burned for hours afterward. I got to a point where I could not eat anything. Even the smell of food made me sick. I lost so much weight that it hurt to lie on my stomach in bed. I finally started

sleeping with a pillow under my stomach to keep my hipbones from digging into the springs of my old army mattress.

I spent one day a week in extensive trauma therapy, and it was the only place that I could let out my feelings. Most of the time I sat rocking back and forth as waves of nausea washed over me, my knuckles digging into the arm of the chair. When it was time to leave the counselor's office, I'd have to force my fingers apart and hold them straight or they would cramp and curl back up. I tried to listen to the professionals' suggestions for a diet that would ease the vomiting. Bananas, applesauce, tea, and toast were the only things I could eat for months. When my stomach pains became overbearing, I would open a bottle of wine and drink myself into a stupor. I never took the time to use a corkscrew, and I would dig at the cork with my knife until I could shove the cork into the bottle. The wine always had a woody taste from the bits of cork floating around.

I went to work every day, but I could only function if I had taken my medications. Meds for depression and anxiety, insomnia, and nightmares were my breakfast. I choked them down with whatever wine was left in the mornings and headed to work. I missed my physical training routinely due to severe vomiting and diarrhea. My platoon sergeant looking for me in the bathroom was irrelevant; the pills allowed me the numbness again.

The sea of green uniforms caused hypervigilance when at work. Each time someone walked by me in uniform, I looked for my attacker's face. My heart would speed up and I would start sweating heavily. I tried to stay alone indoors to escape the people

in green. Each face under a beret could be my attacker. The fear of running into him made me sick, my hands shaking so bad that I could barely hold on to the cigarettes that were my only comfort.

I would forget to turn off the lights in my car and find a dead battery. I would leave cigarettes in my hand until I felt the cherry burning in between my fingers. Forgetting the small things made my symptoms worse. I could be attacked again at any moment. I started becoming obsessed with locking and unlocking doors and windows until I could guarantee that they were all secured. I would lie on my barracks room floor and watch people's feet as they moved back and forth waiting for the sound of someone breaking into my room in the middle of the night.

I didn't see my attacker when I got home from deployment. He was transferred to a unit near his home of record and that made my life a little easier. When I transferred to a new unit, I had to tell the chain of command why I was in counseling. They deserved an explanation about why I was going to miss work, and I was in the middle of being chaptered out of the army. My supervisor from Iraq went to my new unit with me. My new platoon sergeant and captain asked her if she had known about the rape in Iraq. I stood in my commander's office waiting for a denial, but she simply acknowledged she knew. After months of verbal abuse from her about how weak I was, making me feel less of a soldier for accepting care from mental health, I learned she knew what had happened to me. I had never told anyone in my last unit. In fact, the therapist, my new platoon sergeant, and new commander were the only people I had told.

Every second of pain I suffered from my rape was overcome with fierce anger. I burned from the inside out and I wanted to kill everyone that sat back and watched me suffer. If she knew of the rape then my former chain of command had to have known as well. I hated all of them. Each day I went to work and had to see that woman. I thought about how to kill her. Nothing seemed evil enough for me and I was not willing to give another second of my future to an institution that treated one of its own so poorly. I worked diligently to complete the therapy required for my chapter and prayed daily that they would grant the paperwork necessary to send me on my way.

The light was how it started. When I did not respond to the pounding on my door, he walked around to the back and shined his flashlight on me through the window to see if I was there. I lay in bed motionless, as if paralyzed, hoping that the monster stalking me outside would go away. I was not that lucky. Within minutes I heard something slide through the crease in the door and open the lock. It was an identification card. I had used one myself to open the door to my room in Iraq when I forgot my keys. I often wonder what made me think he would go away. I was naïve to think that a predator would turn away from its prey. I am positive he stalked me for a long time before attacking. My predator waited in the sand watching me for hours and I was never aware.

During the attack I kept my breathing even, hoping that he would have a change of conscience and leave. The feeling of hands

over my mouth and around my throat forced my eyes open. His teeth biting into my skin took the psychological pain away. My rifle was within reach nestled against my bedside table, but I could not force myself to grab it. My mind was slipping away and it was easier to let the darkness engulf me. I couldn't decide if I was too nice or perhaps my smile or the way I walk was the lure that drew me in. Maybe my uniform concealed enough to be appealing to a man that dreamed of forcefully stripping a woman of everything she had. The vulnerability must have been a beacon shining in my eyes every time he saw me flounder in my new surroundings. A flush from the heat betraying my misery was enough to evoke a reaction from the demon inside him.

Ten years later I have rituals to help ease the panic attacks. I heat up a pot of water on the stove until it is boiling rapidly, then I lean over it and force my eyes open to absorb as much moisture as possible. The constant crying leaves my eyes dry as the desert where the cause of my pain originated. Each teardrop spills over into my drowning heart that will not stop beating. In the night I often ask God why he keeps me here. I cannot seem to find a reason to continue suffering. At night I lie awake for hours staring at a black ceiling, listening to my husband breathe in and out as he sleeps restfully. Sometimes I burn with anger because I am sleep deprived and the rest of the house sleeps. I flip through a variety of applications on my smart phone that I use as sleep aids. Sleep hypnosis therapy helps me drift in and out of consciousness, but the light from a passing car shines through my window and I am instantly awake and alert.

When lights flash through my window at night, I feel constriction around my throat. A snake wraps tighter and tighter with every intake of breath. I want to quit breathing, but I do not want the beast to win. I count quietly: one, two, three, four, five . . . Then, I think of five things I can feel. My toes touching the blanket, my fingers along the side of my pajama pants, the dryness of my eyes, the air from the ceiling fan moving hairs across my forehead, and the rise and fall of my stomach as I breathe. I think about five things I can hear: passing cars on the highway, my husband breathing, my cat playing with something in the hallway, the rustling of my daughter turning over in her sleep, and the beating of my heart. I think about five things I can see: the light on the other side of the window, the blinking of my smoke detector, the blades of the fan spinning, the edge of the blanket by my nose, and the faint outline of white paint bordering the bathroom door.

After going through this mantra, I move on to four things I can feel, four things I can hear, and four things I can see. Then I go to three, then two, and then one. If my panic has not subsided, I start tapping various points on my body with my fingers. I tap my forehead five times, my arms five times, my sternum five times, my thighs five times, and the inside of my wrists five times. Then, I move down to four times, three times, two times on down to the final tap. Once I am calm, I check the windows and doors to check the locks. I lie back down in bed and then I cannot remember if I locked the doors and windows. So, I get back up and check the doors and the windows. I unlock each one and lock them back several times before I tug on the doors with all of my weight and

pull up on the windows as hard as I can to ensure they do not budge. I go back to bed and cannot remember if I locked the doors and windows. Finally, I take a spray bottle of fragrance and spritz each knob and handle when I'm finished tugging on the locks. Once I go to bed, I cannot remember if I sprayed the lavender or the mint, so I get back up and unlock the doors and windows, tug on everything, and then spray the scent that I cannot smell on the locks.

I run back and forth from the bathroom to my bed like a little kid avoiding the monster that lurks beneath. I run because I cannot see what looms around me. My mind imagines my attacker behind every door and every window. I cannot sleep with the doors ajar because I imagine his eyes staring at me through the crack waiting for his next attack. After all of the curtains are pulled tight, I desperately cling to the tired feeling behind my eyes in hopes that it will take root and allow me to fall asleep.

My husband often reassures me when I become irrational. He will lock the doors with me or for me and then consistently remind me that everything has been taken care of. I frequently pick fights over small things just to keep from thinking about what is really bothering me. Arguments let me vent my anger on something in the present and I come at my husband with sharp claws. The venom that spews from my mouth hurts him, but I often find comfort in the shared pain. During these bouts of craziness, my husband sits with me until my medications take effect and I can finally go to sleep. His aid has pushed me further in my healing than a lot of trauma therapy I have been through. Even though I

often argue with him over things, I have learned that I can trust his word. He loves me and accepts my episodes as a part of the person whom he loves, and that has been the glue that has held my marriage together for so many years.

Anytime my mind is not occupied, I am more easily triggered. I get transported back to that night and can feel his weight bearing down and the hands splayed on my throat giving me the feeling of drowning. My breath goes in and out as he tightens his hold. He moves one hand from my mouth to kiss me and I feel him biting. The coppery taste of blood trickles down my tongue and I gag. My brain starts to go fuzzy from the onslaught of emotions. I quit fighting and allow my world to turn black. When I come to, I am sitting in my kitchen with a plate of food in front of me nearly a decade after the assault. The world around me starts turning again and I look at my husband and daughter, wondering if they noticed my absence.

Often, I find myself back in Iraq hearing my first sergeant telling me I am a disgrace. My nice personality is a waste and makes me a victim. Nice people are not tough and I cannot expect to be a success in the Army if I cannot man up. Everyone is ashamed of me and I cannot figure out what I've done wrong. Her scoffs and angry words fall on open ears even though it has been nearly ten years. I stare through her face as she yells, and I can feel the commander pulling my sewn-on rank off my collars. I listen to her berate me for being a whore, but my body stands as stiff as a stone gargoyle refusing to cower. The tugging of my commander's

hands nearly pulls me off of my feet, but my shop sergeant holds me steady until it is over.

I hear my husband calling to me and asking me where I am. He says that I will be in the middle of a sentence and stop talking; he asks me what I am thinking about. It is hard for me to put my flashbacks into words for him, as the act of speaking about it causes my insides to writhe. I usually fail to recollect what I was doing before the flashbacks, and I have to sit down and concentrate really hard to remember. If my husband is present, he can tell me where I left off in conversation or what I was doing. If I am alone, I accept the time I have lost and try to move on with other things that need to get done.

When I went to war my idea of the military changed. Trauma painted my world a different color and the light inside of my soul extinguished. The girl who wanted to help others became a shell. I was barely surviving, and no one seemed to notice nor care. Numbness took over and allowed my modesty to diminish. My body was still sore from the rape and my mind was fraying at the edges. I stopped thinking about daily activities and began robotically performing my duties the best that I could. When I signed out on the ledger, I would search for someone to escort me. I didn't know anyone in the unit well enough to trust them with the knowledge of my rape, so I kept it a secret. I waited for my deployment to end to get back to the states in hopes of putting it all behind me.

The day I caught a flight back to America was the first part of my saving grace. When the buses reached the unit in garrison, everyone scattered and we were given several days off. I immediately went to my assigned barracks room and lunged for the fridge that our group of Army wives had thoughtfully stocked with alcohol. When I ran out, I went to a local pub and drank myself into oblivion. After my binge ended and we processed back into the states, I caught a break. The mental health station asked if I needed to speak with someone, I said yes. They sent me a few doors down to a female civilian social worker that picked up the phone and set me up an appointment at her office. A few days later, I sat down with her and described everything that had happened to me in Iraq. She said that as a civilian her hands were tied, but that I could ask my unit for a psychological evaluation.

Before long, the dark was my friend. I stopped being friendly with other soldiers. They were blurred faces without feeling. I wanted to take white-out and smear it all over their faces just to get rid of the eyes that could not see me in the first place. I wanted their smudges to blend in with the dark canvas I was looking at daily. The abyss was closing in and I could no longer look at myself from a first-person perspective. Every day it seemed I was on the outside of my body watching myself die a slow and painful death. The lack of feeling may have saved my life, but it has continued to hinder my emotional health.

A couple of weeks after requesting a psychological evaluation, I was sitting in my first sergeant's office for the last time. I listened to how poor my performance was during Iraq, and she was

formally requesting a psychological evaluation. The reason was due to my being lethargic. She said that I smoked cigarettes all day long and stayed away from everyone in my unit. I wouldn't speak to people unless they asked me direct questions, and I was no longer an asset to the United States Army. She could tell I had injuries and there was no reason for me to continue as a soldier. I sat in the room listening to her ramble on about how I failed the Army and felt the warmth of tears falling from my eyes. My heart told me to restrain, but the more I cried, the more my vision obscured. As the tears fell, my imagination took me somewhere else: A place where there were colors and sound of waves washing the shore. Birds chirping as they flew. I watched the world happen from my dark cave next to the ocean. This became my safe place and I have held onto this image since.

The mental health department sent me through several months of intense trauma therapy including Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy. My counselor was a sweet woman who worked with me diligently to get past the first onslaught of PTSD. During one of my EMDR sessions I blurted out, "I was raped!" I didn't know until she mentioned it to me at the end of our hour. Shocked, I started sobbing in my chair. I wanted to forget. We took some extra time that day and tried to set up a plan for dealing with my pain. She had noticed the cut marks on my arms and told me that I had to start eating. She taught me self-meditation techniques to access my safe place quickly. I caught on and learned how to visualize my cave on the beach when my thoughts turned negative.

A single knife, blackberry wine, and Yukon Jack were permanent staples in my barracks room. I bought a couple of Disney cartoons on DVD and watched them over and over and over while I cut myself and drank my problems away. Eventually, the psychiatric clinic at the military hospital prescribed heavy medications and sleep aids that effectively made me a walking vegetable.

My post-traumatic stress disorder is a direct result of military sexual trauma. For years, I battled alcoholism and self-injury. Medications helped to an extent, but it was my faith in Christ that helped me meet the goal of quitting. I imagined myself wrapping my addictions in a box and handing them to Jesus. My husband used to hold me down and pull the knife out of my hands to make me quit cutting. Eventually, I stopped fighting him and was able to quit cutting. I swore off alcohol after my husband and I went on a drinking binge and he got alcohol poisoning. The fear of losing him allowed me to give up the addiction, and I have been sober since. I held on to cigarettes as a final addiction, but I stopped smoking one Christmas day, and I told myself it was Jesus's birthday gift. This imagery has helped make me whole again because I believe that Jesus died to save me from my sins and addictions.

There are a few people in my church circle that know the truth I have endured. I am scared of people treating me the way my former unit did. It is hard to share, and I do not want judgments that I fear every day. I will probably never again know my old self. Even though there are pieces that I miss, there is a reason why this

has happened. I am a better person now and I am definitely stronger. I know that I would never lie in wait for an abuser to have a change of heart. Instead, I am now a woman that will fight to the death for my safety and that of my loved ones. I am no longer scared to use whatever is at my disposal to ensure my livelihood.

There is power in overcoming victimization, and I will stand strong. If I have appointments or errands that are out of my comfort zone, I treat them as missions. I try to get in and out as quickly as possible. I rarely take food from friends' homes and I suffer from hair loss every time someone comes into my house that is not my immediate family. I will continue hosting because I want people in my life. I know that seclusion only aggravates my symptoms. It is imperative for me to stay vigilant. Post-traumatic growth cements my beliefs. I know that I am on the right track.

My therapist helped make me stronger, and I learned that it was all right to have some weaknesses. She taught me about body language and how to not look like a victim. We discussed self-defense techniques and she helped me to toughen up. For months I learned about mindfulness and positive self-talk. Before long, I was more confident and wielded a thick outer shell. She taught me how to say no effectively and how to be assertive. I no longer had to be afraid of that simple word, and I slowly turned into a warrior again.

Post-traumatic growth has taught me a lot about myself. I have spent a couple of years reverting back to my childhood and literally carried a stuffed animal everywhere. My trauma team

encouraged me to hold on to anything that would ease my symptoms, and a white bear from an Asian marketplace fit the bill. This stuffed bear that has soaked up thousands of my tears has been one of my items of comfort for nearly a decade. A bear to make me feel safe has done that and so much more. My bear was there for all of the therapy and moved on to be in the hospital bed when I delivered my baby girl. I revel in knowing that a simple inanimate object has carried me through some very tough times. It has become a talisman of sorts, and his furry outside holds most of my deepest secrets. His name is Lumpkin, and I have sprayed him with more aromatherapy to keep my senses in the present. He watches me sleep and sits with me when I write the hard stuff. I can hug him when I need a tangible hug from something that does not ask any questions about why I need him.

My confidence allowed me to get my Bachelor of Psychology degree. When I started reading about Jesus' story, I learned I was not alone in my suffering. Although he was not sexually abused, his abuse and death comforted me because I no longer felt alone. Someone in history had experienced the pain that I have had to endure for years. Every word of his story became monumental to my post-traumatic growth, and I got a bit of my old self back. I became a fighter for a different war. A war where my divine chain of command loved me unconditionally, and that was the single best revelation since the day I discovered that the rape was not my fault.

Post-traumatic growth reminds me of the ocean. It mesmerizes me how the earth looks cut off from the beach. When I am driving

toward the water, the endlessness on the horizon makes my heart flip, and I feel like I am almost free. The closer we get, the more excited I become until finally reaching the shore to dip my toes in the water. I set my sights on freedom from pain, and with prayer to Jesus, he will help me reach the shore. Sometimes I want to give up when an obstacle blocks my view from the shore, but I remember that Jesus went up the mountain to pray to God. I use my personal mountains as places to pray. The ups and downs of my condition have brought me closer to God because I find myself praying each time the crests peak and the valleys dip. When I see a new level stretch of future ahead, I praise my Lord for seeing me through.

I can have a relationship with God on my terms. Fellow Christians do not occupy the space between God and me. The only person who stands between God and me is Jesus Christ, and he has become my best friend. When my symptoms become unmanageable, I talk to Jesus. If I cannot make myself get out of the house, I tell Jesus about it and know that he understands. On the days I am suffering and cannot bring myself to church, I know that it is all right because Jesus took personal time and prayed on the Mount of Olives. I can go outside and spend time with my farm animals where I feel closest to heaven, and I remind myself that it is perfectly acceptable to call out to God and ask him why. I may not hear the answer, but I know that Jesus called out to God too during his suffering. He is my leader and I his follower. I can be still and know that he is taking care of me. In the last few years I have let Christ enter the secret cave in my mind. I can open up to

him and not feel threatened. We exist in a place no mortal can penetrate, and I allow him to hug me and tell me that everything is all right.

Some of the biggest leaps in my growth had Jesus at the center, and I find myself fortunate to have finally found a method that helps me heal. I understand that not everyone turns to Christianity, but this is what has helped me the most. I often think those of us with PTSD have to hold onto whatever we can to survive.

In the beginning, the things I held onto were destructive and that was no way to live. The amount of positive growth I have had is a miracle. I have been fortunate to find something that helps me have a brighter future, and I hope and pray that all of my fellow veterans find whatever it is that heals them from the inside out.

My Reason



Robert Loughhead

He kissed me. I was waiting to get the mail, but I realized that she would be a while. I went over, picked him up, and gave him a big hug, telling him how proud I was of him. Somehow, I think he will never know.

It was a lovely Somali day and I had just finished playing some volleyball in the sandy courts we had outside of our accommodations in Mogadishu. I was standing in line waiting for a hot meal of pork chops that had been commandeered somehow on a convoy run. Just as they were putting the pork on my paper plate, the call came through, “Shut the line down, and link up at headquarters.”

Within five minutes we were lined up, watching the horizon, as the sky out over the most direct route to the crash site was lit up with green tracers. Our guys were being pierced by cross fire from the Somalis and their progress was halted. They turned around to come back while another plan was formulated.

I walked into the kitchen, shaking off the sleep meds I had taken the night before. She was putting away some dishes as I moved to the refrigerator to get the eggs and crabmeat for her

breakfast omelet. I moved back around the island and waited. After two seconds, I'd say, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get in your way." The way the words hung in the air, the look of fear and concern on her face. They stung me. *Is this what I had become?*

This was our routine. She would get up and shower; I'd get up and make her breakfast and feed our son, to help get her out the door. It was about all I was functional for in the house. A warrior reduced to playing Mr. Mom. Once she left, what used to be a strong man would find himself on the internet, doing a little reading, or, if I felt really down that day, I'd just go lie back in bed or go to the basement where it was very dark. I could grab my poncho liner, curl up on the couch, and act like the day didn't exist, like I was normal and could just sleep it all away.

Some days though, our routines would collide. Those were never good days. It was never good to mess with my schedule, even if I didn't know what in the hell my schedule included on a daily basis. The only thing I knew was that in the morning I had a purpose; once they walked out the door into the real world, it was anybody's guess as to *what he is going to do today*.

"Are you going to your doctor's appointment?"

"Yes," but even that would be a lie sometimes; I would get to the VA hospital and not be able to walk in. I quit going to group therapy at the Veteran Center downtown.

"Will you go to town and pay this bill? It's due today."

"Sure thing."

Only hours of solitude would be followed with drinking to numb the pain, and I would finally say, "The hell with them, I've

got too much going on, I'm not going to town today, parking is a pain, and I don't feel well."

There was always something wrong: bills, dinner, and school events; if they didn't center on my pain, I could not care less about what the rest of the world thought about me. What these people once knew to be me left a long time ago; they just never saw the train while it was leaving the station. Then again, maybe that was just who I had become. I was too busy with the tree rooted in my life, much less a forest.

"Cpl. Loughhead, you are going fifth in the lineup." I started looking at the moon that was rising over the Black Sea. *How in the world did I get to this point?* The calm of the moonlight on the water centered me; water always had a peaceful effect on me.

All seemed to be eerily quiet at 11 PM as the convoy started moving. Then, as we rounded a corner, I heard the tank up front open up with a couple blasts. The Somalis knew which way we were coming, and they had used the hours of our planning to construct more roadblocks. I heard the cacophony of fire come roaring to life. It felt like anybody that could breathe in that city with access to a weapon was out on both sides of the route, doing their best to take us out.

I drove a hardback Humvee that we had equipped with an automatic grenade launcher with my team. Nothing about the night seemed normal as I looked through my night vision goggles driving through the narrow streets. I saw muzzle flashes to my left as PFC Topmiller shot targets appearing in doors and the windows

of buildings that were no farther than 15 feet to our left or right. With every launch of a grenade from PFC Smith up top, I saw the clouds of debris and destruction left in front of us.

We followed the convoy onward as number two in the lineup. The first two APCs had gotten into another ambush and were lost for the rest of the night. I felt my skin prickle with more anticipation of how the night seemed to be getting worse in a hurry. The stench of sweat mixed in with the carbon of our fire, and the dust from the debris and filth of the city formed a smell I knew I would never forget. My other platoon mates from 1-87 infantry sat at the intersection, a link up point to lead a convoy back out of the city.

Army experience had already taught me that “anything that can go wrong will go wrong,” and about ten minutes later the first sergeant was calling for a Humvee with a grenade launcher to take out a sniper who had halted their advancement. I followed the sound of the nearest gunfire until I found the grunts after a couple blocks. The first sergeant walked up to my window and told me to follow him. Before pulling into the street and into the line of fire, he told my gunner, “I’m going to put tracer rounds on the target, and you follow my rounds and take that son of a bitch out.” I felt the turmoil in my stomach grow; I could feel the tension in my vehicle, as we knew this was a death mission, as the sniper had already killed one and injured some others.

I watched in amazement as the first sergeant marched right out into the open of the street, seemingly without any fear for his own well-being. At this point, I thought to myself, *fuck it; if he’s got the*

balls to do that, then I'm following that man anywhere. I drove out to his position and watched through my night vision goggles as the last of his tracers hit the top of the wall of the roof. My gunner launched his third round, hitting the sniper as he stood up at a timely moment. I watched him take it; he fell over the roof's edge. A cheer rose up from the grunts that had been pinned down. They were then able to move on up to their objective.

Sure, I heard the whispers. I saw the people talking as if I weren't even in the room, "Well, if he can go do this or that, then he surely doesn't have a problem."

I was even asked by a friend one night when I was out picking up some take out, "So how much do you get a month from the VA?" I was shocked. The cat was out of the bag, and I had officially lost friends that would never understand.

I dealt with the "I don't know why you just can't get over it" and other mundane comments from friends or family that thought they were being helpful. The more I was prodded, the harder it fell back on my wife and son. Push his buttons and look out. My roaring would be at family. It allowed me not to look at the real issues.

I went into sabotage mode and tried to push those closest to me away. I would talk to people online to make myself feel normal again. It is easy to paint yourself as normal or joke that your craziness is what makes you normal when you are online. It is the people that think they are normal that don't have a clue.

Self-deprecating humor is a tool for avoidance for a person with PTSD, as is intoxication. Many turn to alcohol. I knew what I was doing and knew it would be the end of my family, yet I couldn't stop the train that was rolling. The train had run for so long that I truly didn't feel that I could undo all the damage that had been done. I saw the cuts; I saw the way PTSD had controlled me. I saw how it was affecting my son, my wife, and the people closest to me. There were eggshells and shattered glass littered all through the path my life would take.

The chaos of battle overtook me as we sat there in the middle of that street; it seemed the whole world went silent around us. With the grunts moving forward on foot, they continued to fight their way in, but my company radio net was quiet. I knew people were locking up. Still, no matter the training, when bullets start snapping around you, all bets are off.

We were alone in a Humvee in the middle of a bad part of town. Our only saving grace: the Somalis didn't realize we were there. I started to take notice of the sights around me: a dead donkey that had been shot was lying not far in front of me, his cart overturned but still attached to the harness. Bodies scattered here or there very dark in color.

The crackle of my radio finally broke my silence and reflection and told me that something was about to change my situation again. "Three, this is six, you need to take your Humvee up to the evacuation point. They have a casualty you need to bring out."

I was left to my own fruition to find the link up point. I had no map. I could only go on the sense of direction that I had acquired after a couple years of doing land navigation and finding out where I was on the earth for some second lieutenant that hadn't quite mastered the skill yet.

The Somalis didn't know we were coming since the 2-14th, 10th Mountain guys had already cleared the way to the link up, so I didn't encounter a lot of fire for the next couple of blocks. I rounded a turn to see silhouettes through my goggles—troops moving around, setting up perimeters. I linked up at the casualty collection point. They tried to immobilize him in the back of my Humvee. Every little jolt in the street made him scream out in pain. I made it only about fifty yards before I was called to a halt. It seemed they were sending in a front line ambulance to extract my guy. We were needed at the crash site. After the soldier was transferred, I was led back to a small alley where the Black Hawk Super 61 had been shot down in the midafternoon.

PFC Topmiller was outside of the vehicle helping to liaise between me and the Delta operators working on the fuselage. They hooked the Black Hawk up to a tow strap and my Humvee, and we started working to try and pull the wreckage from the tiny alleyway. Tight quarters didn't bode well for us as sitting targets, so they dispatched four rangers to our front to provide security. Others were at the rear of the helicopter, but the Somalis knew exactly where we were. They knew that we would try to get the pilot out of the bird.

What seemed like forever in time had only been a few hours. It was 2 AM on October 4th, 1993. Whenever the Somalis fired RPGs or small arms at us too heavily, the operators called for a gun run from the AH-6 little bird pilots circling above. You could hear them coming, the sound reverberating off the tin shacks on either side, the infrared laser of the targets through the night vision goggles, as you went momentarily deaf from the loud burp of their Gatling guns roaring overhead, raining down hot brass that would burn you to the soul. I watched the destruction in front of me while wiping the hot discharge from my neck.

I did therapy. I was an inpatient and I put in the time while I was in the hospital. It hurt and I was as raw as I think a human can be. I shared my fear and guilt with my brothers in arms, even ones from Korea, Vietnam, and the War on Terror. Yet, I let my patterns of comfort continue. I have come to see the light now, in more ways than one. I understand that it was my fear of telling my loved ones what was bothering me and what was going on in my head that was driving the very people I needed away. I lost my wife and essentially my son. Honestly though, his dad is in a better place, and if I were with him daily, I'd be tempted to fall back into the same routines. I have a chance at life now with my son. I don't want to see the markings of PTSD on his life any more than they already are.

They instructed me to start pulling forward. Dropping the vehicle into low, we tried for several minutes, but there was no

pulling the big bird, and my wheels were just spinning up sand at that point.

Every so often I got calls over the net from my higher ups and even some of the leaders back in the Battalion Headquarters, asking about our progress. *When will you be done?* Daylight was coming soon, and we would lose our advantage of the Somalis' not being able to see us at night. I was a little consumed with working the Humvee and not entirely worried about the chatter, but it was becoming a distraction. In my mind's eye I had seen enough of "leadership" in this evening, to make me a little on edge.

Time seemed like it was going fast as we were coming up on five o'clock; I felt like I had been in warp speed and had only been at the crash site for about forty five minutes instead of the three hours that had actually elapsed. I felt very safe in this hell hole of a place I had found for the early morning hours, surrounded by Rangers and the strafing runs of the little birds; I could never recall such a feeling of peace and resolution in my life.

As I watched the dawn of day coming, I noticed as the birds started chirping in the bushes along the shacks that we were lined up beside. One final call over the net finally got one of the Delta guys on my Battalion net; he calmly grabbed the mic from me and told the officer on the other end, "We will be done when we are fucking done, not any time before, so clear the fucking net so we can do this."

We were well aware of the situation at hand, but leaving was not an option. I smiled to myself at what I knew was a seething

and humiliated officer whose radio operators back in the tactical operations center were smiling just the same.

I was told to start pulling again—slowly this time. There was a little more give. Suddenly, I felt the Humvee lurch forward as I hit one of the ruts I had dug out earlier with my tires. I felt the line go slack. I looked in my side view mirror and saw a head and arm come rolling towards me in the dirt. I had never been sicker to my stomach in my life. Topmiller came up and asked if I saw it. I told him yes. I saw the same look in his face that I knew he was seeing in mine.

I still see it plainly. I have opened up my mind to the possibilities, of the insanity I saw. How is it that more people are not affected by seeing or being a part of this sort of chaos? When I struggle with the nightmares, they are grand. I can lock down on anyone and anything, just go in my shell and watch them—*feel them*—prodding me as if they are a young boy with a stick trying to prod the turtle to stick his head out from under the shell.

APCs were called forward to get the wounded and dead, but there was not enough room for some of the Rangers to ride out. They were instructed, along with some of my 2-14th brothers, to walk and use the APCs for cover. Finally, with the lob of a couple grenades into a gathering crowd behind us, we dispersed the group and started on our way out.

The Somalis came back in full force. I saw them everywhere shooting at us. My gunner ran out of ammo, so he called for my M-

16 to use. As I handed it up to him, I saw a guy on the roof directly above, getting ready to aim at us. I told Smith to take him out and watched as a guy was shot in the knee right in front of me. His buddies had to grab him to pull him forward. Another was shot in the hand and dropped his rifle. Everything was intense: the heat of the morning coming up off the cool streets, the smell of gunfire in the air, the loud explosions, the roar of it all. We picked up six Rangers at the rally point, and they were crammed into our Humvee on top of each other. Those without sightlines were handing any ammo they had left to those with opportunities to fire from the back of the Humvee. This sensation of euphoria and extreme fear was feeding the adrenaline in my body again. Finally, I pulled into the link up point, and we got back together with my platoon mates who had been there through the night.

We got confirmation that the last soldiers were out. As I was getting ready to leave, I noticed that I would be the third from the end of the convoy. Looking into my side mirror, I saw the next vehicle's gunner take a shot to the neck. I watched in horror as Doc Foley sprinted into action to save SPC Gutierrez's life. I couldn't believe we had made it back to this point only to see another guy get shot. I was told to go on.

We started to encounter burning roadblocks. By this point, I decided I wasn't staying in the city any longer and drove through three roadblocks to the amazement and chatter of my new passengers in the back. Time seemed to be slowing down as I got us out of the intense fire. But I was snapped back into reality when I realized I was losing the convoy. We were only doing about

fifteen miles per hour. I heard screams, “You missed the turn!” and “The stadium was on the left! You need to go back!”

“Hell, no, I am not turning around! We are going to the airport.” I took the roads I knew. Another Humvee followed as the chaos turned to serenity. People trying to kill us turned to people cheering us on. I passed by the War Memorial monument, then past a mosque; I could see the beauty of the Black Sea. It looked like a good day to be at the beach playing volleyball.

I slid in through the gates of the airport as the Turkish guards got the hell out of the way. They didn’t even think about trying to stop this haggard looking bunch of shot up vehicles. I pulled up to the makeshift hospital tent as the Rangers got out and instructed the medic that we had a body in the back. I watched as they removed the bag and felt the sickness in my stomach again as I visualized the head and arm. I knew at this point it would be this image that would haunt me for many years to come.

I still see the damage. When I wake at 2:20 AM, I’m ready for the dreams and the visions. I check the locks on the doors, look out the windows. It is not Somalia that haunts me anymore, though; it is the 20 years of my life I lost in between.

I see her now. I see the relief on her face because she doesn’t have to live with that person anymore. She doesn’t have to wonder what she is coming home to each night. “Will he be drunk? Will he be in one of his silent but pissed off moods?” That pains me, but it gives me great relief. I know now that I’m no longer a burden to her or my son. They no longer walk on eggshells. I wish it had

never been like that. I wish I had reached out and let her into my pain long ago.

I have a purpose now. With the help of my VA counselors, I am now able to write about Somalia and talk about it. I have reached out to a few of my brothers in arms that are struggling with the same stuff. Sometimes people back home want to hear the how and the why. But they don't want to know about the nightmares wreaking the havoc on your life.

During my first stint at the VA I was ready and willing to do the work. Little did I know, it would just be the start. Four years later, I felt more like a counselor. I knew what I had done with my life after trauma; I knew there was a way past it. I've been a voice of reason on more than one occasion for my brothers, even those on the verge of ending it all. For me, even on the days that seem like the future of those around me might not be enough, I will get a call or a message from someone needing help. I don't run from this responsibility. It is my passion. It is what I know best. The depths and despair of PTSD have wreaked havoc on some of the best men that I have seen or heard about in combat. There is hope for me, though. I do it for the brothers on my left and on my right.

I know now I should have let my family in, but I was too busy beating myself up for coming back. It makes no sense, but it was my mechanism. I tried my best to push them away, but she kept coming back for more. Until one day she didn't.

I am stronger now and I don't hold back my emotions. I'm trying to let them out for the world to see. I do it for my brothers and sisters, so that they can see; I do it for families that want to

understand. Maybe they can't, but letting them try sure as hell beats the alternative.

I'll always be there to support my son. I have a new mission now: I want him to know that his dad went through the depths of hell and found a way out. The human mind is truly capable of wonderful things. I've found in it qualities which have allowed me to do things I never perceived possible. Maybe one day he will understand. After all, shattered glass makes for the prettiest prisms in life.

No Ejection Attempt



Susan Bechtold

*Accept the place divine providence has found for you, the society
of your contemporaries, the connection of events.*

—from “Self Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1841

Although I had left my previous job in aerospace physiology for computer programming, the flight line was still more my home than any office. Everything I needed for cleanup detail was folded neatly in my backpack. It contained one set of fatigues with four stripes on each arm, comfortable boots, my wallet, and a room key.

The staging area was standing room only. Unlike the other side of the runway, the only spectators here were by invitation. I had met the Captain of the Italian team, Mario Naldini, while tending bar at the Officers’ Club in the evenings. He introduced me to Ivo Nutarelli and some of the other team members of Frece Tricolori.

Frece Tricolori was going up. They rolled onto the flight line in precise formation. Wingtip to wingtip, they roared by and swept up into the air, banking, rolling, and climbing upward until stalling and plummeting back toward the earth. Combat tactics without the enemy. Near the end of the show, they began their signature maneuver, “Piercing the Heart.” They came in from both

sides, narrowly missing each other, making the bottom of the heart. Ivo, the soloist, would pass through the shape and toward the waiting crowd. Ivo misjudged his plane's speed and altitude, causing him to strike one of the passing aircraft.

Ivo's plane caught fire as it cut through the tail of the other jet; his damaged plane disappeared across the runway. A black ball of smoke replaced it. "No ejection attempt, dead."

I would repeat that phrase two more times in the next seven seconds. All the emotions inside me were pushed away and shoved down into some dark hole. They were not important.

Two more planes came crashing down nearby me and burst into flames. Their explosions were silent concussions followed by a blast of hot air. No one survives fireballs like those. The invited guests were immobile, staring at what used to be a pair of airplanes no more than thirty seconds ago. Everyone I knew on this side of the runway was either dead or flying away.

There had to be people injured on the other side of the flight line. My friends were over there. They would have been up front. I could not stay where I was and do nothing, but I knew better than to walk across an active runway.

"I have to get across the runway. I can help. I have medical training."

The pilot driving the VW truck nodded and said, "Hop in." He remembered me. I had taught part of his refresher class at Edwards AFB.

I stowed my belongings in the medic tent as I arrived at the crash site. I had already passed by remains tangled in debris; the

dead could wait. They wouldn't mind. Waiting helicopters buffeted the triage area while other victims were lifted away. The critically injured were already gone. Practiced hands grabbed the stretchers, working together smoothly. Again and again we lifted the plentiful green stretchers. Inside one helicopter, a civilian covered in someone else's blood squatted next to a litter. His medical school training was already useful. It was the last time I would see him, but it was good to know that one friend had survived.

The last patient's transport signaled the end of duty. I could search for my own: the missing, my backpack, a safe ending. My outward identity was another casualty; it had disappeared along with my backpack. The base policeman shrugged when I asked about it, saying that it was probably in the morgue and would be there for days.

It looked as if I was trapped on Ramstein for the night. With no money and no belongings I started walking. I knew where one friend lived. If I could make it there, and if he was still alive, I could finally sit down. Placing one foot in front of the other, my mind buried in a black cloud, I made for the other side of the base as the sun set.

In the morning I had help breaking into my barracks room.

Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense.

—from a speech at Harrow School by Winston Churchill, 1941

I tucked my head down so fast that I nearly busted my nose on the steering wheel. Letting out a string of curses in English and German, I managed to make the turn at the end of the runway without crashing. Cursing myself, the military, the pilot, and the plane he flew in on as my schoolbooks tumbled to the floorboards, I dug in the backpack for a pack of cigarettes. Growling about the books and barely paying attention to the road, I lit a cigarette and sat up straight in the driver's seat after completing the turn that led away from the runway.

Somehow, even when they were visibly coming down the runway, the jets still managed to make me jump and that pissed me off. Maybe some people were afraid to fly and jumped like rabbits at every sound, but that was not me. Another jet took off behind me; the F-111's were probably doing bombing runs out at the range that day. It was time to get away from the flight line; there would be more planes taking off soon. I hated being on base. After getting out a few years prior, there should have been no reason to have to be on a base anymore. Every day after school, it was the same. I stayed as late at school as I could and then drove the long, empty road between the university and the base. Since eastern New Mexico was flat and treeless, you could see 100 miles of sky in any direction. I would watch the sky the entire ride to the base, hoping to not be surprised by a roar overhead, yet always cowering when one flew above me.

By the time I arrived at my spouse's unit, the ride in had reminded me of all the things that made me angry. The list changed daily, but there was always plenty since what I was angry

about was my own fear of something I had once loved. Picking up my husband and heading off the base toward home, we used the front gate. Unlike the back gate, it was far from the flight line and always quiet. Every night I thought about changing my route home and dropped the idea quickly. That would be giving into the fear and giving up on one of my greatest joys. Whenever thoughts would lead me in that direction, the memory of flying a jet and the freedom I had felt would rumble its way up from the depths, convincing me that I did not want to give that up.

I stayed angry after leaving the base. There was much to be angry about. Life was unfair. Everything that made it worthwhile kept disappearing. I had lost my career hopes, my marriage was awful, my cat had died a slow, awful death in front of my eyes, and recently I had almost lost my best friend in an accident. It had been a week at that point and she was in a coma. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) was the diagnosis. I tried not to think about it as I checked her house, watered her plants, and picked up her mail. She was in intensive care a couple of hours' drive away. Beside her problems, mine were nothing.

Heading home in the late dusk I faced another night. I wanted to sleep without the nightmares, to not to have the screams to choke down. Not wanting to bother my spouse in the middle of the night because I knew he would not understand and would blow it off as just another dream, I said nothing. Maybe God would finally answer my prayers and take the visions away. I recited the Lord's Prayer four times with three Hail Marys for good measure, saying prayers for everyone that came to mind until the names ran out.

The night was silent; the base approach pattern did not go over our house. Maybe that night I would be able to sleep.

In the depth of winter I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.

—from *Return to Tipasa* by Albert Camus, 1952

The bus driver said my daughter never got on the bus home from middle school. I gathered my stuff and finished my phone calls. Questioning myself again if I was making too much of a fuss over something that might be nothing, I shook my head to clear it; that did not matter.

“It’s always the first few hours that matter if someone goes missing, Mom. I’m not over reacting. The worst thing to do is sit around and wait just to find out you shouldn’t have. I’m going to go look for her. If it’s nothing, well, then I’ll be embarrassed and survive. If it is something, then maybe I’ll be doing the right thing.” I was angry.

Her sister, usually the last one home, was waiting for me on the porch.

“Let’s go,” I said.

“Where are we going, Mom?”

“We have to find your sister. I’m hoping she’s at the school.”

I felt the flashback waiting as we got in the car. I held it off; the old training that was my weakness was also my strength. I had already walked through hell and survived more than I imagined possible. I told myself I could tackle whatever I met. I shoved

doubt and fear away. I had called the mental health office already. I hoped she was there. They asked me to call them when I knew something after they asked if I was okay. The police station was on the way. I pulled in and out of the station parking lot. The school was a little farther up the road. I pulled into the school parking lot and saw what I knew I should have expected; a crowd of people watched the district track meet. My daughter's grades hadn't been good enough for her to attend the event.

She was not in sight. Telling my youngest to stay in the car, I headed toward the stadium at the other end of the parking lot. The flashback tapped my shoulder again when I passed a Guardsman. His BDUs were in that odd pixelated pattern that the military started using after I was discharged. I made note of the emotions and the situation and continued walking. Settling in to my search, I began to look carefully through the packed football field, noting similarities to my past trauma. Chaos, unfamiliar faces, tents, an ambulance, people yelling, tugged at the memories. Dialectical Behavior Training (DBT) was right: Recognizing and acknowledging reactions gave them less power, but it didn't work as fast as making them unimportant.

Just past the 50-yard line, she saw me before I saw her. Her excuses piled up as we headed back to the car and were met with the stiff responses of adrenaline-fueled anger. I was scared, so I chose to be angry. Less than a mile toward home, I had to pull over because the white noise was burying my thoughts. I put a name to it: disassociating. Flashbacks and intrusive memories were old

enemies that I knew better than my friends. My children were in the car. Getting home was not as important as they were.

Leaving my children in the car, I stepped out and took a few deep breaths. The wind blew through the parking lot, cooling the tears on my cheeks.

“Mom? Mom? Are you okay?”

I held on tightly to the two most precious people in my world and cried until I could think. Their existence was what kept me alive when I couldn't find any other reason. They were my anchor, at least until they reached 18 and no longer needed me for survival. What happened to me after that was unimportant. I could work on that later. It was September of 2013. My counselor saw me the next morning. After hearing what happened, he acknowledged that I fit the criteria for PTSD.

Neither hope nor despair have power on their own; they can only provide the fuel that you will use to prevail or be defeated.

—from “Bridges” by Charles deLint, 1992

The final alarm rang. I looked up at the ceiling of my small room in my mother's house. I did not think about whether I had any nightmares anymore. That part had faded into the past. Tired from staying up too late, I made my way around the pets by the light of the lamp that was always on. Turning on the light in my daughters' shared room, placing my feet carefully for my own safety, I woke them up for school. My happiness to see them went unnoticed. They grumbled and complained about getting up. I

considered blasting reveille and put on my old sergeant's voice instead. It was better when I did not have to be mean mom.

Breakfast went partially uneaten; the lunches were packed in a rush. There was nothing to wear in the pile of clean clothes. They debated about the necessity of coats and sweaters. Hugs and kisses at the door. I never said goodbye without letting them know that I loved them. If I didn't get to see them again, I wanted them to have those words. I won: they left wearing coats and sweaters.

Standing on the lee side of the house, out of the wind, I watched the cigarette smoke twist in the gusts and enjoyed a public concession to my lack of perfection. A robin landed on the lawn. It was down from the mountains due to the early winter storm approaching. The temperature was dropping. I could smell snow on the wind. The weatherman had been right for a change. I hoped that would mean less debate the next day.

Looking at the beautiful houses around me, I reminded myself that even Jesus was homeless. We had a very nice roof over our heads, and some thrift store clothes were better quality than I could find locally, even if I could afford them. I should not complain. It was easier to make it unimportant. If I thought about it too long, I would be in tears. A warm coat would be nice, but I would survive with layers until I found one. I did not think about that very long either. Thrift stores were something my best friend in college taught me about. Her memory of our friendship was one of the casualties of her TBI.

I should be content that she lived, but the pain of that loss is more stubborn than any of the dreams or wishes I sent to the

unimportant file. Recently, I had had to remove the paintings she did while we were still friends from my room. Trying to understand why I had to lose her friendship kept me awake for too many nights.

Hearing jet engines, I looked for the source among the snow clouds. It sounded as if the plane was at a lower altitude than normal for an approach to Reno. It was difficult to tell in snow; sounds acted differently. The noise faded away, and I was relieved not to hear a crash. I told myself to let it go and said a quick prayer for everyone on board. It was silly to keep doing that since most planes never crashed, but I did it anyway. Just in case.

I had already labeled too much of myself as unimportant. I had to reacquaint myself with my gut instincts. It had to be okay for me to worry about that aircraft. If I sacrificed any more, there wouldn't be anything left to keep alive. I wished for an answer. None came. The serenity to accept the things I could not change eluded me at that moment and tears welled up in my eyes. I was so tired of the fight, but I could not let despair win.

My dog whined on the other side of the front door. She was not used to my being outside without her. Heading back inside, I scratched her ears and smiled at her tail dusting the tabletop. I had lost nearly everything that I thought I needed, but I had what I really needed: food, shelter, my children, love, and a friend or two. Life was good, but I was not good at living. I kept telling myself to look at the good. It was not the solution, but it was better than the other options.

Gardening was a good metaphor for me. I had wanted things that would not survive. I had planted hothouse flowers in the middle of the winter storms and watched them die while learning to accept that not everything I wanted to have was possible. I watched goals and dreams succumb to my PTSD. I mourned them as if they were good friends. Each loss caused denial and anger, grief, and finally acceptance. I knew learning to want what I had instead of wanting what I could not have was a way to freedom and peace. To design a good garden, you had to consider where you lived and what would grow in the environment. You could not grow oranges in North Dakota or lilacs in Los Angeles without extraordinary measures.

I nurtured what I could in little ways every day and let the rest lie in God's hands. I searched and found the beauty in the desert and hope in the unceasing changes of life. I did have some victories over the years; they were my trophies. When my days went dark with despair, I held them up to remind myself that it was worth all the pain, and that good days would return. It had been a very long winter, but winter never lasted forever. There was beauty in winter too, if I looked for it. If I waited long enough, spring would return, making winter another memory. Hanging on to that thought kept me going another day.

The Terrible Moment that Defines Me

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Joseph R. Miller

As we turned the corner on the narrow dirt road in northern Iraq, I saw a dazed middle-aged man walking in the road, oblivious to wounds on his head and all of the blood running down his face, which showed stark terror. My infantry platoon was among the first elements to arrive at the site of the suicide bombing. Though I was the platoon commander, we had less than four soldiers who could dismount their vehicles, so I grabbed a combat lifesaving kit of basic medical supplies and went out to help whoever I could. The first man I came to, his clothing blood-soaked and charred, was the most significantly wounded human being I could ever imagine. At first I thought his injuries were limited to a severed leg, but when I tried to lift him his torso gave in ways that it should not have. Gravity rather than the sinews of his body held him together, an image and sensation so horrible that I could not even remember it in therapy; I had blocked it out until I wrote this account.

Even with the damage to his abdomen, I hoped that maybe he could be saved. I struggled to find a place to put a tourniquet. But his left hip more resembled ground beef than human flesh, and it

was hard to tell where his wound began. I didn't know what part of his body was intact and what had liquefied. His leg was still technically connected, but it resembled a bloody and dirty gelatin warmed by the sun into a substance that was slightly between liquid and solid.

My years of training at a senior military college, infantry officer basic course, ranger school, jumpmaster school, and my first tour of duty kept me focused. Though my head was swimming in the chaos and abject horror, my hands were steady as if I were back at Fort Benning being tested on my leadership under pressure.

You can never forget the smell of charred human flesh and hair. I had never smelled it before, but it couldn't be mistaken for anything else. The smell combined with the shrieking despair of the wounded who all wore the same look of horror.

I was outside of myself as I tried to help this man. No place for a tourniquet and the wound was far too large for an occlusive dressing. This poor man was going to die and there was nothing I could do. Worse, in that moment and despite all of the carnage around me, I noticed that there were multiple supporting elements coming to help and that the security was getting disorganized. I was a platoon leader, and though every fiber of my body just wanted to comfort this man, I had other responsibilities. I could not save him and now he would die alone on a street corner in Tal A'Far, Iraq.

I will never forget the look on his face when I left him. He did not know I was leaving to keep others alive and that we were all threatened by the lapsed security. That poor man just thought I

had given up on him. It was like watching a man's soul die along with his body. I cannot fathom a greater amount of grief that has ever existed than what I saw on his face as I left to take charge of the perimeter.

As a historian, I know events on the Russian Front of WWII, the bloody battlefield of the American Civil War, the trenches of WWI, and even the sectarian violence in Iraq in 2006 were far worse, but I cannot grasp these facts emotionally. I know that I did the right thing, but he did not understand. He died alone and abandoned. I had abandoned these sorts of hopeless casualties many times in training, but the emotional gravity of such decisions became real only when actual lives were at stake. I wanted to curse the world that made me look a man in his eyes, realize that he was beyond help, and move on to things that I could affect. I wanted to say *fuck the universe* that made me have to be so callous and so methodical to witness another man's suffering, recognize the tragedy, and not be able to do anything for him. If I, or someone I loved, were lying there wounded and dying, all I would wish was that someone could offer comfort. But I had a platoon to manage and the area was less than secure. *I can feel this later but I have a job to do right now*, I thought to myself, but I would not be able to feel anything but anger for many years.

That moment will never leave me. I will possess that man's humanity and the sorrow and empathy that I gained from that man's terrible injuries to my last breath. Yet, I have no idea who he was, what he did for a living, or even his name. Though he had no hope for survival, watching him die made me feel like I let him

down. It broke down cultural barriers. No worldview justifies the brutal killing of civilians. I just cannot fathom what it took to commit such a terrible atrocity. I hope to never believe so passionately about a cause that any actions are justified. Because when “the ends justify the means,” where does it stop before another innocent man is lying on the ground bleeding to death?

I came home from that deployment broken. I thought home was going to be easy because there were never going to be days like those from Tal A’Far again. That may be true but that day and hundreds of other terrible days changed my emotional outlook permanently. I wanted the memories to fade into oblivion, to wash away with time and energy. I wanted to study pop culture history, maybe write a thesis on *Beavis and Butthead*, and do something without stress. I wanted war and tragedy to fall away from my life forever. But I couldn’t let it go. Everything in my life felt like it was life or death. I became more obsessed with Iraq and Afghanistan when I came home. I read more and more. I had serious PTSD, but I still had to play a part in the war. I got a job offer teaching ROTC in Maine and took it regardless of whether that was a good fit for someone with PTSD.

I was as old as my cadets’ company commanders would be, so I wanted to play that role with them. I was absolutely in charge but on the same team. I wanted to prepare them for what they would face overseas. War was shitty. I would point down to the bloodstains on my boots during lectures. I talked about killing insurgents, losing soldiers, and watching massacres. They had to

know, and I wanted those who weren't ready for it to self-select out. Some did, but the ones that stayed were the best in the country. Their performance singled me out for awards, but I was wearing down. Almost all my male cadets went infantry. What would I do if one of those kids died because I messed up or missed something?

I had worked myself so hard I was breaking down, feeling suicidal and homicidal, though I would never act on it. I never should have been doing the job in the first place and after three years I was all used up. I had already been an inpatient for PTSD and mild Traumatic Brain Injury because I stayed on the line for a third tour knowing I had serious PTSD. I was blaming myself and I couldn't let go of the war. I loved my students, but all the bureaucracy made me angry. I hated violence, but it was my job. I found release in exercise. I would leave to lift weights, swim, and run up to three times a day in addition to morning PT, which I skipped all the time because I had vertigo every morning. I was using work to compensate for what war had done to me. Every day contained the intensity of the suicide bombing in Tal A'Far. If I didn't start putting the same passion and drive into caring for myself, then I would completely break down and succumb.

I finally quit my job. When I came to clear out my desk, a letter from the Commanding General of ROTC was delivered that congratulated me for being the top instructor. I was suicidal, on the edge of a cliff, but my non-stop pace had made me the best. Now I had to focus on me, then figure out how to help others again.

At first, I thought I would move past it, and in time it would go away. I would do everything right. I would manage my demons, even if they would not be gone forever. This would work for a week and then the demons would turn back on, totally unmanaged.

But then I started blogging. The first part of this essay was the most successful post, and it amazed me to see how much writing about my life was helping others. For the blog to be successful I needed to post regularly, so I started pulling a heavier writing load. I would deal with something over and over again. Writing two posts a month was as effective for me as ten hours of therapy a week.

Writing has been the most therapeutic aspect of my homecoming. I would get the words out, but then it took more and more drafts to get the language right. This is probably the thousandth time I have looked at this particular essay. Maybe because I am not naturally good at writing, I have to revise, and revise, and revise. All the while, I am managing my issues. Somewhere along the line I started to understand that succeeding with PTSD—the horrors and difficulties—was a lifetime condition. I couldn't allow myself to give up on my dreams because of it. I have had to be more pragmatic.

I started studying veterans' issues so that everything I was doing both helped me and scratched my deep longing to make the world a better place. The memory of leaving an innocent man to die alone on a street corner is never going away, but I can accept how that has changed me. I study PTSD as a field now because it

helps me understand myself, including telling the stories of people who were sick in the early American National period and had no idea why. It is meaningful and self-affirming work that breaks me down crying for the plight of these soldiers more than it brings me joy. But war celebrators have dominated military history too long. People like me who have seen war first hand should play a bigger role in how it is remembered.

When my lieutenants went to war, I saw the greatest proof of my growth. The strongest cadet I taught lost four soldiers to a complex chain of six improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Afghanistan that wounded six other soldiers and many civilians. He had survived the worst situation imaginable with such courage, character, and empathy for his soldiers. I have not been more proud of the performance of a student. He wanted to thank me for teaching him the right way and he thanked me for being honest about PTSD. All I wanted to do was cry and blame myself for not violating operational security and being more specific about complex IED attacks, but he had lost only four so he must have done all he could. *Sometimes you do everything the right way and people still die.* As we talked, he was second-guessing himself and his tactics; I was doing the same about my instructing.

I hit the brakes and did my best to tell him that we all do this. I told him that to this day I second-guess myself on irrelevant details that I cannot change. Until I wrote the first draft of this essay, I had remembered the day in Tal A'Far as if I had frozen up because I felt guilty for surviving. I had done everything I could,

but the man died anyway. It is worse for empathetic soldiers and leaders who lose subordinates. What my former student was going through was normal but awful.

Somehow, the difficult process of telling my own story and choosing to study PTSD as a field in graduate school was helping one of my students. I would have died to prevent the loss of his men, but knowing that what I had experienced in the past was somehow helping my lieutenant manage his own terrible moment validated my experiences in ways that I did not anticipate. I cared about him and his cohort enough to try and mourn with them, so most of the time that effort was enough. He and his platoon deserve all the credit for their courage, but I was so happy that I was still a resource.

I am sure I'll have a few more breakdowns in my life because I will never be able to turn down my new sense of right and wrong. I am sure to go so hard I crash again, but in the end I have decided to believe that homecoming with PTSD is more of a gift than a curse. I have chosen to accept that I have been through some abjectly and inalterably terrible experiences while also believing that there is some purpose for my experiences. I believe in the divine, but I take extreme issues with people blaming God for all the bullshit I experienced in war.

People were to blame—people who did it proudly and left a paper trail. Choosing to accept the terrible moments for what they are and still finding an appropriate take away is not easy, and it is only the start of a never-ending and treacherous path. But if I don't do it, then I will lose those extremely costly lessons.

I struggle every day to never forget what hatred brings to our world and that beyond all the misery of that moment, which will never go away or be made better, I am so beyond lucky to have survived it. Better to have my moral compass still intact. However, taking the time and effort to care for myself as well has been the hardest battle I have ever fought.

I am proud to have faced hundreds of days like the one in Tal A'Far, but I am also ashamed to live in a world that required it. I can't live a life where those deaths mean nothing, and if all I ever achieve is helping one lieutenant mourn his lost soldiers, then that is enough for me. My growth has been awful and magnificent: a paradoxical path of stubborn attachment to goals and pragmatic acceptance of what will never be the same. It has been gruff, stark, gritty, and dirty—like war itself. Ultimately, it is less about my ideals and more about getting up every day, accepting what war has done to me and still finding the way on my path.

When I have shared my experiences, other people have thanked me, but even the parts of my story too rough to become readable have helped me process and feel my emotions. I have begun to abandon the results-based approach to life and instead have tried to stay present and focus on my daily tasks over my larger goals. Failure is too acutely connected to life and death, and long-term success has more to do with consistent daily effort than anything else.

Grinding out daily effort makes me a little better at every aspect of my life. It is a relentless slog that is just like a piece of writing: even when it wears me down and I have to take a break, it is just

waiting for me in precisely the way I left it there. Even when I fall down, when I think I cannot do anymore, it's open on my desktop. The more time I take, the better it gets; the more others interact with it, the more the writing improves. Over time, it is transformed into something so different from when it began. A thousand times in the process I could have given up, but I did not. I put in that daily grind and it got a little better each time until it was something that exceeded my expectations. I would not have chosen to experience that terrible day and Tal A'Far, but the stark results of that day and the difficulty of carrying it forward every day have created something in me that I would never have had the courage to imagine.

My take away is simple: Do something tangible that helps others every day. That is all I could do then and it is all I can do now. But that is not a burden; rather, it is a hard-earned privilege that I am lucky and better to have gained. I owe that nameless man who taught me this terrible but valuable lesson, and I owe myself to have the courage to face it and apply it. I can't let his death be for nothing. It was ultimately my choice to make that terrible day meaningful.

I still wish I knew that poor man's name, but I hope he somehow knows that I will carry his memory forever and that every day he is motivating me to get up in the morning and leave the world a little better than the way I found it. I wish I could have shown him what that awful moment means to me now and that his knowing such would have brought him a little comfort. I wish I

could have told him that I will forever mourn the pain he felt that awful day.

A Note from the Veterans' PTSD Project Founder



Virginia Cruse

The Roman philosopher Seneca said, “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” As an Arabic speaker and a DoD-certified interrogator, the new Iraq war brought me much “luck.” By the time I arrived to my Army civilian job in Germany in 2006, I had deployed twice to Iraq, once as a Soldier and again as a DoD civilian; and I spent a year working at the US Naval Base in Guantanamo Bay. The hours deployed were long, exhausting, and dangerous. When my new job told me I would deploy to Iraq a third time, I knew I wouldn’t make it. I asked my command to *please* reconsider. My boss stared at me, disgusted, and told me to “suck it up.” I left the next week. And, no, I didn’t make it.

Although it was just eight years ago, PTSD was hardly a common acronym then. I simply surmised that I was going crazy. I slept little, hallucinated much, and developed increasingly irrational fears: crowds, loud noises, opening my mail box, checking under my car for bombs. The war on terror was in full swing; my hyper-vigilance justified.

When I arrived in Iraq again, I felt relieved to be back. Civilian life was not kind to my newly developed quirks; nobody in

Germany understood when I lost my shit after someone bumped into me with their shopping cart in the commissary. An accident, sure, but Jesus, pay attention! In Iraq, I had a purpose; I was not just some weak female who couldn't hack it. They needed me; I spoke the language. I understood how the enemy thought. And everyone was fucked in the head; those were my people. I was ready to get back to work. Then I failed the initial psych eval.

I returned to Germany just two weeks after I left. When I arrived in Spangdahlem Air Base, I checked in to the BOQ to sleep before returning the next morning. The noise of the jets taking off was loud and frightening. I curled up in the corner of the room and screamed into a pillow. I couldn't stop crying. I could feel myself going hysterical—tick, tick, tick—as if I were watching myself from outside my body. I became very afraid. I knew I couldn't lose it there. *These people don't know me. This isn't my base.* I called my husband. I don't really remember much of what happened next or in what timeframe, but the MPs came and took my weapon. My husband came and held me close. Finally, I was safe. I started screaming.

I returned to my command the next week to sign some paperwork to take leave. I knew immediately that everyone knew what happened because no one looked me in the eye and, when someone did speak to me, it was in hushed, happy kindergarten-teacher tones. *No worries, Ms. Cruse! We're all going to hold hands in the Magical Fairy Forest and sing songs until care bears jump out of your ass! You deserve this break!* I imagined it was similar to how Alzheimer's patients felt.

Department of Army jobs are funny in that there are civilians, usually retired military members themselves, and active duty Soldiers. While my civilian colleagues and supervisors were polite, my active duty counterparts felt open enough to tell me what everyone thought: *I was a shit bag*. One young Captain in particular, CPT Ireland, pointedly “thanked” me for “abandoning my weapon” at a base three hours away so that an officer had to go and retrieve it. “It must be nice to get some time off when you can’t hack it downrange,” quipped another. My civilian counterparts stood by silently among this chatter, stared at their shoes and signed my paperwork so that I could leave. I was labeled a “shit bag” until I finally left the command in 2010.

There are some of you reading this who are shocked, but many also who have been there— made to feel ashamed for seeking help or maybe struggling to understand what is wrong with you. You understand why I thought of killing myself every single day until 2008. You understand that I thought it would be more honorable to kill myself than to saddle my husband with a mentally ill wife. You understand what it is like to go back to work and for your “Army team” to publically shame you. You get it.

And that’s what The Veterans’ PTSD Project is about: it is for those of us who have been there. To paraphrase researcher Brené Brown, shame cannot survive in an atmosphere of empathy. I found this out first hand when talking about my own PTSD with my battle buddies. There are no more healing words than these: I’ve been there. I get you. You’ll get through this, too.

Fast forward to 2014: I am a multi-bazillionaire with a successful tech start-up company. Okay, maybe not so much, but I am happy. I don't think about hurting myself or anyone else, and I haven't lost my cool at the supermarket in almost a week. Most of all, I don't feel ashamed to tell you my story; my experience has given me compassion—and I know that you can get through this because I've been there. I get you.

Thank you to Travis Martin for his inspired leadership. Travis is the reason you are reading this volume of work.

This is the place. Now is the time. You are the one.

Tell your story.



About the Cover Artist

Ron Whitehead is an Army Infantry Desert Storm Veteran. After being honorably discharged from active duty, Ron joined the Maryland Army National Guard while entering Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania. He majored in Art Education for his undergraduate degree. He has been teaching Art at Ossining Union Free School District since 1998 and has since completed his Master's Degree in Instructional Technology through Western Connecticut State University.

Ron presently resides in Brewster, NY with his wife of 16 years and two children. Ron's BIGGEST passion is to serve fellow veterans in any way he can.