

# 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.