

# Blue Nostalgia

A Journal  
of  
Post-Traumatic  
Growth



The Veterans' PTSD Project Presents:

# *Blue Nostalgia*

*A Journal of Post-Traumatic Growth*

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# ***Blue Nostalgia: A Journal of Post-Traumatic Growth***

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# Introduction: After You Break



David Chrisinger

What happens after you break? The world breaks everyone, Hemingway famously wrote in *A Farewell to Arms*. It shouldn't surprise anyone. After all, war is undeniably hellish, and many veterans throughout American history have struggled to move past their traumatic experiences once they return to civilian life.

In 1989, for example, two researchers published the results of a study in which they assessed war's influence on the emotional health of World War II and Korean War veterans. Among the negative outcomes of their wartime service, the veterans cited the experience of a "disrupted life," the pain of "separation from loved ones," and a "delayed career" (between 40 and 50 percent of the 149 veterans surveyed).

"Bad memories" and "combat anxiety" emerged as the strongest negative effects for many of the veterans. One veteran from Oakland, California told the researchers that his memories of loss persisted, even four decades after the war ended: "Today I have nightmares. Something will remind me of the men I killed and this will bring me to the point of tears."

Similarly, another veteran admitted that "the military service totally screwed up my life. I had a nervous breakdown that took me 20 years to get over—I became withdrawn, distrustful of others and a recluse. It wrecked me emotionally."

At the same time, however, the trauma and suffering that oftentimes breaks our military veterans can lead to undeniably positive forms of growth. Between 60 and 70 percent of the World War II and Korean War veterans who were surveyed in 1989 selected "learned to cope with adversity," "self-discipline," "greater independence," and a

“broader perspective” as the most positive benefits of their war-time service.

A veteran of the intense shelling that took place during the Battle of the Bulge told the researchers that, “In the down times of my life, the rough moments, of which I’ve had a few, that bottom line, I’ve always come up with this: ‘Christ, this isn’t so bad. You could be back under a tree burst.’”

Similarly, a veteran of four landings in the South Pacific said that combat taught him the confidence to overcome adversity, to persevere: “All one needs is the will to survive and the skill to cooperate with others, to be dependable and self-disciplined.”

The veterans who fought in heavy combat also were more likely to value human life than others not exposed to war’s destructiveness. “I developed a new sense of empathy,” reported one veteran, “after seeing the suffering of so many throughout the Pacific area.”

Such a nuanced understanding of trauma and its aftereffects can be hard to find in today’s media coverage of veterans. Depending on where you get your news, this latest generation of veterans has been neatly divided into one of two primary groups, each with its own narrative. The first—the “hero narrative”—portrays veterans as stoic and resolute Medal of Honor recipients with extraordinary courage, lone survivors of overwhelming odds largely unaffected by their trauma, or disabled warriors undaunted by their newfound limitations.

The other dominant narrative surrounding veterans is that of the “victim”: debilitated sufferers of post-traumatic stress, wounded warriors falling through the cracks at the Department of Veterans Affairs, and pitiful cases needing handouts. Drinking and divorce. Depression and destitution. Their fathers—those who fought in Vietnam—were oftentimes portrayed in even less flattering light.

To be fair, both narratives—like all generalizations—have some basis in reality. The problem with such polarizing and totalizing narratives, however, is that they emphasize two equally useless messages that

have been used to represent all veterans: (1) that veterans belong on a pedestal or (2) that they are troubled and in need of pity.

“How many times,” asks former Marine infantry officer David J. Morris, “have you heard a television reporter talk about the joy of being alive with an Iraq veteran? Instead, they (and we) all slip back into a cultural habit that has its origins in the Vietnam War: we turn to pity and pathos. The veteran is a broken person, exploited by the state. A creature deserving of pity and a medical diagnosis that will grant them a special status in society.”

Many of the veterans I know—including those who contributed their stories to this collection—advocate for a third narrative: Even though war and other traumatic experiences change all who engage in them, veterans can still, by virtue of their experiences and struggles, be great and productive members of society back at home.

Indeed, some veterans will eventually achieve a degree of satisfaction, happiness, and emotional growth that may not have been possible had they not gone to war. A post-9/11 veteran named Camilo Ernesto Mejia, who was featured in the documentary *Soldiers of Conscience*, put it this way: “As horrible as the experience of war was, and as painful as the memory of it continues to be, I am now a much better person than I ever was. My eyes are open and I no longer view the suffering of others as alien to my own experience.”

Unfortunately, we as a society do not always recognize the ways in which surviving trauma can actually be beneficial. What we fail to recognize, more specifically, is the prevalence of “post-traumatic growth” among our combat veterans.

What exactly is post-traumatic growth?

The idea that a survivor of trauma could actually grow from their experience stems from the work of Professor Richard Tedeschi, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. In the early 1990s, Tedeschi began interviewing people who had suffered from severe physical injuries, including a number of people who had been paralyzed in car accidents. He also began interviewing senior citizens who had lost their long-time spouses. What Tedeschi found,



time and time again, was that even though the people he interviewed regretted the loss of their mobility or their spouse, above all else the experience had altered them for the better and had given them a fresh perspective on life. Current studies have shown that 30 to 90 percent of people report some positive changes following trauma.

For many combat veterans, such a fresh perspective on life has a number of positive benefits. For example, at least one study of combat veterans has shown that combat can increase their desire to help others. Moreover, according to Dr. Aphrodite Matsakis, who has worked with veterans and their families for decades, there are a number of other positive outcomes they may experience following their service, including an increased:

- desire to live each day to the fullest, including a reevaluation of one's life and a reordering of priorities;
- ability to tolerate and manage uncertainty;
- ability to handle crises and remain self-aware;
- sense of confidence and level of self-reliance;
- awareness of the brevity and fragility of life;
- ability to process and manage powerful emotions;
- sense of belonging; and
- faith in people and compassion for others.

Others may find that they have a greater determination to achieve goals, a greater appreciation for close relationships, and a greater sense of loyalty and commitment, as well as tolerance of others.

This process, whereby trauma leads to positive growth, doesn't mean, however, that a trauma survivor will necessarily "get back to normal." Some of those veterans featured in this collection will tell you explicitly that they are not the people they once were. They still have tough days, and there are times when all seems lost.

What I find so powerfully moving about these stories, though, is the ways in which these veterans have used their trauma as a springboard that propels them to a level of functioning higher than that they held before their trauma.

Take Jonathan Silk as an example. After being hit in the chest with a rocket-propelled grenade that fortunately didn't detonate, he needed to have major heart surgery that probably should have ended his military career. After a short period of emotional turmoil, however, he made a conscious effort not to let his new reality keep him down. He stayed in the military, deploying twice more, and is now an instructor at West Point. "Having the courage to be imperfect," he writes, "enabled me to resume being an endurance athlete and a soldier. I was able to reframe my injury and the 'new normal' as an opportunity to grow and develop.

Then there's Joseph Miller. After surviving multiple IED attacks in Iraq, he came home with severe PTSD that made daily life almost intolerable. He was in a dank, nasty stairwell when one of these attacks occurred, and when he got home, such places became triggers for him, snapping him back to that fateful day. Instead of avoiding anything that reminded him of his trauma, he embraced them. He now works out routinely inside a dank, nasty stairwell at the university he attends. "I add PTSD stressors like I add mileage," he writes, "by consistently building up in little intervals. It is so meaningful to me to do my best therapy in a building named to honor University of Maine Veterans and the fallen from the First World War."

We cannot choose to live a life without suffering—such does not exist. While it is true that, "The world breaks everyone," it is also true, as Hemingway says, that "some become strong at the broken places."

In the end, healing from a traumatic experience can be a painfully slow process, but as the veterans who were brave enough to tell their stories in this collection can attest, there is comfort in the fact that there is always a light at the end of the tunnel. Keep going. Be patient. Don't stop.

# The \$300,000 Man



Jonathan Silk

I didn't crash an experimental aircraft. I didn't have my right arm, both legs, and left eye replaced with bionic implants that would give me the power and strength of a bulldozer, the speed of a mid-sized sedan, and the vision of the most sophisticated drone available on the civilian market. I also don't work as a secret agent, though I would certainly entertain the idea!

In other words, I am not Steve Austin, the "Six Million Dollar Man."

No, I was made stronger, faster, and braver 10 years ago for far less—only \$300,000.

Let me explain.

On April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004, during a firefight in Al Kut, Iraq, I received trauma to the chest from enemy fire. I recovered from the hit and kept fighting. The next morning I had a fairly large bruise on my chest but did not think much of it. I was just happy to be alive.

After I returned home from that deployment, I was getting checked out for problems I was having during physical fitness activities. I just wasn't the same as I had been. I was getting incredibly tired doing things that used to be easy. I knew something was wrong.

The doctor confirmed it. He asked me if I had sustained any trauma to the chest during my deployment. I told him what had happened, and he told me that the mitral valve in my heart had been torn from the impact of the projectile I got hit with.

During the subsequent surgery, my damaged-beyond-repair valve was replaced with a carbon fiber valve that I was told would last 400 years. Three hundred thousand dollars later, I woke up in a different world than when I went under.

I was now the \$300,000 Man.

A crucible is, by definition, a transformative experience through which an individual comes to a new or altered sense of identity. After I became the \$300,000 man, I was right in the middle of one of the most difficult crucibles I had ever had to deal with—though I didn't quite know it at the time. From my perspective, when individuals are in a crucible, they have three options:

- 1) They could spin out of control—what I call the “Death Spiral.” Something bad or challenging happens, and the person in the crucible struggles, crashes, and burns.
- 2) They can learn to operate at a new, lower level of performance. There is no death spiral; however, there is also no recovery. When someone follows this path, they don't get back to where they were, and they avoid any risks that could result in them getting hurt even worse.
- 3) Lastly, they can accept what has happened and leverage the experience for the learning, growth, and developmental opportunity it is. Those who follow this path don't just recover—they thrive and reach new heights. They come out performing and operating better than they were before the experience.

## **Why Me?**

As I was recovering and adjusting to my new identity as the \$300,000 man, I was following option #1. I was in a death spiral and asking, “Why Me?” Instead of looking for opportunities to grow and improve, I felt sorry for myself. Even after I recovered and got active again, I

was not running as fast as I used to due to the damage done and the new mitral valve—the “aftermarket part.” I was also facing the possibility that I would have to be medically retired from the military. The doctors told me I would receive a nice disability payment for being wounded in combat, but I wanted none of that. Instead, I wanted to continue to serve and was not ready to leave the military, much less be considered “disabled”.

As steadfast as I was at times, I was having a hard time coming to terms with my “new normal”. I felt like I was not good enough anymore. I was ashamed, and I was too scared to let anyone into what I was dealing with. I was decorated for valor and was being told by medical professionals that I would not be able to stay in the Army. I was a warrior. What do warriors do when they get disabled? When they’re vulnerable?

They fight.

With the help of family and friends, I started to fight again. I transformed my “Why me?” to “It starts with me!” In the words of Brené Brown, I found the “courage to be imperfect.” I slowly began to accept my new identity as a wounded warrior, and my attitude started to improve. I realized that the only one who expected me to be my old self was me. No one else did.

### **It Starts with Me!**

Having the courage to be imperfect enabled me to resume being an endurance athlete and a soldier. I was able to reframe my injury and the “new normal” as an opportunity to grow and develop. I could have chosen to leave the military with a medical discharge and lived off the disability payments, but instead I chose to overcome adversity and continue to serve. I was now following option #3 and realized my full recovery started with me.

Having been commissioned as an Army officer in 2003, I have spent the majority of my time as an officer as a wounded warrior. In 2007, I

took command of a tank company in Korea. During my second company command, I deployed in 2010 to Afghanistan, where I served as an advisor to the Afghan National Police. Deploying back to a combat zone confirmed in my mind that I was back and better than ever. As crazy as it sounds, deploying back into a combat zone helped me feel “whole” again and helped with my mental recovery.

Once I returned, I continued competing in endurance sports. Before I left, I completed the New Orleans Half-Ironman, as well as several other shorter-distance triathlon races, and after I returned, I got into obstacle course racing, completing several Spartan races. I also got involved with a great organization—Team, Red, White, and Blue (RWB)—and through my involvement with them was able to help others reintegrate and recover from their own injuries and challenges.

I have been with Team RWB for over four years now. It is an amazing organization, and I truly believe in its mission to “enrich the lives of America’s veterans by connecting them to their community through physical and social activity.” Last year I got the opportunity to participate in one of the most rewarding events I have been involved with the organization to date. Several Team RWB leaders and teammates were selected to take part in a leader development experience for the top 18 high school quarterbacks in the nation as part of the Nike Elite 11 program at Nike World Headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon. The experience was designed to take the quarterbacks to the “edge of uncomfortable” so they could grow and develop as a result. The quarterbacks were going to be put through a series of military style missions that would last approximately seven hours. It was during that time that we were given a chance to share our leadership experiences with them and give them a better understanding of what it meant to be a leader.

A true test of our character is how we overcome adversity. As I reflect back on the last 10 years, the takeaway I want to share with readers is simple: Anyone can overcome adversity. Life will throw multiple challenges at you. If it hasn’t already, rest assured that it will. It was

Ernest Hemingway who wrote that the world breaks everyone. The bright side, though, is that most of us will be stronger at the broken places. Overcoming the adversity in your life and taking the third path when you're in the crucible will make you stronger, I promise. With the help of family, friends, and community we can learn from and find meaning in adverse circumstances, though no one can conquer your adversity but you.

Here is to another 390 years. It starts with me!

# Everyday Danger

War Trauma, in the Absence of Drama



Glenn Petersen

Two widely differing perspectives, each dramatic in its own way, dominate the many ways wars are portrayed. Classically and cinematically, the violence of direct combat draws the eye. More recently, in concert with rising concerns about human rights, the suffering of noncombatants draws attention (so much so that we now hear of “compassion fatigue”). Among the many cruel faces of war, though, appear others that are more easily overlooked. One of these entails the slow ratcheting up of day-in and day-out stress that war wreaks at even its less intense moments. While they don’t catch the eye as readily or so abruptly jar our sensibilities, everyday dangers are worth attending to because they’re likely to get lost among more camera-grabbing events and the kinds of trauma they wreak are ill-understood and easily overlooked.

For many veterans of war, the sources of danger and damage are insidious, in the literal meaning of the term (“to lie in wait for”). Long-lasting effects may be products of experiences that were not seen as traumatic when they initially occurred and were therefore left untreated. To cite just one current example, we might consider the long-term impacts on those who operate the “Predators” and similar drones the U.S. military deploys in many parts of the world. Some of my experiences in Vietnam seem relevant here.

Raised in the wake of World War II on a steady diet of movies, TV shows, novels, and comic books dramatizing the war, I had an indelible grasp of what combat was supposed to look and feel like. So



when I returned from my tour in Vietnam, I felt sure nothing had happened to me. I hadn't been out in the rice paddies with a rifle company, which is where what I thought was the real war was being fought. My own experiences as a navy air crewman seemed unremarkable by comparison. For me, war mostly entailed boredom punctuated by brief moments of terror. As Robert Murphy, whose destroyer survived Japanese kamikaze attacks in the final months of the Pacific War, once put it: "Those who have had combat experience reliably report that it consists of short periods of intense danger, long periods of equally intense boredom, and continuous authoritarian discipline." I am not claiming that art necessarily misrepresents war—sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. Instead, I am simply offering an observation about how art and psychology intersect in the processes of creating our notions of war and of making war interesting. My perspective on war left me to conclude that without drama there is not much going on; therefore, there must be nothing to fear. When I enlisted at 17—still a child, really—I had incorrectly concluded what true drama entailed.

### **Encountering Everyday Danger**

Routine tasks that are essential to the operation of war are generally not considered an immediate component of combat. These activities become so systematic as to be ignored and almost forgotten. Without glory or allure, these duties entail little apparent drama. Accounts of these activities might not be thought of as "war stories," perhaps because they have not been sufficiently articulated or examined. Three tasks that I undertook during my time in Vietnam will illustrate my point. I had difficulty conceiving of these duties as dramatic or dangerous because they seemed so routine to me. Now I know better.

It is worth noting an odd contradiction: I did engage in some classically dramatic combat activities, but their impact on me seems, in retrospect, to have diminished. I don't pretend to understand this, but it's true. At some level it may be that I was better able to psychologically process the more overt hazards.

I flew as radar intercept controller/flight technician in an E-1B Tracer, an early warning, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft, off the *U.S.S. Bennington* in the Tonkin Gulf in 1966-67. While we were there on “Yankee Station,” I flew a seven-hour mission every day. Each mission began with a catapult launch and concluded with the controlled crash-landing, euphemistically known as an “arrested recovery.” I came under fire, intense at times, made carrier landings while losing engine power, made failed landings (“bolters”), and dealt with a range of other dangers. On every mission I carried with me stark recollections from my training in survival, resistance, and withstanding torture in the Navy’s mock-prisoner of war (SERE) camp. I had been taught just what to do if shot down in hostile territory. I was entirely prepared to crash. Quite a few times, I thought I was about to die.

At age 19, I had as many as six other aircraft under my control, and as part of “Operation Sea Dragon” I bore responsibility for attacks on enemy shipping and the ensuing casualties. I volunteered for this duty, having been influenced by both *Catch-22* (which I read just weeks before enlisting) and my share of movies about flyers and aircraft carriers and aerial combat, but I am equally aware that very few enlisted men flew off carriers in Vietnam. My unit was hard-pressed to find enough men willing to fly, and that many of the other enlisted men aboard thought those of us who did fly were crazy for doing so. But again, these hazards did not have the same impact on me as the following everyday dangers I survived.

## **Everyday Danger: Three Fragments from the Fudds on Yankee Station**

### *1. Up in the radome*

If the United States learned anything in World War II, it was about warships’ vulnerability to attack from the air. That’s what happened to the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor, and in the Pacific battles in the Coral Sea and at Midway. You have to know where your enemy is, where its

forces are coming from, and where they're heading. With changes in the age of aviation, speed became essential as well. Radar was developed to address this need. In its early years, radar was limited to "line-of-sight."

And so it was that the E-1B Tracer was developed in the 1950s. It was originally called a WF-2, and that designation coupled with the plane's ungainly appearance earned it the nickname "Willy Fudd." No one ever called them Tracers; they were always and everywhere known as Fudds, and we who flew them were Fuddmen. Its tasks were numerous, but they all centered on what was at the time a state-of-the-art radar system. The Fudd was, simply, a flying radar platform, and everything it did depended upon the massive antenna in its radar dome—or radome.

Unlike any aircraft that came before it, the Fudd's antenna was housed not in a bubble jutting out from the plane's fuselage but attached separately above it (and establishing the fundamental premise for today's AWACS planes). Aerodynamically shaped, so that it lifted its own weight, the radome looked something like a teardrop sliced lengthwise, but at a glance it looked more like a mushroom that had popped out of the plane's roof. With its radar range of close to 200 miles, a Fudd in the air enabled an aircraft carrier to see far beyond its own horizon. Its two radar operators' primary tasks were to control the carrier's aircraft. They directed its fighters to intercept enemy bombers long before they could approach the ship, and they guided its own attack aircraft to where they would deliver their payloads.

When I stop and think about it now, it strikes me as odd—absurd even—that although the Fudd's radome was its reason for being, it was designed entirely as an afterthought, and almost casually slapped onto the back of a newly-designed antisubmarine plane. I guess that the last design element that the engineers were thinking was how the men who maintained and repaired the radar could possibly do the

work that needed to be done within the radome itself. I was one of those maintenance guys.

Because of its aerodynamic shape, the radome's roof was asymmetrical and higher in some places than others; at the highest point, the clearance between floor and ceiling was a bit over four feet. The antenna was an elliptical steel crescent, curving in a sweeping parabola, 17 feet from end to end, tapering to blunt points at the tips and about three feet high at the center. In order to keep the antenna on a level plane, as the aircraft itself climbed and banked, the dish had to tilt continuously up and down as it revolved. Inputs from various instruments fed into the system in order to give the antenna the necessary information to keep itself in its even plane. The machinery that accomplished this was delicate. Regularly the circuitry controlling the antenna went out of whack and had to be repaired and recalibrated. Since virtually everything in the Fudd's radar system was fragile and in need of continual mending, we, who maintained the system, just assumed the responsibility for all the work we did on the antenna.

The only way we could be certain we had successfully repaired an antenna problem was to climb up into the radome and visually observe it as it rotated, to make sure that the dish was tilting precisely as it should. And this is why I say the entire system was designed without any thought to maintenance. There was no light in the radome—it was dark up there in broad daylight, though minimal light filtered in from the hatch in the floor, and it was pitch black at night or when the plane was on the carrier's hangar deck. The floor was crisscrossed with a series of metal struts to bear our weight while we worked up there. The only way to know if the dish was tilting properly was to watch a simple gauge—an arrow pointing at a ray of lines marking the angle of tilt—as the antenna revolved. And because it was dark, the technician had to use a flashlight.

Now comes the tricky part. This hulking antenna unit rotated at six revolutions per minute. Period. It turned either at full speed or it was

stopped, nothing in between. No one inside the radome could run alongside it at six RPM while still watching the gauge. Our solution, in order to “walk the antenna,” which is how we described the process of checking its operation, was for one man to sit below in the aircraft, at the antenna motor’s on-off switch. The man up inside the radome had to signal his partner to switch the antenna motor on and off at a speed slow enough for him to scuttle alongside the antenna while gazing intently at the gauge. Lacking any built-in technology, we signaled with a series of stomps on the floor of the radome. Under optimal conditions, this was fairly effective, but because aircraft engines were constantly roaring everywhere around us as we worked, it was often impossible to hear clearly. It took enormous concentration simply to turn that little switch forward and back at the right pace.

The attention of the man up in the radome is directed entirely at the gauge as he tries to keep his flashlight pointed at it. The huge and powerful antenna threatened at every second to go too fast. Additionally, he has to stomp his foot at the right pace and rhythm to keep the antenna turning at a rate that ensures he can move with it. But the radome roof is low and asymmetrical, and so he is bent over, at some points nearly in two, as he scrambles beside the boom. And the floor is a hash-work of exposed metal struts, any one of which can catch his foot as he scuttles along, curled into a near-fetal position. There in the dark, with his entire concentration focused on the gauge, while keeping his flashlight aimed at it, he danced over the struts grabbing at his feet.

If the antenna starts turning too quickly, it will smash into the man walking it. Since it is massive, the antenna can easily kill him. While we were on Yankee Station, a sailor on our carrier was killed when one of the ship’s antennas crushed him against a steel bulkhead. We knew about the danger, but what else could we do? The Fudd was only as valuable as its radar, and the radar simply wouldn’t work unless the antenna was reliable.

One day I was at the controls inside the plane, and my buddy Gene Warden was up in the radome. I missed the signal as he stomped and let the antenna revolve for a split second too long. It gained speed and momentum, and Warden saved himself only by diving headlong into the narrow space at the trailing edge of the radome. He was fortunate; if he'd been at the front or the side, there would have been no place for him to leap to, and he would have been smashed. When he clambered down, he blasted me for my incompetence, which had nearly killed him. I don't know what happened, whether I couldn't hear his stomps above the roar of a jet engine beside us, or if I had momentarily dozed off—a much-too-frequent occurrence since I often worked around the clock, sometimes for days on end. But it scared me so much that from then on I refused to work at the controls, insisting instead that I be the one walking the antenna up in the radome.

On one occasion while I was in the radome, I was a bit late stomping the signal to halt the antenna's rotation. My foot caught on a strut on the floor, then jammed against it, and the dish came to a stop pinning me in place. I could not move. Had the dish revolved any further than it did, it would have ripped off my leg before it hurled me through the side of radome. It took three men to pull the antenna backwards (there was no way to reverse it) far enough for me to slip my foot out.

I reflect on this now: There I am, up inside that black hole, curled nearly into a fetal position, attention riveted on a gauge illuminated by my flashlight, scrambling around sideways, trying to time my stomps properly to keep the antenna slowly rotating, all the while dancing over metal struts I can't see in the dark. My attention is focused on the task at hand, making sure that the antenna is tilting properly as it revolves. Only a portion of my attention is concerned with stomping at the right pace to signal the man at the controls below, who can see nothing of what is taking place above him. And nothing but the most residual pieces of my attention are left for maintaining the proper crouch and avoiding the struts grabbing at my feet.

The darkness, the confinement, the crouch. All of my consciousness devoted to the job at hand. The womb and the tomb, literally united there in the radome. E-1 radomes were designed explicitly for their mission, with no consideration or concern for men who had to maintain them. And so to climb up into one and walk the antenna was like crawling into a womb that was womb-like only in its confinement. I can feel, as I write, the terrible hunching over, the need to shrink myself for safety's sake, the utter confusion about how to keep all my attention focused on the gauge while still trying to preserve myself; this was my every day work.

## *2. Changing a scope on the flight deck*

Each of the plane's two radar scopes weighed 113 pounds. When I began maintaining the full radar system in the planes themselves, I learned how awkward it was for two technicians to carry a scope together. On land, at the naval air station, it could be done. However, aboard ship, where we moved continually up and down steep, narrow stairs (or "ladders," as sailors call them), it was nearly impossible for two to efficiently carry a scope. And at sea, where there were only a small handful of technicians in a Fudd detachment, I quickly learned how to back up to the plane's hatch or the workbench, squat, heave the scope up onto my back, stand, stoop forward, and rest the weight against my shoulder and upper back. Then I would climb the ladders from the shop to the flight deck, my left hand free to pull me up. In the Tonkin Gulf we operated in battle readiness conditions that kept the carrier's flight deck pitch dark at night, which was normally my shift.

The seas were not particularly heavy, but we were always underway, and the deck pitched and rolled. I would climb onto the flight deck somewhere aft, hunched over, scope on my back, and start forward along the center-line of the deck. Carrying the scope along the flight deck of the rolling ship forced me to move pretty much like a drunkard, weaving from side to side as the weight and inertia prevented me from keeping a straight course.

The easiest way to locate a Fudd was to feel for its tall vertical tailfins, one rising up from the end of the horizontal stabilizer on either side of the plane's tail. On any given night, I would reach the point on the deck's centerline that I thought was parallel to the plane. I would then face to the right, hoping that I was facing the plane. There were no railings on the deck, and the catwalks running alongside were well below its edge. I would have a massive radar scope perched on my back, and I would be bent nearly in two beneath it. I would then begin to creep slowly toward the edge of deck, my left arm stretched out ahead of me, waving back and forth, searching for the plane's tailfin. The ship was usually pitching and rolling, and I would have to use much of my attention just to steady myself. As I move closer to the edge of the deck, my steps would get shorter and shorter. So planes won't slide off the deck in rough seas, they are held in place by "tie-down" chains, which stretch out between fastening points on the planes and anchoring points recessed into the deck. I had to move cautiously so that if I encountered one of those tie-down chains, I wouldn't trip over it.

Moving blindly, all I can do is feel for the tailfin. If I miss the plane and keep moving ahead, I'll come to the edge of the deck, which I won't be able to see. I won't know it's there until I've stepped off and vanished into the night and sea. (Other men simply disappeared while working on the flight deck in the dark.) Trying to find the tailfin, I would have to continue waving my left arm, shuffling forward, not at all sure how close I was to the edge of the deck. Finally, if I concluded that I missed the plane and am about to plunge off the side of ship and into the sea, I would have to stop, turn around, and walk slowly and carefully—avoiding tie-down chains—back toward the centerline. When I sense that I'm well inboard, I move a few feet forward, face right, and repeat the process. Slowly I head toward the edge, arm waving, body hunched under the scope, moving sightlessly, feeling again for the tailfin I hadn't been able to find. Perhaps this time my hand will brush against the tailfin, or maybe not. If not, I start again. If I find the fin, I face left and begin to move toward the plane's hatch,



climb in, drag the scope along the floor, mount it, hook it up, and check it.

Nearly all of the aspects of work up in the womb of the radome have their equivalents out in the open air of night on the flight deck: the utter blackness, the hunching under the weight of a scope, the shuffling feet, feeling for tie-down chains. Instead of focusing my concentration on the tilt gauge, though, now I'm feeling for the tailfin. And instead of trying to keep out of the way of the massive, sweeping antenna that could crush me, or hurl me through the side of the radome, I'm trying to avoid stepping off the edge of the flight deck and plunging into the sea. I cannot do the job if I focus my attention on my own safety.

### *3. In-flight scope repair*

All the elements of the Fudd's complex radar system merged together in the radar indicator, the scope. The aircraft carried two, one for the radar officer and one for the enlisted flight tech. Their round, green radar screens were about a foot in diameter, set in the center of the unit's face, which was about 16 by 24 inches. The entire black box, roughly 32 inches deep, slid into a deep recess directly in front of the radar operator's position. A dozen or so cables attached to the rear of the scope. Because of the way the scope slid so tightly into its casing and pressed up against the pilot's back, it was nearly inaccessible. When a technician installed or removed a scope, he had to reach his arm through a narrow slit at the rear of the sleeve and connect or disconnect the cables entirely by feel and memory. It was impossible for him to see what his hands were doing. An exacting task, it took much time to complete because it was so easy to make mistakes.

When radar images failed to properly display, a technician had to troubleshoot the entire radar system in order to determine whether the problem lay with the scope itself or in one of the many other pieces of equipment integrated with it. The scopes themselves were fragile and commonly the source of the problem. When it was clear

that the scope was causing the problem, it had to be removed, repaired, and replaced. Normally a technician pulled it from the aircraft after the plane had returned to the ship, hauling it to the avionics shop, where it was hooked up to a work bench. An experienced bench technician could often identify simple problems merely by looking at the display on the screen, but other failures could take hours to diagnose and repair.

These scopes used vacuum tubes, technology most people alive today have never seen. A dozen or so circuit boards, each fitted with five to ten tubes, sat on either side of the giant cathode-ray tube that was the radar screen. While capacitors, resistors, and a multitude of other components often broke down, it was the fragile glass tubes that most commonly failed—not surprisingly, considering the enormous forces the equipment was subjected to during catapult launches and arrested landings, along with ceaseless vibrations from the two powerful aircraft engines. There were so many tubes, though, and so many types of them, that even if the technician knew that a problem was likely to be caused by a failed tube, it often took much careful troubleshooting to figure out just which one had to be replaced.

Several circuits and types of tubes were more prone to failure than others. An experienced bench tech could sometimes narrow the problem to a specific circuit merely by observing the behavior of the various components of the scope's screen display. Of the five flight techs who flew my squadron's five daily sorties, only two of us also worked at repairing the scopes in the avionics shop and understood their circuitry well enough to diagnose the more common tube failures while we were still airborne.

As I grew increasingly familiar with the Fudd and the entirety of its radar system, I learned which types of tubes and which circuits were most likely to fail, as well as what symptoms would appear on the radar display when they did. I began stuffing spare tubes into the pockets of my flight suit so I could make repairs to the scopes in-flight. Without being able to put the scope on the workbench with all

its testing equipment, diagnoses were still partly guess work. Repairs had to be done entirely on a trial-and-error basis. Sometimes a malfunctioning scope could be fixed and put back into service fairly quickly, but more often it took several attempts to locate the problematic tube. While the tube itself could be swapped once the scope was withdrawn from its narrow sleeve, it took a lot of time to disconnect the scope from all its cables, pull it out, fix it, slide it back in, and reconnect the cables. The entire process might have to be done multiple times before the appropriate tube was detected. But the radar was useless without the scopes, so we had to make sure they were working.

At some point during our tour of duty in the Tonkin Gulf, after months of constantly operating, repairing, and maintaining the radar, I assumed such a sense of responsibility for our missions that I began doing something that in retrospect was especially reckless and foolhardy. No one stopped me, though, so I went ahead with it on a regular basis. When a scope malfunctioned in flight, and I could see that it probably needed only to have one or another of its tubes replaced, I would do the repair while it was still hooked up to the system and operating. This meant pulling it part way out of its sleeve and exposing the first circuit board or two. I would then slide my hand and arm down inside the scope, curling my fingers back to locate the tubes most likely to have failed. Pulling a red-hot tube loose, I would slowly withdraw it from inside the scope, then thread my hand back down inside the scope and insert a replacement into the empty socket. A glance at the radar screen would tell me whether it had begun working properly. If it had not, I repeated the process until I had either fixed the problem or run out of options. I could then slide the scope all the way down into its sleeve and put it back into service.

The problem of course, was that all of these circuits were live. The scopes ran on high-voltage, high-amperage electricity, and they had no on/off switches. They were energized on along with the entire system. The radar transmitter's power had to be raised and lowered

slowly; thus the system could not be readily powered off and on, and being so, I had to work on the scopes while they were fully operational. I could not see where my hand was maneuvering, and I had to direct its movements entirely by my recollection of how the circuits were laid out. However, if I touched the wrong part, I would be electrocuted.

Undertaking this risky procedure was entirely voluntary on my part. It was my own idea, and I pursued it on my own. No one was ordering me to do it. In fact, if any of my superiors in the avionics division had known what I was doing, they would probably have had a fit. I was so eager to save time and to make my aircraft as effective as possible, that I was willing to risk electrocution in order to get the radar operational as quickly as possible.

### **On Exposing Oneself to Danger**

None of these situations were momentary episodes, rare occurrences, or responses to sudden attacks. They were everyday tasks—the work I did each day, sometimes several times a day. I tried to ignore it, and still try, and yet at the same time, the sheer power of these physical experiences continues to impress itself so strongly and deeply upon me that I cannot entirely ignore it. At the time I didn't think much about it, didn't acknowledge it, yet years later, it hasn't dissipated. It is here, etched more permanently into my body than any tattoo. It's part of my flesh. I can call these events, these tasks to mind, and I can see them, but even now as I write them down I can barely call the fear—the terror—up into consciousness. I have submerged and embedded those feelings now as it was then. I couldn't have performed my duties if I had allowed myself to be cognizant of what it was doing to me. Now I seem to have no way to reclaim that which I so successfully suppressed.

I find myself likening the impact of all these events to thinking about how my spleen feels or my endocrine system's working. They're there, and I have every reason to believe that they're functioning, but I

cannot know them first hand. I can't feel them—my knowledge of these things is purely theoretical. And those repeated stress events, and others, seem to occupy similar places for me. I can reasonably believe they exist, but I can't call up the terror. Perhaps that's no longer entirely true, though, because as I write these passages I can so clearly visualize the scenes, and feel my body hunching, feel my neck tautening, feel my breath shorten, feel the tension in my body, see my hands shaking. I just can't cleanly open the connections between the images I describe and the state my body is in. I know the connections are there, but I haven't been able to get access to them. The same evident strengths and hidden emotional wrangling that allowed me to hide these from myself then keep them concealed now.

It strikes me that there's a close connection between my willingness to take these risks, the absence of any dramatic impact (as I understood it at the time), and my curious failure to come away afterwards with any sense of what I'd exposed myself to. This leads me to ponder such risk-taking, something others have considered as well. Though it seems not to be something widely celebrated, it is in fact fairly well established that in combat men are more likely to be concerned with preserving their own lives than with taking others'. In his pioneering work, *Men Against Fire*, a first-hand study of American infantry in World War II, S.L.A. Marshall claimed that in most direct engagements with the enemy, less than 25 percent of riflemen fired their weapons. As they begin to come under hostile fire, troops head "individually to whatever cover is nearest or affords the best protection." "A few of them fire their pieces," but "others do nothing." While some fail to act because they don't know what to do: "others are wholly unnerved and can neither think nor move in sensible relation to the situation." In analyzing his data, Marshall concluded that a man's failure to fire comes not so much from a conscious desire to avoid exposing oneself to return fire, but "is a result of a paralysis which comes of varying fears. The man afraid wants to do nothing: indeed he does not care to even think of taking action." Training has

since been redesigned to train combat infantrymen to overcome these natural tendencies.

Bernard Knox, a classics professor who served with the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) directing French resistance forces during the Normandy invasion, offers a related observation. The problem with deploying men in advance of an invasion, Knox writes, is that “they may do the obviously sensible thing: go to ground in a safe hiding place, do nothing to attract attention to themselves, and wait for the arrival of friendly troops.” In selecting men for his unit, the intent was to find “men psychologically incapable of remaining quiet—troublemakers, in fact.”

Ron Kovic’s climactic account of the firefight that left him paralyzed vividly describes the two different types—those hell bent on trouble and those who think better of exposing themselves—in a single action in Vietnam. “I was yelling to the men,” he writes. “I kept telling them to hold their ground and keep firing, though no one knew what we were firing at. I looked to my left flank and all the men were gone. They had run away, all run away to the trees near the river, and I yelled and cursed at them to come back but nobody came.”

Then Kovic is hit in the foot. “A great surge of strength went through me as I yelled for the other men to come out from the trees and join me.” But he “seemed to be the only one left firing a rifle,” and as a corpsman bandages him, he realizes, “The whole thing was incredibly stupid, we were sitting ducks.” He nevertheless continues firing and then receives the wound that has left him paralyzed from the chest down ever since.

## **War Stories**

I recall watching a football game in about 1976 or 1977, with a friend who’d also served aboard aircraft carriers, as a Navy recruiting ad appeared on the screen. It was set entirely on a flight deck, with jet engines screaming, men in brightly-hued sweatshirts dashing about

beneath the taxiing aircraft, radio communications squealing in cockpits, blast deflectors swinging into place, last-moment salutes, and catapults hurling fire-belching jets off into the waiting skies. I turned to him and said, without irony, “Man, does that look exciting! Why don’t I remember it that way?” Film directors, editors, and television advertising directors long ago figured out how to tell the story of carrier operations in compelling fashion in order to sell their product. But none of these artistic telling’s captures much of the real experience of those on a working flight deck during round the clock combat operations, because everyone working on a flight deck is concentrating entirely on just two things: getting their jobs done as effectively and efficiently as possible and staying alive.

I can still feel the catapult launches and arrested landings quite viscerally in my body, but their ratcheted-up intensity lasted only a few moments at the beginning and end of each mission, and only sporadically re-asserts itself these days. What I feel so much more of the time is the dull, aching, continuous throb of the danger and fear I dealt with when I wasn’t in the air—when I was engaged in the seemingly mundane maintenance of the aircraft.

At the time, though, even as I was aware of the danger, as shown by all of the actions I took to minimize it, I didn’t, or couldn’t, integrate into my consciousness what was happening to me. It simply didn’t fit into the images I’d formed of what combat was supposed to look like. Despite the clear threats to my life, my mindset and mental preparation told me that in order to be meaningful, danger had to spring out of dramatic conflict, especially direct and immediate engagement with the enemy; in the absence of something resembling this scenario, the danger was meaningless. Without meaning, it was nebulous and transient. It seems there was no way for me to consciously hold onto that danger, and I almost immediately lost track of it.

Nevertheless, everything I experienced remained with me, hidden away and out of sight for decades, until the emotional energy I had

been using to repress it was steadily directed elsewhere—toward my family and my job, in particular—and those experiences, along with their emotional content, reasserted themselves. I returned from the war feeling that nothing had happened to me. I thus ignored what had happened, told myself that nothing happened, refused to acknowledge what happened, closed off some of the most powerful experiences I have had in my life, and in doing so left myself wide open to a lifetime of struggling with things I didn't comprehend.

At age 40, when my daughter was born and the emotional energy I'd devoted to keeping the war at bay was redirected, the worm turned. The war slowly re-asserted itself and over the course of the following decades it fought to gain control of my emotional balance. I was, to put it simply, overwhelmed by the war's return. Various treatments worked for a time, and then they didn't. At times the raw terror and near-paralysis have swelled almost to the point of trapping me inside my home. Now, at age 67 and nearly 50 years away from the war, I still seek a daily reprieve. And I've no reason to imagine it will be much different for the latest generation of vets.

I see little likelihood that the men and women who've fought in Afghanistan and Iraq will be spared the distress that my own generation of vets continues to bear. The military and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs claim to be addressing these issues, but they seem to focus almost entirely on the immediate and the obvious. My experience tells me that much of the damage, and the danger, lie in wait, hidden from everyone by the traditional focus, in art, literature, and film, on the dramatic. Deeper and slower impacts, I fear, await today's vets.



# Grief and Rising



Julie Smoot

Missing the innocent girl I was  
 Miss the trusting girl I was  
 I miss the girl who chased her dream to serve  
 her country  
 Thinking that the six guys and chain of command had  
 killed her,  
 Just go through the motions  
 Afraid to trust  
 Afraid to feel  
 Dissociate because that is what she was taught  
 Sometimes I have thought, “why did you not fight them and make  
 them kill you, why did you just lay there, why did you not jump when  
 you had the chance”  
 Sometimes I have wanted to get rid of this body, to hide this body  
 so that men would not look at me or hurt me again  
 But the belief it happened because of what I was wearing and that  
 I was too drunk came from society, not me.

It is time to unlearn everything that society has taught me,  
 Time to learn to feel, to stay present, to cry, to be angry, to laugh, to  
 sing,  
 to dance, to dream, to tell my truth.  
 I am learning every day that there are more threads to me  
 That I have been rising and changing, rediscovering who I am  
 becoming who I want to be  
 putting the broken pieces back together and becoming an arrow  
 continuing to rise into the light.  
 Shining light on the things that I have never told anyone

letting go of old habits, old ways of doing things  
I will become who I want to be and the world is going to hear me,  
ROAR!!

I will speak my truth, and they will hear me.  
I do not care what they think  
No more excuses! No more abuse  
I am back! I have the little girl back. She is stronger  
She is beautiful. Yes she is changed, but she is complex, caring,  
compassionate, understanding and she is faultless

She has brought with her: Patience, Truth, Anger, and Empowerment  
She is not alone and together we will rise.

# Iambic Pentameter and the Meter of War



Diane Cameron

In the 1940's, a young Marine returns from China to a small Pennsylvania town. He enrolls in graduate school and begins to work as a high school teacher. He marries the young woman who had waited for him through the war. They buy a house and invite her widowed mother to live with them.

One year later, he finds the body of the mother-in-law sprawled on the kitchen floor, the body of the wife in the living room, both perforated with bullets. The former Marine is handcuffed and taken away by the sheriff. The local newspapers are filled with testimony from the man's former employers, neighbors, and students. Each interview is a tribute to the good worker, teacher, and neighbor they knew Donald Watkins to be.

After more than 30 years of hospitalization, Donald Watkins married my mother. He was 84; she was a younger woman of 70. For a decade, Donald was part of my life. He was a gentle and reserved man, whose past always seemed like it must have belonged to someone else. My mother had told me Donald's story and, though he rarely spoke of it, over time his story had begun to haunt me.

In September 2000, four years after Donald's death, I placed ads in *The Marine Gazette* and *Leatherneck*, seeking Marines who served in China between 1937 and 1940. I gave my address, phone number, and email address, expecting one or two responses at best.

The first day the ads appeared, my answering machine flashed with seven messages. “This is Staff Sergeant Clifford Wells,” the first one announced in a no-nonsense voice. “I served in China 1938 and departed Shanghai on the USS Truman 23 March 1940. I usually bowl on Monday and Wednesday, so it’s best to call me on Friday.” The messages were all delivered in similarly clipped tones. The callers recited rank, name, duty assignment, and location in China, including exact date of arrival and departure. I received letters and e-mails from engineers, corpsmen, a chef for enlisted men, and even a chauffeur to the Commander.

The former marines who contacted me were in their late 80s and suffering from diminished capabilities. “I am happy to help you,” one wrote, “but please don’t call. I am extremely deaf.” Another said, “I will write back to you again but only when my son comes on Thursday to help me with the mail.”

These men had saved crucial documents from their service: scrapbooks, Shanghai phone books, box-scores of Chinese ball games with the rosters of players, the 1938 Thanksgiving dinner menu, copies of the *Walla Walla*, the weekly Marine newspaper in Shanghai. And they wanted to send it all to me.

These men became my teachers. They told me what it was like to be young and far from home, to see death all around them, and then to have to kill. Many had never discussed these events with anyone. My most regular correspondent and phone pal was Frenchy Dupont from Louisiana.

Frenchy and I corresponded for more than three years. As we got to know each other, I told him why I was writing about Donald, that I wanted to understand how this nice elderly man could have had such a scary past. That I wanted to know why my mother could marry a man who had killed his first wife and mother-in-law, and yes, that I thought that being a Marine in war might have something to do with what had gone wrong with Donald.

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Under Donald's reserved and always polite demeanor was a hum of tension. There was his obsession with a TV show called "Combat" that was in re-runs. He had to watch it no matter where we were: at the mall, eating dinner, at a baby's birthday party. Then too there were his infrequent but almost exquisite moments of paranoia that came and went in seconds, always occurring in restaurants. He'd turn on a waiter or other diner and scream, "I see you," and then just as quickly return to his quiet dinner.

Frenchy's letters arrived every two weeks. I would manage to send at least a short note in response to each of his six-page letters. I told myself that because Frenchy needed a magnifier to read word by word, it was good to be brief. In one letter, which I go back to often, he answered the question I'd kept asking him: why hadn't he suffered shell shock following the torture he endured in the Palawan prison camp? He'd been starved, beaten, set on fire, and nearly blinded before he'd even turned 25. "I was so happy to be rescued," he wrote, "that this was never a problem." That's a glass half-full, I thought. "Our conflicts weren't the glorious battles," he went on. "There weren't any cameras where we were, and the current history books never mention our piece of World War II."

Temperament and upbringing—crucial determinants of resilience in the face of trauma—must have been key factors in Frenchy's emotional survival. At 85 he remained an outgoing optimist, no cynicism, always kind, and the perfect barkeep in the Hospitality Suite at the China Marines reunion.

There was one moment though, he told me, when he had a taste of what the other China Marines live with. Here is what Frenchy wrote:

*"About three months after I came home, I had one flashback. It was a dream that several Jap guards had come to my home. I saw them coming up the front walk. As I ran down*

*the hall to go out the back door, I saw one of them standing with his back to the porch wall by the door and as I ran by I heard his rifle fire and I was hit in the back with the bullet. My feet flew out from under me and I fell between two rows of roses in our back yard."*

"One taste and never another," Frenchy's letter continued, "You are the first one, except my wife, to hear of this incident." So much for therapy, I think. "Some fellows do have problems though," he said. "A few still attend weekly group therapy at VA hospitals." That is, he means, 57 years later.

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It's mid-January, and Vermont is sunny and snow-covered. I have taken a break from Donald and the Marines to visit Bennington College to hear the poet Robert Bly speak to the MFA students. It's bright and cold when I walk the short path to the lecture hall. Bly has just begun his lecture as I slip into the back of the darkened hall. I peel off my parka while my eyes adjust. He is talking about how structure is part of the message in any writing. He focuses on the early 1940s, his younger days, when he learned the formal shapes of poems and the rules of poetry. Strictness of form and careful structure was critical to the work they were all doing then.

"Prescribed forms were important because we were, at that time, writing about social madness. It was World War II," he says, and I lean forward in my seat. "We were writing about the war, bombing. America was at war on two sides of the world—it was a crazy time filled with chaos." Volatile content required strict form to contain it.

I lean back in my seat and put my feet up on the rail in front of me. As I listen to Robert Bly describe the war and the turmoil of that time, I think of Donald and Frenchy and my other Marines. They were part of this social madness. They were young, away from home for the first time. They had been at sea for weeks on the *USS Chaumont*. When

they finally neared their exotic destination, ready for the promised worldly adventures, the ship pulled into harbor full of floating dead bodies. Once on Chinese soil their job was to go out each day, after the Japanese bombs struck, and collect the dead bodies.

I think about that fact many times. For most of us, our picture of a dead body comes from a relative we've seen in a funeral home, or maybe a visit to a deathbed in hospital or hospice. But these young Marines faced the dead in parts and pieces—heads, arms, and torsos separated and tossed about. Their job was to pick up the body parts and load them on trucks. Every day. How could they not go mad?

Robert Bly asks this audience of aspiring writers if they can let go of form or “at least the overused iambic pentameter.” He explains that we learned this rhythmic pattern from the Greeks who used it to express irony. The Greek poets had a repertoire of rhyme schemes and each one was used for a specific purpose. This is news. Did Shakespeare know that? Did he also use iambic pentameter to express irony? What do we miss when we don't know small pieces of literary or historic context? What do we miss when we don't know, for example, that these young Marines were not allowed to engage the Japanese until 1945, that for eight years all they could do was watch people get torn apart? And then pick up the pieces.

A woman across the room is waving her hand excitedly. Before Bly can call on her she blurts out, “But we can see form as a cage which is outside of us and therefore limiting us, or we can see it as a support, as something internal like a skeleton that provides structure that allows us to hang things on it.”

I think of Frenchy. What allowed him to survive in the Palawan prison, to structure his chaos? On what did he hang his experience so that he could come home more or less intact? Was it simply youth? Faith? The Marine *esprit de corps*?

I think of another Marine, Cliff, who told me how he came to be a China Marine. “It was the Depression, no one could get a job.” So he and two friends went off to join the Marines. He was excited but nervous when he was selected. He would go to China: foreign, exotic. I learn that there were Mama-San houses that provided rice and meat and well, a little piece too. Of course Cliff didn’t use that kind of language. He said, “The Marines made sure we had all the things a young soldier needed to keep him happy, girls of course, providing pleasure.”

I think about what part pleasure and sex might have played in counterbalancing the chaos, in facing down the madness. Picking up shredded body parts by day, going to the Mama-San house for sex and dinner at night. I wonder now how aware these young men were of the greater geopolitical picture. The war was coming to the Pacific. Picking up body parts was a prelude, preparation for what was to come. Very soon they would do their own killing.

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Cliff told me about the medals he received for hand-to-hand combat. Hand-to-hand sounds so innocuous. Like they were shaking hands or arm-wrestling. Cliff asked if I knew what “hand-to-hand” meant. “Sort of,” I said, “but I’m not really sure.”

“Well,” he said slowly, “you look at a man who is about to kill you, and you kill him first. You look a man in the eyes and then stab him over and over with your bayonet.” How could we have expected our soldiers to survive that? Even our words look the other way.

Bly reads to the college audience from Robert Frost. “Listen to the form” he says. We can hear the despair, madness and emotional chaos of Frost’s life in the poems. “Frost chose to convey his life’s words in iambic pentameter because it just barely contains the chaos.”

Perhaps this is the key, how well a person can contain the chaos of their life, the chaos of heartbreak or war or murder or mental illness.



If there is a form—linguistic, emotional or spiritual—they survive. Maybe some Marines like Frenchy possess a form, an iambic pentameter that courses through their lives, keeping their chaos in check. But for others, like Donald, their meter is more fragile, more unmanageable, and the chaos spills over in unruly and violent waves. These waves crash into other lives—Donald’s wife’s, her mother’s, my mother’s—and then into mine.

This then may be Donald’s gift to me—a unexpected one certainly from a man whose measure I am still taking—to look at the meter of my own life, valuing those things that keep me from chaos, and as much as I can, counting on the good.

# Post-Traumatic Growth



James Heavy Hackbarth

First let me give you a little background on myself. I served in the Army from April 1968 to June 1971. I was a helicopter door-gunner on a Huey UH-1d Troop Transport. I was in Vietnam with the 1<sup>st</sup> CAV AHB Airmobile from October 1968 to October 1969. I flew more missions than I can count and picked up more body bags than I want to remember. I have been 100 percent disabled with PTSD since 2003, right after we dropped cruise missiles on downtown Baghdad. I watched it on TV, and all I remember are the explosions and flashes and balls of flames. I sat there and started crying; war is ugly, and I knew too many of our young people would pay the price with their lives or end up like me. I attempted suicide twice and thought about it every day for 35 years.

One question that I faced and I think every combat vet faces is, “Did you kill somebody?” After going through two cognitive progressive therapies, I wrote a poem about this. I call it the “Did You Song.” I remember clearly how many times I was asked that question. I couldn’t get the thought out of my head—did you, did you, kill somebody?

I have a dear friend who is a Vietnam veteran who started a company called First Stage Theater in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A group of veterans and I have done poetry readings on stage in front of a hundred people twice last year. We have a young lady who is studying acting read this poem in front of us on stage. People in the audience were crying. The veterans on stage were crying. The words are like hammers. The accusations hurled at the performers cut deep into one’s emotions.

If it wasn't for these types of things happening in my life, I'm not sure where I would be. To see the impact of my poetry has given me the meaning and purpose I sought for a long time.

### ***The Did You Song***

Did you, did you, did you  
Kill somebody did you kill somebody  
I want to know, I want to know  
Did you, did you, kill somebody  
Did you shoot them in the head?  
Did you shoot them dead?  
Did you kill somebody?  
Did you kill somebody?  
Were they young or old?  
Young or old  
Women or child or an old man  
Did you, did you, kill somebody  
I want to know  
Because I didn't go  
Didn't go to that place  
I did not go

Can you tell me?  
Can you tell me?  
Did you, did you  
Kill somebody, kill somebody  
Tell me it ain't so  
Tell me it ain't so  
You didn't kill somebody  
You didn't kill somebody  
You didn't kill women  
Or a child like they said  
You didn't shoot them dead  
I didn't go I didn't go  
So how would I know?  
So how would I know?  
Unless you tell me it ain't so  
Unless you tell me it ain't so  
God am I glad I didn't go

--James Heavy Hackbarth, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010

## 21 Days in Herat



Bill Blaikie

My wife always said that before I experienced a series of traumatic events, I was a happy-go lucky bloke who loved life and got the most out of it in everything I did. Before my trauma, I had developed a real sense of ethics and ethos as a professional soldier, and I felt that what I was doing was the right and proper course. My family life was great, and I enjoyed being with my wife and three children at every opportunity.

I was a different person, though, when I returned from Afghanistan. I experienced mood swings with outbreaks of anger at those closest to me. As I recognized this, I isolated myself from those who loved me most. I decided to leave the Army, my perception being they didn't appreciate me and my expertise. This led me into a series of high-profile strategic change management roles in private enterprise and government sectors. My only solace was launching myself into my work.

As my psychological state deteriorated, so did my physical health. I stopped going to the gym, and my sleeping patterns became spasmodic, intertwined with worsening nightmares. This culminated in two suicide attempts within a month of each other. The latter resulted in me being admitted to ICU and my family being told that there was only a 20 percent chance of survival from a drug overdose.

While I was going in and out of a coma, I could see my wife and daughter beside my bed. It was at this stage that the light went on and I decided that life was too valuable, that my family needed me, and that they wanted me back.

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The western province of Herat was a relatively secure, autonomous sector under the control of a well-respected—or feared—warlord and governor, Ishmael Khan. Khan, also known as the Emir of Herat, had reasserted his power in the province, and once again Herat had become the transit hub for goods and supplies coming into Afghanistan from Iran and Turkmenistan. This had led to increasing tensions with the Afghan Transitional Administration as he refused to pass on to the government the revenues gained from custom taxes on goods. This was a lucrative business as the majority of taxes went to Ismail Khan, not the national treasury. Herat was also by far the most advanced metropolitan city in Afghanistan at that time, with uninterrupted electricity, water, and sanitation. There was even city garbage collection and street cleaning, which gave it the picture of a city almost untouched by war.

In early spring of 2004 the build-up of the Afghan National Army (ANA) was continuing at a rapid rate. The aim was to extend the hand of the Afghani National Government and move forward toward unity. The idea behind this was to visually show the Afghan people that their country was on the road to establishing a national identity. This period in the emergence of the new Afghanistan was one of excitement and trepidation; no one knew where it would ultimately lead.

Just before our arrival in Herat and the start of our mission, there had been a major incident that had claimed, among others, the life of Aviation and Tourism Minister Mirwais Sadiq, the son of Ismail Khan. Fighting erupted in Herat between Ismail Khan's private army and the Defence Ministry's 4th Corps militia. Sadiq was killed by a rocket propelled grenade during the military standoff between his father and the Defence Ministry's Herat Division Commander, General Abdul Zaher Nayebzadah. The death toll from the fighting was estimated at 50 to 100 people. The 17th Division headquarters was overrun by Ismail Khan's private militia on 21 March 2004. The German

Consulate was peppered with rocket propelled grenades and small arms fire, and the residents had to be evacuated to the U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT).

In response to the fighting, 1,500 Afghan National Army (ANA) troops and their imbedded U.S. advisors were to be deployed to Herat. The ANA were sent to the garrison of the 17th Herat Division of the Defence Ministry's 4th Corps, General Nayebyzadah's headquarters. The Afghan Government and the Coalition agreed that the deployment of an ANA force was imperative and essential not only to the stability of the province, but also to show the extent of the National Government's reach. This was brought forward after the events of 21 March 04. One of the most effective ways to do this was to introduce the ANA in Herat province.

After the Sadiq incident, several high-level Afghan Government Officials were deployed to investigate. Concurrently, a small team of coalition personnel was selected to go to Herat to prepare the way for the ANA to move into the province. The team consisted of a U.S. Colonel, Civil Affairs, as Commander; a U.S. Operations Officer, a Major; and me as the Intelligence Officer. As tension built, the team felt excited that we were about to embark on a mission that was a real game changer in the Afghan rebirth. I personally felt a real sense of responsibility and pride that I had been chosen for this mission. In order for me to accompany the mission, I had to get clearance from the Commander of the New Zealand Joint Forces in Wellington and the approval of the New Zealand Government, as this was outside my mandated mission. This was quick in coming, and our small team was assembled and prepared to leave. Prior to our departure, we received several briefings that set the tone for our mission.

One briefing was from the U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Mamozy Khalilzad, who left us in no doubt of the importance of this mission, not only to Afghanistan and the coalition forces in the country, but to the wider international community and their continued support for the Afghan mission. This was to prove a major advance for

international relations and a win for international involvement in the War on Terror. It was anticipated that this mission would last only three to five days.

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It was a lovely, crisp, spring day in Kabul as we assembled to drive to Bagram Airbase. We had just taken delivery of an up armoured Ford 4x4. I can remember that the doors were so heavy to open and close, and the thickness of the windows was impressive. I knew that this vehicle would offer us some protection against a direct attack with heavy weapons or an IED. It was a reassuring feeling we had protection as we were not 100 percent sure of the reception we would receive when we arrived in Herat. The reality of what we were about to embark on hit home, and that knot tightened in my stomach as it does every time you enter the unknown.

The three of us set out for Bagram Airbase in the early afternoon. We had an uneventful drive. We had driven this road numerous times; it was well travelled by military vehicles as it was the main arterial road between the major airbase and Kabul. On arrival at Bagram, we met with members of Task Force 180, in particular their operations and intelligence personnel, to get final briefings before we departed. My professionalism and sense of duty kicked in, and I absorbed every detail of the mission since my judgments would be imperative to a successful outcome.

Later that afternoon, we met the C130 crew who were to fly us to Herat. They were a National Guard crew from Texas that was experienced in flying in Afghanistan. For most of the crew, this was not their first deployment to Afghanistan. We loaded our vehicle and stores into the C130. The stores were destined for the U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) based in Herat.

We were unaccompanied on our journey to Herat, but we were tracked all the way by the multitude of air assets that operate 24/7 in



the Afghan theatre of operations. As we settled down for our long flight, we went over our mission and how we would approach it. It would be a bit of “suck and see,” as we didn’t know what reaction we would get from Ismail Khan. The tension rose in the pit of my stomach as I knew I was committed and others were counting on me doing my job to the utmost.

Flying over Afghanistan on such a clear, beautiful afternoon, I couldn’t believe that there was so much turmoil happening on the ground. The landscape varied in our transit to Herat from nothing but desert to lush and very fertile valleys. We knew that the majority of those valleys were being used to grow poppies that stuffed the coffers of local warlords and government officials.

As the evening sun set over Afghanistan, we went into blackout mode, flying by Night Vision Goggles (NVG). Once the sun had set, it dawned on the three of us that we were going into an unknown situation that had the option of turning pear-shaped at any time, given the unpredictable nature of Afghan politics and power struggles.

Arrival time at Herat was set for midnight to ensure most people would be off the roads and we could make a relatively uneventful entry. We were to be met by members of the PRT and escorted to the safe haven of their base in central Herat. Descending into Herat was more eventful than expected, as the aircraft crew had difficulty in locating the Infra-Red (IR) lighting put down by the forces on the ground to illuminate the Herat Airfield. After we landed, we clambered aboard our armoured Ford vehicle and waited for the doors to open and the OK to drive the vehicle off. This was it. There was no turning back. The apprehension was electric as we knew so much was riding on us doing our mission with a successful outcome. Waiting there was the contingent of the PRT and protection party.

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In no time the protection party had loaded the stores, recovered the IR lights, and we were on the road into Herat. Part of the protection party was local militia that had been hired by the PRT to guard the PRT base. Later it would come to our attention that our arrival was not so unannounced, as the militia were loyal to Ismail Khan. This would pose a larger issue later on in our deployment.

Driving through the streets of Herat, the first thing I noticed was the street lighting as we came close to the city, the tidiness, and the tree-lined avenues, all of which were in stark contrast to the environment we were used to in Kabul. The trip to the PRT was uneventful, and once there we made our greetings, conducted a briefing on our mission, and then retired for the night.

My first glimpse of Ismail Khan was when, from a distance, we witnessed the burial of his son at the Herat cemetery. It was a large event that was bristling with individuals carrying weapons. It wasn't a place for foreigners to be. The atmosphere was tense and even from our vantage point you could sense it could become volatile any moment. Driving past the main Herat cemetery was awe-inspiring when you knew the recent, violent history of this place with the occupation of the Soviet Army and Taliban. The cemetery was marked by thousands and thousands of blue headstones. Off to the rear of the Muslim cemetery were several large dirt mounds. These mounds represent the resting place of hundreds of Soviet soldiers, their wives, and children who were massacred by the Mujahedeen Commander, Ismail Khan.

The next day was spent arranging meetings with the Mayor of Herat, the Commander of the Militia Division, the Chief of police, and other senior players in Herat. Our meeting with Ismail Khan would have to wait until we had completed all these preparatory meetings. Meetings with the local government and police and military commanders were numerous, as nothing was ever agreed to in a first meeting. The Commander of the Defence Ministry's 4th Corps militia was particularly glad to see us and the ANA. Meeting with the Afghan

Police was polite but extremely tense as they saw their role as the provision of security for Herat. In their minds, the ANA had no role to play. The Chief of police in particular showed an aura of distrust and left me with a feeling that he would turn in a blink of an eye. There was yet another tightening of those stomach muscles. Negotiations were protracted and required a lot of persuasion.

It soon became apparent that our five-day mission would be extended, but we knew not by how much. Eventually we met the Mayor and other city officials and had numerous meetings, all of which were very courteous and always were accompanied by lots of tea and trays of almonds and pistachio nuts. We explained to the Mayor and other officials the nature of our visit. We made it clear we were there to ensure the peaceful reception of the first ANA troops into the province.

Several days after our arrival, the ANA arrived via road in a large convoy. We met them at the Herat International Airfield. Our first mission was to find an area where the ANA could establish a base. Initially the ANA moved into the garrison of the 17th Herat Division. This was short-lived for two reasons. First, none of the Herat Officials or Ismail Khan wanted the ANA to occupy a base within the city proper. Second, the barracks were heavily mined and strewn with unexploded ordnance. You had to watch your footing wherever you went. It claimed our first casualty, who was seriously injured by disturbing unexploded ordnance. This brought home the unpredictable nature of operating in such an environment.

After a period of living in this highly toxic environment and after many negotiations, it was agreed that the ANA could establish a base on the outskirts of Herat, a site which was previously an agriculture college. We also agreed that a portion of the ANA force could be stationed at the Herat International Airport. This again was an interesting area as it contained thousands of unexploded ordnance dating back to the Soviet occupation; everything from 500-pound bombs and napalm to artillery and anti-aircraft shells, mines and

mortars to small arms ammunition. United Nations demining teams had been clearing the area for several years and had only just scratched the surface. This was a situation not uncommon to most of Afghanistan.

Several days after the ANA arrived in Herat, it was finally agreed that ANA troops could patrol in the city proper. However, they had to be unarmed. We got assurance from local officials and the Police that no harm would come to the soldiers. The local people were happy to see the ANA presence as they had become weary of conflict. We accompanied some of these patrols, and it was refreshing to see the reception of the locals, and the relief on the ANA soldiers' faces, as they had not known what to expect. This happened before we got to meet the man himself, Ismail Khan. Negotiations to this stage had been conducted through his intermediaries.

Ten days after our arrival, we finally had an audience with Khan. We approached his residence on the hill overlooking Herat, Takht e Safar Resort, a palatial mansion that had spectacular views and gardens. There was even a large, green with algae, swimming pool that had seen better days. On arrival at the entrance to the residence, we were met by a large contingent of armed men, obviously the "Praetorian Guard." The guard commander was officious and demanded that we hand over our weapons and body armour, for security reasons. It was at that moment the heart raced and the raw emotions of the unknown came to the fore. We had become accustomed to the ways of life in Herat, and we never went anywhere without our weapons. We subsequently locked our weapons in our vehicle where at least we had control over them. We left our vehicle and the ANA Commander's security detail to watch over everything. The site was one of a stand-off, Kahn's henchmen armed to the teeth and obviously veterans of several campaigns and our young ANA soldiers armed only with personal weapons. The party comprised us three from Kabul, the ANA Commander, his Intelligence Officer, and the Commander of the PRT.

We entered a large sitting room overlooking the pool and gardens. The room was full of various individuals, some unarmed—obviously Khan’s hierarchy—and several heavily armed men. These armed individuals had those eyes that just stared straight through you, disconcerting. They were obviously veterans of many conflicts, and they were not just there for show. We were instructed to sit together on a large couch and await the arrival of Ismail Khan.

After toing and froing of officials to a side room, Khan emerged as if making a grand entrance. We all stood out of courtesy, and were duly introduced. The tension was electric, though we were able to keep our composure and not show our true feelings. The ANA Commander was visibly nervous and scared as he knew Kahn’s past track record, and they were also from different tribes. Khan directed his first question to our Colonel as to why we were in Herat, stating that there was no need for Coalition presence as things in Herat were under control. The Colonel responded that our presence there was to ensure him of our help with integrating the ANA into the province and to brief the PRT. This was then followed by a conversation about the deployment of the ANA within the city and its surroundings. Khan had been instructed by President Karzai that the ANA were there to stay and that he was to help facilitate the ANA integration.

The conversation then turned to talking between the ANA Commander and Khan, which immediately became extremely heated, with Kahn having the upper hand. After some time, Khan ordered the ANA Commander out of the room, and they moved to a side room. They were followed by several armed men. The conversation got even more heated, and we could clearly hear a one way tirade. As we later found out, Khan had also made a phone call to Karzai outlining his displeasure of the situation. As we were left to sit in the room while this was going on, the tension in the air rose, and the presence of the armed men became exceedingly intimidating. This is when you feel you are in uncharted territory and that you have no control over the events that are about to unfold. This period seemed like a lifetime and

was eventually broken when Khan and the ANA Commander re-entered the room. When the ANA Commander returned, it was obvious that he was distressed and totally belittled and intimidated. Tears flowed down his cheeks as he settled down next to me. He was openly shaking, and you could feel the terror in him.

When we left the residence and recovered our weapons and personal belongings, we all breathed a big sigh of relief. Just the fact we had our body armour, weapons, and the security of our vehicle gave us a sense of control, even though we were totally outnumbered and out-gunned. It felt like I had been holding my breath the whole time as the tension in the room had been so intense.

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Tensions were still high between followers of the local Divisional Commander and those loyal to Khan. After a period of about two weeks in the city, rumours spread that there might be a skirmish between these two groups. Caught up in all of this was the local United Nations mission, which had been in Herat for some time. It was decided that contingency plans needed to be made to evacuate the United Nations personnel to the PRT compound and to establish a defensive area around the compound. This was to prove almost impossible as the PRT compound was in the city centre proper and surrounded by civilian houses. A built-up area is no desired place to establish a defensive perimeter. To add to the mix was the fact Khan knew exactly what we were doing as the local guard force hired by the PRT was supplied by Khan.

As the tensions rose and word filtered in that there was possible trouble brewing, it was decided to enact our defensive plan in case of incursion by local forces loyal to Khan. It was heard that local mujahadeen had armed themselves and would overrun the United Nations compound and rid the city of forces loyal to the local Divisional Commander. The situation was growing ever more tense and unpredictable. The Colonel in command of our mission took

charge of the defensive operation of the PRT compound as the PRT Commander was ill-equipped with the necessary military skills. While the Colonel and Major ran the command post with other PRT headquarters staff, I moved to the roof of the central building in the compound as this provided a good vantage point to observe beyond the perimeter of the base. On the roof, a Special Forces Civil Affairs Team had set up a satellite communications set to talk to the air assets on standby. I was able to direct air assets overhead and instructed them to make a show of force by crisscrossing the city at low altitude. This proved most effective as the crowds dissipated. They are all too familiar with the potent strike power of coalition air assets. This was the real deal as we knew we were on our own on the ground, and years of professional soldiering came to the forefront in what we call the “automatic mode switch on.” However, you still feel the extreme tension and vulnerability, but you overcome that by concentrating on the task at hand. As this situation evolved, an emergency response team was placed on standby in Kandahar. This was hours away by air; fortunately they were not needed.

The ANA were on the other side of the city, hunkered down in their temporary base with their U.S. advisors. They were in no place or state to offer us any real help, as they were a relatively new force. Khan’s men, on the other hand, were seasoned fighters.

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Tensions subsided in the city over the next couple of days, and things returned to relative calm. Our 21 days had come to an end. We had achieved the first major deployment of the ANA into a province and with it the extended authority of the Afghan National Government. Our mission had been a success. It had taken far longer than first expected, and the personal toll would not manifest itself until much later.

This was one of several traumatic events in my tour of Afghanistan that year, and it has remained with me ever since. I now suffer from

claustrophobia whenever I am enclosed in small spaces, and I struggle with the feeling of utter vulnerability whenever I am not in control of a situation. The hyper arousal is still with me today and manifests itself in many different ways daily. It was the constant tension and unpredictability of the whole situation I found myself in, but the meeting with Khan was the culminating point. I coped with the stress by just putting all the incidents into that black box in the back of the brain, trying instead to concentrate on the immediate tasks ahead, all the time not knowing that this extended period of stress, tension, and the unknown would have a devastating effect on me years later.

When I returned from overseas I was still on an adrenaline high and running on red alert. Everything was a life and death decision that had to be made quickly. Most of these decisions were made on the run, at times with only the information on hand, and in hindsight, it would have been better to have waited and made more informed decisions about my life and future. I decided to leave the Army early after my return, based on what I thought was best for me and not for the Army. As I had just come back from a high profile position and had been at the cutting edge of operational and strategic intelligence, I wanted to move straight away into a similar role back home. However, the Army had different plans, and that was to move me out of my specialist role to one I saw as wasting my experience and talents. I felt undervalued, so I changed jobs, the start of my downhill slide. I didn't discuss my feelings with anyone and was not willing to as I saw this as a weakness. This attitude is common among military personnel. We are unwilling to put our hands up and say we are having problems, since we are then perceived "*not up to it.*"

I was angry at the Army and at the world. I felt I had been treated unfairly and was undervalued. I could not see into the future as I had been operating in the "here and now" for so long at such a high intensity, making decisions that were valued and acted upon. Some of these decisions have had disastrous outcomes, especially when you can't have all the information at hand and you can't control the



situation on the ground. The loss of life that came as a result of those decisions lay heavily on me, and I often relive those decisions and outcomes to see if I could have done things differently. What did I miss?

Looking back, I realize that I punished myself for those rare events that went wrong, and I didn't pat myself on the back for all the good things I had achieved. Even when I was made a Member of New Zealand Order of Merit MNZM in the 2005 Queen's New Year's Honors list, it was a hollow victory. I still felt I had let people down and individuals had lost their lives.

Intensive flashbacks became strong and were associated with traumatic events, particularly the ones in which the death of others occurred. These became exceedingly disruptive in my life and remain today as disruptive nightmares. I know that in war people get killed and sometimes there is what we call collateral damage, but this still challenges me both ethically and morally. I have come to accept that I was not in complete control of a situation and that you may not have all of the information to make decisions. However, you need to rely on others that they are doing their best.

On my return from Afghanistan, I found myself irritable and quickly lost my temper about stupid things, especially around my family. I wanted to regain the household decision making straight away and found myself arguing with my wife about everything, especially our finances. I had served overseas, I had earned the money, and I would decide on the finances. My relationship with my kids was volatile, especially my eldest son, who could do no right, when all he was doing was just being a teenager. I still regret this today, but now we are rebuilding this bond. He has been so supportive of my recovery, and even though he is a young man, he still tells me he loves his dad and is hugely proud of me. My youngest son was removed from my emotions and anger, but his love for his dad never faltered and hasn't to this day. He too is extremely supportive of me and my recovery. Both my sons are now young men with bright futures. My daughter went

through this hell with me and fortunately has come out the other end a most wonderful and beautiful young lady. This is no small miracle as it was my wife that ensured that she was grounded all the time and was protected from me and my actions and moods.

Then there's my wife. Where do I start? "MY ROCK." I have put her through hell over these last years, and yet, she has stuck by me. When I returned from Afghanistan, I did everything the Army told me not to do. I was still in the controlling mood and wanted to take over the running of the household, even though I didn't know what I was doing. This caused a terrible amount of friction at home and led to many arguments with me getting angry at everything and her getting upset not knowing what to do. My wife went into protection mode for herself and the kids and kept things running as normal as possible. I felt I was a boarder in my own home, and I became resentful over what I felt was a total loss of control. I know now that this was not the case. She was protecting the family from an exceedingly unpredictable me.

It was at this early stage I took refuge away from home and I moved to a new job I thought then was an advancement and a real challenge, a new beginning. This captured my energy full-on at first and then soon became boring and mundane. I found it hard to remain interested and engaged. Some parts of the job I liked. Those were the interaction with people when I was in control. The day-to-day stuff became mundane. As I got bored, my concentration waned, and I turned to having a drink to fill my day, take my mind off work and home, and dream about big ventures I might take in the future. The typical avoidance strategy, I soon became wrapped up in this fake world.

I soon looked for a new challenge in work. I moved to a new and what I thought was a more exciting field: consulting with a major worldwide consulting firm. The prospects of travel, money, and moving around the world were the draw card, not the hard work that would go with it. This led to me travelling a lot. I liked the idea of not being at home as it meant that I could avoid all the things that go with

having a family life, such as day-to-day responsibilities I never had anyway, dealing with kids and my relationship with my wife. During this period, I was living the life of a single man without a care in the world. The cycle of avoidance started all over again, only this time it was worse than before. I knew I was underperforming at work, and that was being noticed. This led to quitting before I was pushed out, blemishing my record.

This cycle continued for four years. Eventually this all came out in the open due to my stupidity. I soon attempted to take my life and ended up in hospital under care. I discharged myself as I thought I had reached rock bottom and could solve whatever was wrong with me. How untrue this was. This was an early cry for help, but the “demon” had me and wouldn’t let go. I saw that there was no way out, and no matter what people told me, I became unmanageable. I spiraled down into the depths of depression and avoidance and all those things associated with PTSD. Once again I tried to take my life, this time very nearly succeeding. My wife came home early, and the quick work of paramedics and hospital staff saved me. Thank God I am here to tell my story and help others.

Coming to the point of where I am at now is due to several positive changes I have made to my life, both physical and mental. I have reengaged with getting physically fit as this is one of the easiest and quickest ways in improving my overall health, allowing me to better concentrate on getting my mental health/physiological space in order. What has worked for me over the last 18 months is this combination of working on both the physical and mental balance in my life. I initially progressed on a journey of intense physiological therapy with a clinical physiologist. It was most important that I found a professional with whom I could connect and who understood my story. Also, it was great they understood PTSD and the military.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been especially successful in my recovery. It has enabled me to understand the trauma and place it in perspective. I feel it has been important for me to relive the trauma

and then accept it. The addition of medication has also played an important role. Used in combination with therapy, it has helped me to readjust and focus on the here-and-now and on my future. I also found that it is important to get the right level of medication that works for me. If I wasn't getting the results I wanted I would discuss this with my psychiatrist, and we would change my meds until they were complementary to my recovery and therapy.

One of the greatest self-help therapies I have used has been to write down my story and journey through recovery. This is extremely cathartic in getting the emotions out and putting them into perspective. This journey over the last 18 months has been one of personal discovery and enlightenment. By no means has it been easy. However, it has been rewarding as I can now help others to overcome the stigma of PTSD. I am now lecturing at Command & Staff College and Army promotion courses on PTSD and recovery from traumatic experiences, and on the ethical and moral dilemmas associated with making command decisions on operations. PTSD does not differ from physical trauma; it just happens to manifest itself in specific ways. It is important to bring the discussion out into the open and demystify it.

# Musings on Running and Coming Home from War



Intro by David Chrisinger, author Anonymous

He was a Marine for four years—check that, he *is* a Marine. He deployed to Iraq twice. The first time, he was sent to Abu Ghraib prison as part of a “provisional infantry” unit and served as a designated marksman and fire team leader. After seven or eight months, he was sent home, had a short break, and then was “voluntold” that he’d be changing units and going back to Iraq.

“They needed experienced NCOs,” he told me.

This time, he was sent to Ramadi and served again as a designated marksman and fire team leader.

“From what I can tell,” his wife said, “the first deployment didn’t cause much change in him. But the second deployment was different.”

When he came home from Ramadi, “gone was that beautiful smile I fell in love with,” his wife continued, “that innocent guy who would shake anyone’s hand. Now he was a man weighed down by the world, who had seen things no one can imagine.”

Two years ago, he started running. His first race was an 18-mile steeple chase, which he ran with practically no training. “I finished,” he told me, “but I hated life.”

Then he started training, built up his endurance, and learned how to properly run on trails. Six months after his first race, he ran his first ultra-marathon—a 50K. He finished after getting lost and adding another seven miles to his race.

I asked him what running did for him as he transitioned out of the Marine Corps and back into the civilian world.

“I’ve actually written about that,” he told me. “Do you want to read it?”

“Of course,” I told him.

### ***Musings...***

*Perhaps the genius of ultra-running is its supreme lack of utility.*

*It really makes no sense in a world of space ships and supercomputers to run vast distances on foot.*

*There is no money in it and no fame, frequently not even the approval of peers and loved ones.*

*But as poets, apostles, and philosophers have insisted from the dawn of time, there is more to life than logic and common sense.*

*The ultra-runners know this instinctively I think.*

*And they know something else that is lost on the sedentary.*

*They understand, perhaps better than anyone, that the doors to the spirit will swing open with physical effort.*

*In running such long and taxing distances they answer a call from the deepest realms of their being.*

*It is during this time that the mind and spirit can heal.*

*The loss of friends and the memories of violence can be worked through.*

*The sounds of explosions, gunfire, and screaming echoing through the mind can be silenced.*

*The sights and sounds of nature remind you that there is still good in this world, and you can continue forward for another day.*

# Poetry as Catharsis



Jesse Frewerd

I am a veteran of the war in Iraq. I have been playing music for ten years and writing poetry for a little over two years now. Where my music is a little more hopeful in its essence, I think my poetry is more eclectic and cathartic—a means for me to vent. Poetry allows me to say more of what I want without being tied to musical time and meter. For instance, not needing to rhyme, using caesuras for an added effect, and just being free in form to get my thoughts out on paper. If I don't say anything, it just festers inside me—the negativity. Then it manifests itself in different forms. The main goal for my poetry is for other vets to have someone to relate to. I've been there. I've seen hell, and these are the things we carry. Trust me. It will get better. It just takes time.

## ***Press Play to Pause***

A damaged internal combustion system muffles my drive,

Unleashing chemical vengeance

on this weakened engine.

Minutes pass as I peddle, kickstart the struggle to rise.

Causing fluidly flowing circuits to stall in chamber.

Flooding my focus.

You are weak,



A slave to a fragile body.

I countersteer the coming turn,

Then lean into the bank.

Innocence clutches my guilt.

Shifting pain to torment.

God please, find me another gear.

As I go through the motions,

I drive in monotony.

As to quell the rising concerns of

Antiquated friends and family.

War has changed me but

its wounds, though invisible, have stolen from me.

Moments I can't get back

And wrongs I can't right.

A different me has emerged.

Constantly haunted

by thoughts I can't control,

and memories I can't contain.

This movie's stuck on repeat, and alternate

Endings deviate from plots.

I press play to pause

When I can't find

The remote

Control.

### ***Stockholm Syndrome***

Faceless enemies convert

shape-shifting civilians.

Armed with point blank ultimatums,

these chessboard men target

pawns for sacrifice.

Fashioning untrained mercenaries

paid for each American head.

Fitted with manufactured ideals

kamikaze assembly lines ripen

product placement | trash

Roadside prostitutes dressed as bombs.

Bullets pointed hollow

converge on the hearts of men.

Are we prisoners to one another?

Captives forced to fight

wars | Modern-Day Gladiators

pitted against each other,

while our Corporate Monarch's shake hands?

Guerilla warfare tactics

used on civilian psyches.

Knowledge is Power

when ignorance is King.

# I'll Just Keep Walking



Deborah Martin

What changed my life forever was being attacked by a Turkish soldier. My innocence and youth were ripped from my body, my head, and my heart. I will never trust or feel safe; I will never feel pretty or lovable again. If someone punches you in the nose, you sop up the bleeding with a tissue, and a few days later, it's all over, you don't think of it again. But when you are raped, it never goes away.

I bet if you ask a rape survivor how he or she feels today, they will most undoubtedly say, "worse." As I look back, I ask myself what I could have done differently, and the answer is always the same. It was my fault. I could have stopped it; I must have put off some kind of vibe.

When I picked myself up, I had no idea what to do. The military doesn't cover rape in any of its in-briefings. There is no friendly First Sergeant, no assigned advocate. I was a young girl from a poor single mom, on public assistance most of my life. I never traveled any further than where the city bus went. I so looked forward to being sent to Diyarbakir, Turkey. I would be part of an integration of females to an all-male squadron.

I became an object of inappropriate behavior immediately. When I would go to our commander, the response was always, "Boys will be boys. You have to learn to have thicker skin. Maybe you and the other girls could stick together and start a knitting club or book club." As time went on, this attitude became unbearable. I had lost trust in men and lost faith in the military system. Airmen started coming to my room at all hours of the night, loudly knocking on the door, even after

I had asked them to go away. They had never been instructed to stay away from the female quarters. The instructions were only to keep noise levels down because of the 24-hour duty cycle.

I had finally had enough and went to the chaplain. He agreed that I had to be removed from this assignment before it got worse. His recommendation was to transfer me to Incirlik Air Force Base, which had base housing for both sexes, including families. I felt safe there; I had found a nice place to call home. I travelled and even made friends with some of the locals and people on base. I was happy and was in an environment that allowed me to trust again. I even thought about re-enlisting. Turkey was beautiful and exciting. The ocean was amazing, and the beautiful, colorful, noisy cities were so inviting. There were shops filled with jewelry, fabrics, and brass ware of all kinds. The food was exotic and flavorful.

One evening, it all changed.

A few months into my new assignment, on my way to the dorm, I heard the sound of footsteps. I turned around, and there he was. He pulled my pony tail and yanked me behind some shrubs near a generator hut. He was a Turkish soldier. He shoved me to the ground, and put what seemed to be a jagged knife at my throat. In between Turkish and sloppy English he told me to be quiet and not struggle. I struggled anyway, but instead of stabbing me, he punched me in the face and shook me. He ripped open my fatigue blouse, tearing the buttons off. He grabbed my breasts, making me cry out, and he spit on me and shoved one of his hands over my mouth. I bit him, and he slapped me across the face so hard it made me see stars. I could only see a narrow hallway of sorts, bright colors and muffled speech, tunnel vision I guess. His uniform was woolen, and he smelled a combination of sweaty, dirty body and wet wool. It gagged me.

He then pulled my shirt up and started biting and licking me. I tried to push him off. I tried to lift my head up to look around, but I couldn't see any signs of activity or people around at this late hour. I

had lifted my head as I was trying to push him off and he head-butted me. I must have lost consciousness for a bit because the next thing I knew he was about to enter me. I begged him to stop. He had this crazy look on his face as he rammed into me, grunting like an animal. He started to ejaculate. I guess he started to come inside me, but then he pulled out and spewed what was left on my face. He laughed maniacally and called me a dirty American whore. Somehow he yanked off my shoes, and took my fatigue blouse. He slapped my face over and over again. When he rose, he kicked me a few times, spat on me, and then left.

What he left me with was the beginning of a hellacious journey.

I walked to the infirmary that was open around the clock. I was in a daze. I was told to sit in the waiting area. I sat there in my stocking feet, without my uniform fatigue blouse. Why did he take that from me? A trophy perhaps? After what seemed like forever, I was called into the triage room. The nurse on duty took some information. It was emotionless and cold, just like the exam that followed. I was taken into a curtained area (not even a separate room). A large white sheet was placed on the floor. I was told to stand in the middle of the sheet. There were two military policemen in the sheeted area. One had a camera. There were also two nurses, one with a tape recorder and another with a clipboard.

I was instructed to remove my shirt, and they began to take pictures and notes. The nurse with the recorder spoke into it stating all that was visible: "Bruising on the left forearm and what appears to be bite marks on the right shoulder, scratches early signs of bruising and teeth marks on this Airman's neck." More pictures and notes were taken. I was then told to remove my bra. The military policemen did not leave the area. In fact one came closer and took more pictures and notes. They circled me as they stared, poked and prodded. They didn't speak to me at all. It was like I wasn't even there. But I was. The feeling of violation continued.

I was told to remove my underpants. There I stood, naked, in the middle of a big white sheet with my clothes strewn about. Notes, pictures, men and women walking around me over and over again. "Airman, come to the exam table please." I walked naked toward it. "Sit on the edge please." A metal tool was used to scrape under my nails, and a flat instrument scraped at the side of my face, removing the dried semen from my cheek. I was then told to lay down on the table on my face, where they examined, took photos, and spoke into the recorder. I was given a vaginal and rectal exam, scraping at the insides of my body. The only words spoken were, "This will be uncomfortable." No shit. The nurse that was taking the notes rolled the sheet up with all of my belongings inside. They all left the area quietly talking to each other.

There I was, naked on the table with bright lights shining down upon me. An orderly came in, and he exclaimed, "Holy crap....I was told no one was in here and that I should scrub it all down." He kept his eyes averted so as not to look at me. He asked if I would like a blanket to cover up. He gave me two nice, warm blankets in which to wrap up. This was the only sign of compassion I received there. He came back sometime later and said that he told the supervisor that I was still in the exam area. She came in and dismissed me. I was still naked. She gave me a set of scrubs and those goofy socks with the rubber bottoms so you don't slide and fall, which was the least of my concerns, because soon things became much worse.

Over time I became sullen and angry and sad. I couldn't concentrate and made many mistakes. I was getting written up for everything. I was sick all of the time. I reported to the infirmary. I found out that I was pregnant. The diagnosis pounded in my heart. It felt as though it would rip through my body. I immediately became sick and started to convulse wildly and vomited over and over until there was nothing left. My attitude worsened. I just didn't care about anything. Not once did anyone inquire about my attitude or ask if there was anything they could do. No one ever offered a helping hand. I decided to ask about

an abortion, but they didn't do them overseas. Instead, I was discharged honorably due to pregnancy.

I was left on my own.

I settled into my old bedroom. I tried to make myself comfortable. My belly grew bigger and bigger. I cannot say what changed my mind about the abortion. I can only say that I was numb. Rational thought escaped me. I almost never left the house. One morning, very early, I went to the bathroom and started to feel funky. I began to get awful cramps. I thought it was gas and ignored it, but they got worse and were almost constant. "Crap," I thought, "This is it." I threw some stuff in a bag and ran into my parent's room. My step-dad grabbed his keys and took me to the hospital. Once there I remember someone saying, "Push, Sweetie, push. Your little baby needs mommy to help bring him out into the world." Then they handed him to me. Everyone was cooing and congratulating me.

I was then wheeled into a room that I shared with three other people. All of them were in labor. They all were moaning, crying, and yelling for pain killers. I pulled my covers over my head and tried to go to sleep. I went home two days later with my son in my arms and extreme pain in my heart. He and I shared my bedroom until I realized that I could no longer live there. I looked through the classified ads and saw a few apartments that might work. But it wasn't the house I couldn't live with, it was the child.

One day while reading the paper I came across a little paragraph that said:

*"Please bless us, we are a loving mom and dad looking for an infant with which to share their life with. Financially stable with stay at home mom to care for your beautiful bundle. We know you are hurting, we promise to give your precious one a safe, loving home with room to play and be surrounded by a big happy family with many aunts and uncles."*



I dialed the number. A woman answered the phone; her voice had that sing-song quality. I could picture a June Cleaver type on the other end. I don't remember the conversation, even on my way home after giving Mark up, I couldn't remember what had transpired. The name Mark just popped in my head. No rhyme or reason. I've never known anyone named Mark. They sent a limo for me to take me to the airport and a limo to pick me up when I arrived. I was driven to a lawyer's office. I have no idea what state, the time of year, time of day...nothing. I remember the smell of leather and books. I walked into the conference room and met the nicest couple I'd ever encountered. She smelled of baby powder. He smelled like clean fresh soap. I wanted to just be with them and not go home. It wasn't me going with them, though.

I walked toward Mark's mom and handed him to her. Her husband leaned in to kiss his forehead. The lawyer told me there was one concern he had. The father was listed as unknown. Was I positive that I didn't know the father? I finally said out loud for the first time, "Positively sure, I was raped." Immediately Mark's mom ran to me after placing him in his dad's arms. She put her arms around me and exclaimed, "Oh, you poor baby, that is so awful, who would want to hurt you like that?" I started to cry and couldn't stop. I had never cried until then. She continued to hold me while stroking my hair. "You are a beautiful, strong woman with a big heart. God brought us together to heal us both."

I am not quite healed yet.

Many years later, actually to this very day, I am still trying to heal. I have been committed four times, twice self-committed and twice involuntarily. For the latter I was on suicide watch. I have cut myself. I have also dug the words SLUT and WHORE into my arms. There is still a shadow of those words on my arms today. I drank myself into oblivion. I smoked and had multiple affairs. I have a wonderful husband and four beautiful children. They have all come to terms finally, but I can see that they will never forget. I can see it in their

eyes. There are days that I can't leave my house. I get claustrophobic and anxious if I have to travel. My back has to be to the wall anywhere we go. The smell of the rain gets to me. Body odors affect me greatly. I cannot watch any program that has a hint of assault. I have psychologists, psychiatrists, and marriage counselors I visit. I repeat this sordid tale and discuss these symptoms.

I am making changes.

I have been medically discharged. I have completed my pension and compensation review from the VA. Many, many doctor appointments later, all the paperwork has been completed. There are 112 pages of medical pension and compensation interviews and check-ups. Some state:

*“Our recommendation for this veteran is that she should not return to full-time employment. She may work at a part-time position if there is a low stress atmosphere, as she will be on maintenance medications and under psychiatric care presumably for the rest of her life.”*

I am trying to learn to like myself. That will be a tough one. I will be going to an eight-week women's inpatient treatment program for PTSD/MST in Batavia, New York after I retire. Maybe then some of the demons can be put to rest. I will keep taking these steps, even if I continually look back.

There are some days that I wonder if it's real. Did I dream it? Was it all a figment of my imagination? How could the Air Force just push me aside? Am I alive or just an apparition weeping at the horror of it all? Why would an all-loving God allow his children to hurt so much?

Here I am, though.

I made it through the hell that is me. I haven't made it to the end of the tunnel. I am stuck in the middle, where the train's whistle and bright headlights blare. Will I ever get through? Will the end of my

tunnel just be another tunnel? Who knows? I'll just keep walking on the train tracks, balancing as if on a high wire, waiting to see which side I fall.

But I will keep walking.

# Walking off the War



David Chrisinger

*“I have two doctors, my left leg and my right. When body and mind are out of gear (and those twin parts of me live at such close quarters that the one always catches melancholy from the other) I know that I have only to call in my doctors and I shall be well again.”*

—George Macaulay Trevelyan, “Walking,” 1913

In 1948, Earl Shaffer, a veteran of the war in the Pacific, became the first person to hike the entire length of the approximately 2,200-mile long Appalachian Trail—from Springer Mountain, Georgia, to the trail’s northern end at Katahdin, Maine. Born in 1918, Shaffer was raised in rural York County, Pennsylvania; a mere 20 miles from the Appalachian Trail.

As a young man, Shaffer hiked portions of the trail with his close friend, Walter Winemiller. After deciding to enlist in the military in 1941, Shaffer and Winemiller made a pact that they would hike the entire length of the Appalachian Trail once the war was over.

Unfortunately, Winemiller was killed during the battle for Iwo Jima. Shaffer came home a different man.

One little known fact about the generation of men that fought “the Good War” is that many of them—like combat veterans before and since—found it incredibly difficult to readjust to life at home.

“Peace,” Maureen Daly wrote in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in May 1947, “It’s a problem.”

Once the Second World War ended, most people were anxious to “get back to normal,” but many veterans found that normal seemed to be in short supply. Many veterans, in fact, had “dreamed of home and longed for it, day and night, for years. And now...there’s something wrong: He’s changed...or it’s changed...or else it hasn’t, when it seems to him it should have changed.”

It wasn’t long before some veterans became disillusioned and bitter. A veteran of the war in the Pacific realized after the fact that he had “lost three years out of [his] life, playing catch up in school, catch up economically, catch up.” His old friends, he discovered, had graduated from college. Two were doctors; all had careers. “I was so bitter,” he later recalled, “you wouldn’t recognize me.” At the separation center, he was advised that his wartime experience as an infantry sergeant qualified him to be a “Maine hunting guide.” Instead, he became “a drunk and a wild man.... I had no direction, no ambition,” he recalled. “I was just overwhelmed with bitterness and full of hate and envy.”

By 1947, Shaffer had worked a series of dead-end jobs and was likely feeling the same disillusionment and bitterness other veterans felt. That same year, Shaffer saw a magazine article stating that no one had ever hiked the Appalachian Trail straight-through. Not long after that, he set out on the trail, reaching the end in 124 days with primitive gear and without modern conveniences (he didn’t even have a stove or a tent). His grand journey rightfully served as a memorial for his lost friend and fellow soldiers.

Walking is a highly effective way to reduce stress, depression, and anxiety because it is soothing and engenders positive emotional states. In fact, a brisk 20- to 30-minute walk can have the same calming effect as a mild tranquilizer, and walking daily for a half-hour has been shown to quickly relieve major depression.

Longer journeys, like the one Shaffer completed, can separate you from the distractions of everyday life and can lead to profound transformations and feelings of purification. Perhaps that’s why Sean

Gobin, a post-9/11 veteran with three combat deployments under his belt, decided to follow in Shaffer's footsteps in 2012. Before the advent of modern transportation, armies would take months to march home from war. That time spent marching inadvertently provided the opportunity for soldiers to decompress and to come to terms with their wartime experiences before returning home.

"Now, after the age of modern-day transportation, we find ourselves coming back and forth from the battlefield in a matter of 72 hours," Gobin told a reporter recently. "So for all three of my combat deployments, I was home in three days. And that makes for a really difficult transition for a lot of service members. And I think that's evident with today's current stats, with over 20 percent of our vets coming home with post-traumatic stress disorder and the suicide rates in 2012, which were 22 per day."

Even before Shaffer, veterans have used long-distance walking to make sense of life after war. According to historian Dixon Wecter, following the Civil War, long-distance walking events were all the craze: There was, for example, a "Bostonian" who walked "forty miles a day in April 1865, carrying the Stars and Stripes to Washington to celebrate the fall of Richmond;" a mania for marathon athletes in Michigan in the summer of 1865; and in New Orleans in September that year, the attempt of one Mr. Harris "to walk for 100 consecutive hours without rest."

For veterans, these events were "the channels in which to work off superfluous excitement," wrote the editor of the *Army and Navy Journal* in October 1866. "And, meanwhile, the friendly associations recall the camaraderie of the campaign."

"As in 1865," Wecter continues, "America rediscovered [at the conclusion of the First World War] the cult of fitness and the outdoor life."

“Nerves, like springs coiled under tension, were now released and quivering,” he wrote. “Long walks, the spending of physical energy, seemed to give relief.”

Perhaps the Greek philosopher Diogenes the Cynic was right after all: *It is solved by walking.*

# Should Have Been You



Joseph Stanfill

Fathers and Sons, Mothers and Daughters  
Sent off to war, they go with courage, honor  
Most will come back with invisible pain  
Some like you, will always stay

Shouldn't have been you, left so far away  
Should have been you, standing here today  
Why on earth did I get God's grace?  
Should have been me  
I wish I could take your place

I've tried to live my life to honor you  
Not taking things for granted like I used to  
But in the night the darkness comes  
I dream about the day that we were overrun  
Right by my side, you fought valiantly



A flash and a blast, I couldn't see  
I said your name, and a voice told me  
"He saved your life, he didn't make it you see."

Now I'm left with memories and regrets  
You were so young, hadn't even had kids yet  
Your young bride, at the funeral I held her hand  
She misses you so much, and so will your little man  
And I know, I could never take your place  
I promise I'll do my best, man, he even has your face  
Should have been you that came home to stay  
Should have been me, I couldn't take your place  
But now I see, I'm here to hold God's grace

# New Realities



Jim Tritten

In 1979, my life changed. I crashed a military airplane. It only took a few seconds, but the near-death experience would unequivocally and permanently alter the rest of my life. Relationships with my family, work, and my view of myself would never be the same.

PTSD was hardly even a fragment in my imagination at the time, so I did not seek counseling, nor was any seriously offered. Military medicine was embarrassingly negligent in 1979. A series of unexplained symptoms increased in severity until an extremely stressful incident in 2008 brought all my unresolved issues to a head. I fell into a tailspin and retired unceremoniously from all work on a psychological disability. I was in total crisis—unable to function in society.

I became a professional patient and sought explanations for what was going on with my body and my mind. A short time later, I received a diagnosis. The good news: we knew the problem. The bad news: PTSD is a mental illness.

Until you've experienced being diagnosed with mental illness, you have no idea how society treats such individuals. To only read about the symptoms and the effects doesn't do it justice.

So imagine yourself walking through a sunny parking lot. It's a Sunday afternoon, and you're out running errands. You see someone you know well—a leader in your community known for their political activism. You watch the individual make eye contact with you, only to

avert their eyes. S/he ducks quickly into their car, turns the key, and drives off. Then picture this person wearing a clerical collar.

But *I* don't need to imagine. Such an event happened to me. The only thing I imagined later when I was processing what happened was maybe I should wear a sign, "Don't worry, PTSD isn't contagious."

Successfully dealing with mental illness on your own is simply *not* possible. It's no easier than trying to walk on a broken foot without a crutch.

In 2008 following a total meltdown, I sought help from the VA. But being able to crack the nut of making a case, being correctly classified, approved, and then be scheduled for treatment wasn't an easy task. Getting seen by the VA would take more than a year. In the meantime, I discovered the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and took advantage of their support groups and classes.

I transitioned from initial diagnosis to being part of a new club. I learned what to do next with the aid of excellent clinicians and a well-developed program at the VA and peers who volunteer with NAMI. I left my first prescription on the shelf for a month before I could muster the courage to take the first pill. I knew once I did that, again my life would never be the same.

With help, I learned the path leading to a predictable and better end state. I mastered coping skills, gained knowledge, grew to tolerate medicines, and changed my environment. Group therapy allowed me to see fragile souls blossom as they meet with like individuals who suffer the same judgment by society, friends, and family. These folks deal with unjustified inner shame, and share hope for a better life.

I discovered there are "underground" support groups for veterans who don't want PTSD on their work record. I empathized with them and told my story of being first diagnosed in 1993 and hiding the branding so I could continue to work—until the meltdown anyway. I show them

the results of not seeking treatment. The choice is theirs. At the time, I did not understand the choice.

I write a lot for therapy. I don't want to write about my trauma, and I don't want to write about the negative aspects of my diagnosis and treatment. Instead, I focus on humor and enjoy it when I write pieces that can make others laugh. The VA helped me write by teaching me about emotions. First, I learned to recognize there are emotions other than anger. Second, I learned how to describe what goes on inside myself when I feel other emotions. The last bit is tricky—how to write words that will cause the reader or listener to feel the emotion that I felt and am now trying to describe. From writing things that will make you laugh, my goal is to write about things that will make you cry.

I share my story with vets and non-vets alike. I know it's customary for vets to say no one other than another vet can understand the challenges of military service. I don't agree. I've obtained excellent care from mental health professionals who've never been in the military or crashed an airplane. I also learn from individuals diagnosed with a variety of mental illnesses that have nothing to do with PTSD. But they all face the same issues I faced—like being shunned by people you know. We debate if it is easier to keep your old friends or make new ones.

I volunteer my time to lead support groups for individuals with all types of mental illnesses. I learn from them, and we help each other. Part of my volunteer activities includes going into the high-security mental health units at a county jail. Incarcerated patients in my support groups include my fellow vets – both men and women. Not everyone has what it takes to do volunteer work inside a jail. It's a great opportunity for most vets who do have what it takes.

We discuss issues common to anyone with any mental illness: How do we get the support of family and what do we do when support does not come? How do we define recovery? Who has stopped taking their

medicine and not told anyone? Will this PTSD ever go away? How best can we process trauma?

We live in a country where there finally are good tools to deal with PTSD and good programs to reach all veterans who are branded with this diagnosis. The VA and NAMI are both organizations that offer hope to people like me who needed to be shown the road to recovery. With help, recovery is possible—and I define recovery as being able to function as well as I can, given the cards I've been dealt. No, my world is not the same as it was when I could work, let alone when I was a Navy pilot. My new environment is smaller and less complex, and it involves working on my diagnosis every day for the rest of my life.

My new reality.

As veterans with a diagnosis, we have the opportunity to get good treatment and share what we learn at the VA and in our self-formed groups with those less fortunate than us. We can help ourselves as we help others. Hope multiplies as each of us comes to term with our new realities and reaches out to help another.

# Tell Your Story, Tell It Well



Christian Nooney

I've always been a social creature. My parents and close friends can attest to that. I've always been able to make fast friends in unfamiliar situations. Maybe that explains why I've always been attracted to storytelling. And just maybe ten-plus years in the army has made me a better, or at least more comfortable, storyteller.

The first time I told a deployment story was my first night of mid-tour leave from Iraq in April of 2007. My company had already taken eight KIAs and a handful of WIA's that wouldn't be returning. We had moved from south of Baghdad, just off of MSR Tampa, to an Observation Post on the outskirts of Fallujah proper named Delta.

I had turned 21 two months before, and after spending six months downrange I had understandably gotten drunk. The story started innocently enough, with a friend of my girlfriend asking me what we had been doing in Iraq. Then came the canned "Have you ever shot anyone?" question.

I proceeded calmly, trying to bring back all of the sensory details I could about the night I had sat on the highway, waiting for the sun to come up to police call pieces of my friends from the pavement. I'll refrain from the detail here, but as the story went on, I brought these civilian college students to a cold December night in a country they might struggle to find on a map.

I talked about the pervasive smell of gunpowder and blood, the guys in the truck with me, the relief as the last Marlboro Red in our truck

was shared. I talked about the men who had gone that night, about the absurdity of Giff, and the calm coolness Linck had always displayed. And so the story went.

By the time I had finished, I looked up at the circle of kids surrounding me, two girls held back tears, soft sobs punctuating the silence, and three boys had their heads held down. To this day I could only imagine what went through their heads. Tension hung in the air; all of us were in unfamiliar territory with what to do next. But I wasn't in Iraq so my sense of ease was better. One of them attempted an apology, condolences, something. But it all came out lacking, choppy, and eventually faded off. The confidence of combat pushed the cavalier attitude I was into. Their apologies to me were met with the soldiers' equivalent of "Thanks for your service": "Hey. It is what it is, no problem."

The rest of the night and the rest of my leave I never hesitated to tell my stories, our stories, if someone showed a genuine interest and had the time to listen. I'm sure it got old for the people who were around me the most, and I know it made more than one relative stranger uncomfortable. But at that point it wasn't about fitting into an image the public had painted me into. It was about getting everyone on the same page.

Similar events have played out over my time and in multiple trips down range—both on the deployed side and the storytelling side. Some of it is probably therapeutic, putting words and validation to the dark thoughts that can run around in anyone's head. Some of it is a desire to get people on a level understanding of me and my peers, to understand what the country has asked us to do for them. It's not a plea to get behind the mission or the Global War on Terror, it's a plea to get involved and fix the way we implement foreign policy if you don't agree (we can save that for another talk though).

The entitlement culture (as popular media would call it) hasn't skipped the military. We feel as if we're entitled to special treatment, often in the form of not waiting in a line; or not being bothered in public; or people being more situationally aware on the roads, clubs, restaurants, what have you. We feel as if we should get immediate respect without ever having to back that up a little. It turns civilians off from us, and it turns us off from civilians.

Let's start to bring our stories to the average guy on the street, to get him to understand a small bit of our culture. We volunteered to serve as protectors of this country. Its people need to know what the country asked of us, and what we did in our service to the flag.

Take the time to tell your story, and tell it well. If you weren't the hero or the centerpiece, that's fine. I never was. You could just be someone involved in the events, maybe carrying a litter, maybe just sitting in the turret, but they were valid and real experiences nonetheless. Relive that event with the civilians you're sharing the story with. You'll find going back through it with company isn't as bad as the first time it happened.



# Another Day, Another Walk



Chase Vuchetich

*“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me. I pray that you make me an instrument of your judgment, help me find the strength to keep going, help me find the wisdom to make the right decisions, before myself keep my brothers safe.”*

Every day I left the patrol base, I said that exact prayer in a whisper to God and myself. Now every day I wake up and pretend to live this normal life. I’m terrified. I have no orders. I have no mission. I have no brothers fore and aft like I grew to love. I walk through campus staring at rooftops and look for likely enemy ambush sites. I play out in my mind how the panic would unfold after the shooting started. Where would I find cover? I feel where my SAW used to be. I think about my .45 next to my bed. I wish I had it with me. I would feel safe.

I look for disturbed earth as I run down the trails through town. My memory screams at me, “Don’t step there!” My common sense tells me to get over it; there is not an IED there. It’s almost time for the spring offensive to start. I hate spring. Flowers remind me of poppy, poppy reminds me of IEDs and AK rounds, IEDs and AK rounds remind me of fallen brothers, fallen brothers remind me of grieving families, and grieving families remind me of a country trying to forget that we are at war while the rest of us try to reason and move forward with our lives.

It’s almost time to walk out my door again. The scariest day of my life was the day I left my family in California. The 185 dip-spitting, shit-

talking Marines who made up my war dog family. They had my ass through the darkest time of my life. Though it gets easier to deal with, it doesn't go away.

As I sit here, I try to finish an assignment for my psychology class, but I cannot concentrate on it. I get anxious as if I am imprisoned behind this computer screen. I pace and tell myself to sit down and try to type something, but the research just turns into a gaggle of knotted sentences. Trying to decipher them only makes me more impatient. I can only think of "over there."

I don't need to talk to anyone. I have tried that, and it only made it worse. I need to figure out how to power through, like I always have.

I am not broken.

I am stronger than most, but I am lost.

I used to have a point of attack. With school I feel like I am chasing my tail. As I sit here, the gates open and the words pour out. Why can I write about the way I feel, but when it comes to an essay where I simply need to interpret what other people said and mention who said it, I want to pull my hair out?

I hate everything about it.

I lay awake through the night. I should be cold, sleeping on the ground somewhere. Instead I am warm and comfortable in my bed. I used to sleep through gunfire, but the sound of trickling water or a slight rustling in the corn stalks jars me awake. I am always ready. The loudest noises on the street outside will not bother me, but if my roommate's three-year old tip-toes above me, I spring up.

How do I conquer these burdens?

I know I am not the only one experiencing this. This is the weight a combat veteran carries. For others, I would gladly carry more. It's all I know how to do anymore. I thought if maybe I went shooting often enough, the range therapy would solve it. Not the case. Little kids make me smile, but ultimately they remind me of the ones I saw on patrol everyday: dirty, malnourished, with drug addict parents, sexually molested, barefooted, innocent kids trapped in a holy war.

For them we did our best to create peace and bring stability.

My best friend was killed "in order to prevent the enemies' freedom of movement." I go to the gym when I feel like I do right now, where the anger builds and I need to escape. I know I am programmed to be an Infantry Marine. I am perfectly OK with that.

I found out in March I am considered 60 percent disabled by the VA. Monetarily that is a blessing. Ultimately it has taken the wind out of my sails. I feel like my entire purpose on this rock has dissolved with the abuse my body has taken. My drive to succeed physically and motivation to be the best is at an all-time high, but the recovery time is much longer. I hurt more than ever. Still I would go back if they let me.

I will never give up on life. That would dishonor those who gave theirs for me, and I am not weak. I could easily crawl into a bottle of Jameson again, but that is a temporary solution to a permanent problem.

My only hope for success is to find a new niche and face my fears of carrying on without my brothers around me.

# My Dank, Nasty Stairwell



Joseph Miller

When I train for ultras, it is common for people to look at me like I am insane. This happens most often when I tell people how far I run or they see me running on a difficult hiking trail. The most common place I see it is in a dank stairwell inside the University of Maine Memorial Fieldhouse. The bulk of my training consists of running up and down three flights of stairs. It has also become my most effective PTSD treatment, an exposure therapy of my own design that—like most of my best coping strategies—came from luck and introspection.

Not so long ago, every time I raced, I suffered from terrible panic attacks. My times were bad, and in one case I was hospitalized for three days because my muscles metabolized themselves. Running was my only outlet, but it was miserable. Not the good kind of miserable that comes from your best effort, but rather it was the panicky, sickness, and migraine-ridden awful that comes with serious PTSD and mTBI.

I worked hard on my issues in therapy, and I ran a 50k and a marathon without attacks, but two weeks later I had my worst attack during a six-mile trail run. I was frustrated and didn't know what to do. When I didn't exercise the attacks increased, but they were the worst at races. The day after my worst attack I decided to run stairs at the University of Maine. It was miserable, but not in the sick, headachy PTSD way. It was gratifying. I watched the football team look up at me like I was a mad man while they practiced. They came and went because it was too hot, but not me. That day something changed.

A week later, I bought a topo map and was running up the closest mountain to my house once a week. I also ran the stairs at the university's football stadium. Every time I ran up the stadium, I was panicking for about 20 minutes and then I would be solid. Over time I did not panic at all, unless an injury kept me off the mountain or stadium. I was climbing over 10,000 feet a week, doing four-hour workouts. Then I ran my hardest race of the year, a 9-mile run with four summits of Bradbury Mountain, and despite a significant sprain early on I shattered my previous record. I was finally making gains. It wasn't long before I ran my first sub 10-hour 50-miler at JFK in Western Maryland. More importantly I was smiling and enjoying every moment of the race.

When I decided to start running the three flight of stairs inside of the university field house, I made a key connection and another stride forward—with PTSD. I suffered a concussion in Iraq when an IED blew up outside of a house I was occupying. It had an excellent vantage point inside of a stairwell. As a platoon leader, I tried to sleep and stay with the soldiers on guard so if there was a problem I would be there when it happened. So I was there when the IED blew up a Bradley fighting vehicle.

Stairwells became triggers for my PTSD, the nauseating feeling of a blast concussion, and the frustration of having a bomb blow up right under my nose. The dark, ill-used stairwell in the field house reminds me of that day, and while PTSD makes me want to avoid those sensations, it was more important that I faced it. I was taking those negative sensations away from that place and it has become a place of strength.

Now I purposefully play music that I listened to a lot in Iraq, just to add another layer of stress and to cause panic. With every workout I am gaining more control of my PTSD. I add PTSD stressors like I add mileage, by consistently building up in little intervals. It is so

meaningful to me to do my best therapy in a building named to honor University of Maine Veterans and the fallen from the First World War.

I was featured in a March 2014 article in *Runner's World* that describes research on veterans who use running to manage their PTSD. It says that with exercise, PTSD symptoms diminish overtime in a permanent fashion, but I disagree. After that tour in Iraq I returned for the surge during the terrible Sunni Shia sectarian violence in east Baghdad, and I have to say that there was just too much to mourn and process.

Rather than a long-term cure, running my stairwell as often as I do continually provides temporary relief. Anytime I get injured and have to take time off, I start at the beginning again: just like starting from scratch after a big race. Even exercise doesn't help very much when I am exposed to high levels of stress—like when I am in a major city, or if I see or smell other people's blood, when I have to speak in public, or on the anniversaries of particularly violent days in Iraq. However, I have refined my stress workout system so well that it takes less time when I have a setback. It is now a lot like spraining an ankle, or road/trail rash, because I have a system of managing PTSD. Running is not a cure-all, but it continuously makes me better at dealing with PTSD and gives me not only the courage to face triggers, but also the confidence that comes from facing a problem head on.

Combat was terrible, and I naturally avoided reminders of it. Over time this allowed PTSD to take control of every aspect of my life. Following my gut and exercising was miserable in all the wrong ways at first, but overtime it helped me key in on the specific strategies that help me cope. It also is extremely healthy.

I imagine that with time, it will lead you to your own dank stairwell and provide you the stamina, fortitude, and perseverance to expose yourself to those reminders, so that you can be more present with your loved ones and at your workplace. Also, the unmistakable “that-

guy-is-a-bad-ass” look on peoples’ faces a couple times a week really makes me confident.

After all, if you have PTSD, you are a badass. You endured something so miserable it permanently damaged your brain. That is awesome, not shameful, and it is valuable to take some time every day and remind yourself of that.

Ultra-running will always be a doorway to feeling the way you should, and might also teach you more about yourself and how hard you can go. Sign up for your first ultra and let it break you, because that will remind you that you know how to drive on when you are broken. If you didn’t know, then how would you have survived? For me a dank, nasty stairwell was something that once made me sick. Now it is the place where I climb 15,000 feet a week, and that helps me feel ready for anything life has to throw at me.

# Afterword



Joseph Stanfill

*“Suffering is traumatic and awful and we get angry and we shake our fists at the heavens and we vent and rage and weep. But in the process we discover a new tomorrow, one we never would have imagined otherwise.”*

– Rob Bell

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In the preceding pages you have been offered a glimpse into the military experience. And you have been exposed to the concept of post-traumatic growth. More importantly you have read through stories that are real, stories that come from the heart and mind working as one—a visceral representation of people’s memories. By reading them you have been a participant in a project that seeks to shed light on the other side of trauma—the side that is unspoken in the media and, sadly, within the veteran community as well.

A relatively new concept, post-traumatic growth has been a part of every war, car accident, sexual assault, and child’s broken arm. The founders of the post-traumatic growth concept, Rich Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun describe it as such:

*“Posttraumatic Growth is not about returning to a ‘default position’ but rather about expanding and experiencing significant life-changing shifts in thinking and relating to the world post trauma.”*

To understand post-traumatic growth, we must first understand post-traumatic stress. One of the most important factors to keep in mind when considering post-traumatic stress is that we all experience



trauma differently. It is a very personal thing. No scale exists to show how one should respond and process a traumatic event. What effects one person greatly may not register as traumatic for another. How a person processes trauma depends on many factors, such as previous beliefs on safety, trust, control, self-esteem, and others. A person's upbringing, any previous trauma exposure, and even genetics play a part as well.

From a neurobiological perspective, fascinating things are going on in the brain during and after one experiences trauma. When we are faced with a traumatic experience, no matter how intense, our primitive brain springs into action. The sights, sounds, tactile feelings, taste, and smells that happen during trauma are received by our sensory organs, sending signals into our brain, starting with the thalamus. These signals are routed to the amygdala, circumventing the hippocampus, where they would normally be put into a memory with data about space, time, and function. The signals also bypass the left hemisphere of the prefrontal cortex where they would take on a symbolic significance, as the event takes on meaning within us. In an instant, the brain sends signals to the adrenal glands, which begin emitting cortisol and norepinephrine, which in turn activate the fight-or-flight response and hyperarousal. The result of this process in the future is a seemingly unconscious recall of the trauma. The veteran does not even have to be thinking of the traumatic event in order to experience anxiety, hypervigilance, anger, or rage.

After living through extreme trauma, such as sexual assault or combat action, a person may experience constant over-arousal and respond as if the event is occurring all over again. This constant state of arousal and hyper-vigilance can lead to difficulty concentrating and holding attention. It can also distort information processing and create tunnel vision. The brain becomes unable to distinguish between actually recalling the trauma and the stimulus occurring in the present. The brain treats the current stimulus as a clear and present danger. Eventually the person starts to isolate or restrict themselves from interaction with others, including going out in public, in order to avoid being subjected to those feelings again. Nightmares and re-experiencing of the traumatic event(s) are also common.

Travis Martin is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran and the founder of Military Experience & the Arts. He speaks to this avoidance and the benefits of the arts to the veteran:

*“Writing and doing art doesn’t cure PTSD. People pushing that panacea are the same types afraid to confront the reality of veterans suffering from lifelong, debilitating mental trauma walking about in their midst. These creative acts can, however, conquer the symptom that gives PTSD its staying power: avoidance.”*

Travis goes on to speak of reshaping the trauma and the feelings which feed off of it:

*If war trauma is a scalding hot casserole dish in the oven, the creative act is like a pair of oven mitts; the finished casserole is analogous to a finished story, poem, or piece of art. Importantly, that finished work may be only one of the dishes in the oven. And it may take some a lifetime to finish baking. Oven mitts aren’t going to change the dish that was prepped, but they may speed up the process by allowing for culinary precision. They’re for handling things, so that the amateur or expert chef alike can take out the casserole, taste it, check the temperature, show it to others, and even share recipes:*

- *“Take out the casserole” by transcribing images and thoughts that are too painful or loud to be transformed from within the psyche onto a canvas, page, or screen.*
- *“Taste it” by easing the artist or author into the creative act—into the act of remembering. It can be easier to simply put down a pen or paint brush than to answer questions from loved ones in real time.*
- *“Check the temperature” to let the artist or author decide whether the story is still developing or stuck on repeat somewhere in the past.*
- *“Show it to others” so that the author and artist can discover they are not alone.*

- *“Share your recipe” and join a community to help those in that community suffering from trauma build the skills needed to express themselves; and to educate those with no referents about what it is that was sacrificed in their name.*

Many veterans recover from the worst symptoms of post-traumatic stress. This is not to say that the veteran does not “live” with the trauma. Some veterans will not experience a symptom for years, then something triggers a latent memory within them and symptoms reemerge. Post-traumatic growth is what happens during this recovery, be it from medication and psychotherapy, or the veteran working through things on their own.

Travis Switalski, a veteran of both Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, speaks to recovery and the reconciliation of guilt which comes through writing:

*“Writing about my experiences in the military has given me more in the way of recovery than medication or therapy ever has. Putting down on paper what happened to me and those around me has helped me to understand the trauma that we were subjected to, and to help let go of some of the guilt that I was holding on to personally. There is something liberating about getting all of that mental mess out of my head and heart and putting it into an organized, understandable thought that others can read and comprehend. Translating it for them has helped me understand it better myself.”*

The growth he speaks of is the real life representation of a phoenix rising from the ashes. People will experience varying levels of growth through trauma. Some will be nearly symptom free and become successful in their chosen passion and profession. Others will be challenged by symptoms yet find that they are better able to cope with those challenges and live more full lives.

David P. Ervin is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the President of Military Experience & the Arts. He says that, “Writing about the traumatic events of war removed one major—and damaging—element of the aftermath. Writing it reinforced retrospect. It helped me move past the guilt of what I did or didn’t do. It gave me

perspective that there is nothing I could do to change the past, and thus I accepted the memories with greater peace of mind.”

Much time and sacrifice went into the collection of writings on the previous pages. David Chrisinger, the Managing Editor of *Blue Nostalgia*, was the engine and the driving force behind this effort. Associate Editor, Josef Nix, lent knowledge and expertise in composition and history to the initiative. The Veterans’ PTSD Project is a collection of volunteers, veterans, and civilian counterparts who have a passion for assisting veterans in telling their story of trauma and growth through the arts. The staff of The Veterans’ PTSD Project and its parent organization, Military Experience & the Arts, would like to thank you for making this valuable compilation possible. This journal would not exist without you, the reader. And it would not exist without the brave veterans who were courageous enough to submit their stories of pain, loss, and growth. Thank you all.

# About the Cover Art



Jennifer Ghormley

The print was created by Jennifer Ghormley and tells the story of a veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom. It is titled “The Peacekeepers,” and was created in collaboration with the Veteran Print Project, a non-profit organization that pairs veterans with artists. Their goal is two-fold: 1) Obtain and develop oral histories of a new generation of veterans and 2) to connect artists with the veterans to create prints based on the oral histories. Veteran Print Project believes that artists have a unique capability of communicating history visually. It is the goal of Veteran Print Project to assist in the development of these “Pict-Oral” histories and to display the creative energies that result from the collaboration between two iconic groups: artist and veteran.



Here is Jennifer, describing the thinking that went into her print:

*Participating in this project proved to be a valuable, eye-opening experience for me as an artist. My father was in the Air Force, stationed in Vietnam for a bit, so I grew up exposed to many stories and movies from the Vietnam War era. I am embarrassed to admit, but my initial, naïve impression of a “vet” was someone old and weathered, with irreparable psychological and physical damage as a result of their service duties and self-sacrifice for the good of the country.*

*Upon meeting the veteran with whom I was paired, I quickly realized this was an archaic definition and that many wars have passed since then, recruiting younger generations of soldiers along the way. Family history and a strong desire to travel and help people, she voluntarily enlisted in the Air Force when she was 19, and she hoped to make a difference in the lives of others. Her position was Security Forces, essentially the base law enforcement. I immediately thought “the peacekeeper”.*

*Leaving home for the first time was an emotional event, but she was determined to follow in her the tradition of her grandfathers. Adjusting to life in boot camp, the learning curve was difficult, as she and her fellow cadets learned to function as a strong supportive unit and work together. Deep-rooted fears of punishment for disappointing the Sergeant kept order and peace amongst the squad, as they adapted to the new environment and way of work and life. Field training exposed her to many new skills and weapons, and she routinely carried a 9MM, M4, and M203 as part of her duty.*

*While she was stationed for a few years in the states, her first deployment overseas was to Bagram, Afghanistan. Tension was high in this high-profile war zone, as was the need for tight security and a well-prepared base unit. Imagine being “on edge” for months on end and how that must affect your body and your mind... After a bit of time back in the states, she was deployed again, this time to a rest and reconstitution base in Qatar. While the need for security was also high, this location was not as dangerous as Afghanistan, and she was able to interact and learn a bit about the culture of the area. One of the many challenges she faced overseas included a lack of*

*personal privacy and extremely restricted internet access, which greatly limited communication with family and friends.*

*After four years of service, she separated in 2009 and found the biggest challenge was the transition from a rigid daily structure to complete freedom with no structure at all. This adjustment was abrupt and extremely difficult; she experienced intense periods of anxiety, which had a physical impact. With support, she managed to establish a framework and life for herself, and through the GI bill enrolled in a four-year program at Colorado State University in Ft. Collins. She was a student in the Human Development and Family Studies program, where she continued to pursue the rewards of helping people and a desire to make a difference in the lives of others.*

*In listening to her story and learning about her experiences, one of the things that stuck with me was the physical impact one endures as a tool for waging war in order to establish peace. She mentioned that she has tinnitus, or a constant ringing in the ears, as a result from being around loud noises, operating artillery, machine guns, and grenade launchers, etc. So while she is no longer enlisted, and has a whole life of experiences ahead of her, this constant reminder will always be present. My piece is an interpretation of this event, as a grimacing textural face is recoiling from the exploding sounds of numerous M-16s emanating from the ear. While I am not necessarily pro-war, I do identify with a personal sacrifice one makes for the good of others. And a part of me is grateful in ways I simply cannot express.*