

"It just changes you." Understood by every soldier everywhere, since the beginning of time.

Kevin served in the U.S. Army during Operation Iraqi Freedom II, and within the first week of his deployment, Fallujah fell back into enemy control. His job as a "heavy wheel" diesel mechanic required him to be among transportation units who obviously travelled and were also out in the open quite frequently. The threat of buried IED's, mortar fire, and arial ambushes were a daily occurrence in Kevin's day.

Kevin is a man of few words and seemingly quiet, but his head is always on a swivel and he's watching everything around him. He didn't share much of the details of his deployment, but being in the heart of the most deadly and aggressive urban combat zones during the fall of Fallujah, you can only imagine what he has encountered. More importantly, Americans follow "rules" when they fight, Iraqis don't.

"A lot of things happened over there that CNN doesn't know about."

Coming back to regular, normal, life is an extreme adjustment. At any point, his mind snaps back to seeing explosions, hearing gunfire, and feeling the pressure of survival. Having a family with 3 teenagers, Kevin's priority is always situational awareness and protection.

One of the most concerning things about conversing with Kevin was learning about what he has gone through back in the states. There are tons of establishments offering veteran support, but it's not always accessible. The VA is SO busy that waiting lists are much too long or services are of lesser quality than they should be. Other agencies and organizations that claim to help leave many broken promises or require so much red tape, their service is hardly worth it. If it's happening to Kevin and his friends, you can bet it's happening to many others as well. Between the PTSD and lack of accessible help, many veterans struggle to re-find their place in society. In many cases, divorce, substance abuse, homelessness, and—unfortunately—suicide are often the result of unmanaged PTSD.

Sending many down a dark path, PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury are not just concepts or "being sad" because of something that happened. Trauma — which can be physical, emotional, or psychological — causes actual physical effects on the brain. After traumatic events, neurotransmitters fire differently and change the way the brain comprehends its surroundings. Trauma most often affects the Amygdala, Hippocampus, and Prefrontal Cortex. The Amygdala and Prefrontal Cortex work together to control emotional responses and instinctual survival skills—like fear. The Hippocampus stores and retrieves memories and differentiates between past and present experiences. Injury to these areas results in the lack of ability to rationalize fear on the scale of a threat to survival to not-a-big-deal issue. Also, not being able to differentiate between then and now causes survivors of trauma to re-live incidents, just as severe, and at any time.

The good news is that the brain is ever-changing and always learning. Effects of PTSD and TBI can be lessened over time, if the appropriate measures are taken. Therapy or counseling is one of the ways to help the brain heal from traumatic events. Increasing Serotonin and Dopamine levels also aid in the re-wiring of brain function. The "happy" and "feel-good" hormones can come from a variety of positive experiences, one of which is having contact with an affectionate animal. (Dr. Todd Thatcher, Highland Springs Specialty Clinic)

"knowing that there's people out there willing to help us makes us feel like we're wanted. It's a good feeling."



As a result of the generosity by many Caldwell individuals, Kevin was able to meet his new best friend at the Fortified K-9 Training Facility in Christiana, TN on May 20, 2022. The selected recipients were able to interact with many dogs, but Katera chose Kevin. She walked right over to him and put her head in his lap and that was that! Katera is a 2yr. old Belgian Malinois who is incredible loving, affectionate, and soft. Between feeling appreciated and cared for, and finding the perfect puppy pal, Kevin's on his way to experiencing increased levels of Serotonin and Dopamine daily!

KEVIN KILLIAN

BRANCH: ARMY

LOCATION: IRAQ

**LENGTH OF
SERVICE: 7.5 YRS**