

THE
INVISIBLE
VETERAN

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INTRODUCTION

THE BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT (BLUF)

I am not your typical veteran author. I wasn't an "operator." I don't have movie-worthy stories. I'm just a regular army guy who thoroughly enjoyed serving his country for twenty years.

This book is for the veteran who feels unseen. For the one who gave everything in uniform and then walked into a world that didn't know what to do with them. It's for the man or woman who looks in the mirror and asks, "What now?"

The truth is that transition is brutal. Not because you're weak but because you've been forged in a world with a different language, a different pace, a different standard.

And when that world ends, it doesn't just feel like changing career paths. It feels like a loss of self.

I know because I've lived it.

Deployments. Combat. Leadership. Awards. Loss. I know what it's like to be responsible for lives. And I know

what it's like to come home, hang up the uniform, and feel invisible.

But I also know this: You are not alone. And you are not done. Not even close.

Throughout this book, I'll share parts of my journey, not to impress you but to walk beside you. To show you that the pain you're feeling isn't weakness; it's a signal. And it's time to respond.

I'm not a therapist. I'm not a guru. I'm a husband. A father. A coach. A man of faith. A warrior still trying to lead in any way I can.

If you're a veteran, a family member of one, or someone trying to understand . . . this book is for you.

So let's get to it. Let's stop surviving and start thriving. Let's stop hiding and start healing. Let's stop waiting for the eulogy and start living the legacy.

Because the world is better with you in it. And it's time for you to believe that again.

CHAPTER 1

THE MOMENT NO ONE PREPARES YOU FOR

You didn't just leave a job. You left a way of life.

My Story: From Soldier to Civilian

As much as I loved my time in the army, I was ready for retirement. I only wanted to do twenty years because that fall was when my son would turn fourteen and start high school.

My son, Ty, was your typical preteen and teenager, except he has always had the kindest heart and has always been the sweetest boy. Something notable about him is that he always despised being dirty. He would go outside and play, traipsing all over the base and housing areas where we lived, but once he was done, he wanted to be clean. He couldn't stand his hands being dirty at all. It was easy enough for him to stay neat and clean when he was playing video games, something he loved to do, but he had to get his hands dirty when playing sports. Ty didn't

shy away from the sweat and grime of hard work when he played baseball, football, and basketball. But you can bet he cleaned up quick when the game was over! I was proud to cheer him on during his games and even help with scorekeeping and coaching (more on this later).

Ty also loved to go fishing. In fact, he caught his first fish (a bluegill) in one of our kayaks on the lake when we lived in the lake community in North Carolina. It's a cherished memory I have with my son—just one of many.

My daughter, Juliana, loved to dress up like a princess and embrace her girly nature, but she also played sports—basketball and then competitive cheer. She loved to bake and go with me to the grocery store (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic) to buy new desserts from the bakery. I remember we were on a lemon kick the summer of my transition.

Juliana was my snuggle bug. We watched *Forged in Fire* together religiously. Something special about her is that she has the best, most contagious laugh. When we put on YouTube and watch epic fails, the house (and neighborhood, if the window is open) echoes with her distinct laugh. Once she gets going, she can't stop, and it's a futile effort to suppress your own laughter. Her laughing fits are so infectious that my mom and son have both contracted the disease in public—to the point that people stopped, stared, and made comments about it! I don't care—I think it's hysterical. Juliana has always known who she is and what she likes and what she doesn't. She is very

comfortable in her own skin and really doesn't care what other people think. Other than perhaps her big brother, whom she has **ADORED** her whole life.

To put it simply, my kids have always been my world. From personal and professional experience, I know the value and importance a father brings by being present during those formative teenage years. So I dropped my retirement packet in January 2020, exactly one year before I would have hit twenty years in the army. We were deployed to Poland at the time. I had just finished my bachelor's degree the month prior, and I had pretty much bombarded my S-1 (the army equivalent of human resources) with my presence multiple times a day, ensuring my packet was good to go. Because we were forward deployed, it took a little more effort and time for things to get approved back home at Fort Bragg, but all in all, it was a smooth process, and my packet was approved before we returned home stateside.

A few days before we were supposed to fly home from Poland, some weird virus was causing a ruckus *everywhere*. Perhaps you're familiar with it. I'm talking about COVID-19, of course! There was a real concern we would not go home on time and our deployment would be extended. I was nervous. I wanted to be home. I was ready to start the next chapter of my life and was ready for the opportunity to prepare for it. I had given nineteen years to my country and was looking forward to what life after the military would be like. Luckily, the extension did not happen, and

we were back home as scheduled in mid-February. We went on block leave, and I was able to knock out all of my Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP) appointments before the shutdown hit.

The thing about working for the government is that when new policies are put in place, you follow them immediately. For me, the timing couldn't have been better. I only had a few follow-up ACAP appointments, which could be done virtually, and due to phenomenal leadership, I didn't really have a job; I was told to focus on my future. When the "essential personnel only" order came out, I knew that didn't apply to me, which resulted in me having a dream retirement process. I'd get up in the morning, go for a run or a ruck, come home, drink coffee, eat breakfast, and read for a little bit. If I needed to, I would run to the office to knock out paperwork, but I was rarely there for more than an hour or two.

At this point in time, we lived in a wonderful lake community, and it was only two miles from my front door to the lake. So, when I'd get done at the office, and if the weather was nice, I'd back my truck up the slight incline of the driveway and set the parking brake. Then I'd walk back to the boat, remove the chock, and lower the coupler onto the hitch of my truck before grabbing my kids and heading to the lake. The kids and I would do physical training (PT) at the beach of the lake, normally a modified SEAL workout with push-ups, pull-ups, sprints, etc., where we would get wet 'n' sandy. Or we'd do a mini

“triathlon,” where we’d add some swimming at the end of our on-land exercises. After that, we’d launch the boat, find the part of the lake we wanted, jump off the back, and swim or go tubing. We’d be out there all day before finally going home and finding something fun to eat.

You know that feeling: You’ve got that post-lake sunburn because you forgot to reapply sunscreen. It doesn’t hurt except when you smile. You’re famished because you depleted all your fuel splashing around in the water, and you’re pleasantly exhausted from playing all day. Water runs down your chin as you chug it from a plastic cup like a nomad lost in the Sahara.

That was my life most days, and it was incredible. We’d come home and make a sandwich, which always got stuck to the roofs of our mouths because no matter how much water we chugged, we were still a little dehydrated. After scarfing down some chips, we’d get that late afternoon post-lake nap. Not a planned nap but rather that sinking-into-the-couch, feeling-the-stress-melt-away, suddenly-your-eyes-are-heavy-after-being-in-the-sun-all-day kinda nap.

North Carolina weather is awesome, although the humidity can be daunting. In the evening, it cools down, so I’d get the smoker going. Soft winds would traverse through the trees, and a present but not overwhelming scent of pine would hang in the air.

First, I’d grab my charcoal chimney and set it on the grates of the grill before adding the charcoal, setting it on

fire, and getting it white-hot. I loved watching the mini towering inferno dissipate into a smoldering fire.

From there, I'd remove the grates and pour the coals into the bottom of my offset stick burner. I'd get a mini fireworks display as the coals hit the bottom and each other. Then, I'd put the grates back on and check the cooking zones with my hand to ensure the surface was ready.

Next came the best part: the sizzle of marinated meat brought up to room temperature being gently placed onto hot metal. We are a far cry from our neanderthal ancestors, but there's still something primal about putting meat over a fire to cook it. When I grill and BBQ, I go low and slow. I would build and develop flavors that slowly but steadily replaced the scent of pine in the air. I cooked around 275 degrees to layer and build flavor—oak, mesquite, salt, pepper, garlic, onion, and rendering fat. This process also allowed me time to indulge in a cold beverage.

Once the meat was where I needed it to be, I'd throw on some veggies—asparagus or squash and zucchini brushed with olive oil and seasoning—and place them in the hotter cooking zone so they could be kissed by the fire and develop a nice char without getting overcooked.

After dinner, we'd watch TV, a movie, or YouTube, which always resulted in a laughing fit from my daughter. That would spread like wildfire because she has an infectious laugh. Then it was time for bed, and as I lay my head down, I hoped for another day just like today.

As delightful as those days were, once it officially hit, retirement wasn't all fun in the sun. I was facing a "duality of man" type of complex the day I retired. Professionally, I was ready to embark on a new-ish career. To be honest, I was tired of the politics and bureaucracy and seeing people get promoted over me. A lot of this was my own fault, but the frustration remained. I was also excited for the potential freedom that came with a fresh start. I envisioned myself having a distinguished law enforcement career culminating with a Jesse Stone-type arc, where I'd retire as the police chief of a small, tight-knit lake community somewhere.

But personally, I was terrified. As I'll describe in more detail shortly, my marriage was in a very precarious spot, and I knew that the end was potentially looming. I was cognizant of the suicide rate of veterans, especially recently divorced veterans, and was concerned I might not be strong enough to handle the devastation. I was becoming too comfortable with the idea of being Clint Eastwood's character in *Gran Torino*, just growing old, cranky, crotchety, mad at the world, and isolated from everyone.

The light of hope for the next chapter of my professional life was largely obliterated by the fear and distress overwhelming my heart. My sense of self was thrown off kilter, and as I'd come to find out, I had a lot of work to do on myself to recalibrate and find purpose again.