

Ghost Nation

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
and Society**

Ron and Helen Breland



PublishAmerica
Baltimore

© 2010 by Ron and Helen Breland.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publishers, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a newspaper, magazine or journal.

First printing

PublishAmerica has allowed this work to remain exactly as the author intended, verbatim, without editorial input.

This publication contains the opinions and ideas of its author. Author intends to offer information of a general nature. Any reliance on the information herein is at the reader's own discretion.

The author and publisher specifically disclaim all responsibility for any liability, loss, or right, personal or otherwise, which is incurred as a consequence, directly or indirectly, of the use and application of any contents of this book. They further make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this work and specifically disclaim all warranties including without limitation any implied warranty of fitness for a particular purpose. Any recommendations are made without any guarantee on the part of the author or the publisher.

ISBN: 1-60836-392-9
PUBLISHED BY PUBLISHAMERICA, LLLP
www.publishamerica.com
Baltimore

Printed in the United States of America

People sleep peaceably in their beds at night
only because rough men stand ready
to do violence on their behalf.

—George Orwell

INDEX

FOREWORD	9
CHAPTER ONE- <i>Definition, History, Physiology and Dynamics of PTSD</i>	19
CHAPTER TWO- <i>Causes of Post -Traumatic Stress Disorder</i>	37
CHAPTER THREE- <i>Predisposition of PTSD: Helping Professionals and Critical Incident Stress</i>	42
CHAPTER FOUR- <i>PTSD in the Military: A Combat Veteran's Tale</i>	48
CHAPTER FIVE- <i>The Romanticism and Glory of Battle: Past and Future</i>	63
CHAPTER SIX- <i>The "Last Letter"</i>	69
CHAPTER SEVEN- <i>War From Another Front... the Home Front</i>	76
CONCLUSION	87

To care for him who shall have
borne the battle; and for his widow
and his orphan.

President Abraham Lincoln
March 4, 1865

FOREWORD

When I decided to entertain the idea of writing a book regarding Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, I had to think long and hard about how to approach this subject. Like many military Veterans, I believe that this is still a sensitive subject and even now approach it somewhat cautiously, and even with a bit of apprehension. You see, the world that you live in is far different than mine. Our worlds continually coexist in a parallel fashion, and are separated only by a paper thin and invisible layer. That layer may be transparent to you, but I can see it quite clearly. That layer is the supernaturally fine line between life and death. I have embraced death as a constant and lifelong companion. Due to this, I am just this side of the line; somewhat closer to death, and view life from the outside looking in.

Even through these paltry words, my desire is for you, the reader, to visualize and feel what I have seen and felt in vibrant color. As your fingers turn these pages, do not fear the tattered and torn texture of a worn soul that you will surely feel. My desire, however, may be unrealized because again; you view life from the “life” side of the fence. Enjoy this gift, which you may never have to know firsthand the things that I know, and have seen the truest evil that people can bestow upon each other. And may God bless you for it.

I do still feel very strongly that this subject should be addressed in an attempt to achieve a common and fair understanding for all. Potentially, this will allow us all to move forward and do what is right for those affected, and in their best interests. I also had no idea that as one diagnosed with acute PTSD, that I would be immersed in a sea of

information and potential resources. This would be a long and hard road into my own self discovery; but for my own growth and prosperity, as well as for the greater good I decided to move forward. I assure you, that this is easier said than done. We as human beings have certain built-in systems or coping mechanisms to assist us with the events in our lives. Some of us have been pushed to the edge, and believe me when I tell you that sometimes the systems that we have are simply not enough.

The journey that I am currently on is different for every single person. Some take longer than others. I hope and pray that my brothers and sisters who make it their life's mission to serve are able to make this journey to its fruition. I am by no means at the end of my journey, but I have seen many at the beginning. It is a place filled with a lot of walls, lack of hope, and despair. For some, the first leg of this journey ends in death as they have felt overburdened by this load; and made the decision to end their lives on their own terms. May God rest their souls.

However, as a combat Veteran who has been diagnosed with PTSD since 2001; this is the platform from which I hope other Veterans may find some hope in dealing with their "new life" as it were. I use the aforementioned term for good cause; because our lives are certainly not as they once were. We have experienced a rebirth of sorts, and are forever changed. I decided that a plausible solution would be to share my own personal experiences with what I refer to as *my PTSD*. All of our experiences are different, yet share a few common threads. I do feel that this issue has been either sugar coated or largely ignored for years. That being said, I have to also mention that you will see absolute and brutal honesty throughout these pages. *Caveat emptor!*

In recent times, however, PTSD has become more prevalent in the public eye due to the Global War on Terrorism. And well it should. It is truly ironic how an issue only comes to the forefront of society when it is directly in front of our face.

Since the days of our ten thousand day war in Vietnam, thankfully, the perception of Veterans returning home from war has changed considerably. Since the dawn of our nation's history, we have had Veterans. Our founding fathers were the first casualties of this condition known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and no one has dared to

condemn them for their potentially simplistic shortcomings due to the significance of their efforts on a national and historical scale.

In fact, the father of our country and first President, George Washington created the first military award in recognition of those who ‘took a hit for the team’, so to speak. At the time, wounded Veterans would receive the Purple Heart, an award that still bears its creators’ likeness to this day. As a country in its infancy, few resources if any were available to comfort Veterans, however then President Washington recognized that Veterans deserved some small token of noteworthy credit for their own personal contributions and sacrifices. This of course did not erase the injuries or deaths sustained during war; however this small token of recognition has spoken volumes to both Veterans and their families. It still does today.

It is my opinion that the contributions from modern day Veterans are equally significant, whether the general public realizes it or not. Our diverse societal views in politics and a degrading view of government over time tend to allow some people to simply absorb the military community under their own perceived mental blanket of ‘the government’. Typically, Veterans are not of this mentality because they simply know better. They know the truth. As members of the military, we are certainly not policy makers; we are instruments of those policies and laws that our government sets forth.

I recently met a man while travelling through New Mexico. As I walked towards the hotel lobby for my morning coffee, I noticed the odd looking license plate on the car next to mine. It was a ‘Pearl Harbor Survivor’ plate, and I felt a shiver down my spine. As I stopped to view the license plate, the hotel room door next to mine opened up, and an elderly gentleman stepped out with a ball cap that said, ‘Pearl Harbor Survivor’. I know that in this day and age, we are losing about 1,200 WW II Veterans a day across the nation, and the odds of me ever meeting a Pearl Harbor survivor were slim to none. This was definitely a true blessing crossing my path.

He recognized the U.S. Paratrooper license plate on my car, and immediately offered his hand to thank me for my service. I was awestruck. This man was thanking *me* for serving! I felt the long and hard

years in the lines of his hand, and thanked him for his service as well. I told him of my respect for the 'Greatest Generation', and then he spoke to me the most riveting comment to me. He told me that not every generation has been called to greatness, and that those serving in the Global War on Terrorism had indeed answered that call. I was absolutely and utterly speechless.

We traded information, and he autographed a copy of his recently published book; the telling of his eyewitness account of one of the biggest tragedies in our nation's history. I told him that I too had written a couple of books, and agreed to send him a copy when I got home. It was an absolutely wonderful experience, and certainly one that I would not soon forget.

No doubt we've all seen or heard something either in real life or a movie relating to a *'burned out vet'*, or something to that effect. There are few things in life that irritate me more than a derogatory term such as that regarding a Veteran. Due to this terminology, as well as examples under this mentality, there are colonies of men still to this day that live in the redwood forests of California as well as other 'clandestine' locations throughout our country simply because their return home from Vietnam left so much to be desired. The natural inclination at the time for them was to surround themselves with people that shared the same experiences and leave the rest of society to itself.

Near my own home of Rio Rancho, New Mexico there are over one thousand Veterans from wars gone by that live in our beautiful Sandia Mountains. They live off of the land, and stay to themselves. This is a sad and unfortunate truth, however after the homecoming that they received so very long ago; who could blame them?

Like all cases of PTSD, this is not the fault of these men. Their choosing to live like this is a survival instinct, and they are certainly not to blame. Their emotional roller coaster of a homecoming was comparable with some of their experiences during combat, at least from a defensive posture. That whole era was a testament to what a lack of understanding can do to an entire society. This social stigmatism and blanket public diagnosis has only caused harm and even potentially worsened this condition for these poor souls.

I recall my grandmother telling me of my Uncle's war buddies coming over to visit upon their return home from Vietnam. At night, they would all camp out on the floor and as they slept they'd talk in their sleep, crying over the nightmares of their past. The pity in her voice was genuine, but from a mother's perspective and always sympathetic. True understanding could only come from the same men who lay by their side in the jungle over half a world away.

Over the last few decades it has been called by many names: shell shock, combat stress, and PTSD. By whatever name it is called, this condition has been widely misunderstood by many both in the public forum and medical professionals as well. The greatest misunderstanding, however, has come from the general population as it has not directly affected them in the majority of instances. Now, amidst the Global War on Terrorism, this condition has affected literally millions of our military members and their families. The extended reach of this affliction and the potential magnitude with which it is able to strike is truly astounding.

Members of our Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard forces stand a better than average chance; now more than ever of serving on a combat front within the first year or so of their initial enlistment. Though many will not ever come home, even more will. And as they return home and travel within our borders, the affliction they carry is within them. Although this is not a transmittable or contagious condition, the scope of influence for PTSD is very compelling. It can, in some respects, almost be considered a potential 'social pandemic'. Its effect can be felt by virtually anyone who knows an affected individual.

As a Veteran, I have all too many times been asked a host of questions regarding my service overseas. The majority of these questions have shown me something that I suppose I wasn't quite ready for, and these thoughts disappointed me thoroughly. The lack of depth and even near-comprehension in the questions "Did you kill anyone?" or "How did you like Iraq?" still makes my mind stand still at the shallow nature of most folks who are not Veterans. As a father, and a Soldier; I have both given life and taken it as well. This is not a badge of honor, it is a survival technique. He who shoots last dies first. Although I believed

wholeheartedly in my mission in Iraq, I would not categorically describe my feelings about that country in the “like” column.

When people burden Veterans with such questions, it puts a very bad taste in our mouths regarding those who are unknowing. For those of you who are reading this to assist with a friend or family member who is a Veteran, please take heed to these words. All cynicism aside, I sincerely thank you in advance for allowing us all this simple courtesy.

Of course it's possible for a professional such as a psychiatrist or psychologist to treat the afflicted; however it's naturally assumed that the basis of their treatment comes from studying Veterans' cases of the past. From a Veteran's perspective, skepticism is a natural reaction when discussing such personal issues with non-Veterans. When I returned home from Iraq in late 2004, there was a group of about fifty or so Soldiers from our Brigade that were “identified” as potentially needing some help. We were all crowded into a conference room and waited. In walks a young female Captain, a psychologist. She introduced herself, and for some reason immediately informed us that she would be conducting a relaxation exercise with soft music.

Whatever potential benefits that we would derive from this exercise went straight out the window when she immediately followed this up with the fact that she, herself was not a Combat Veteran. She absolutely lost every one of us at that moment, and I informed her of that fact. It was not the fact that she was a female, nor a psychologist that bothered anyone in that room. It was that she hadn't felt the longing, the sting, and the adrenaline of true combat as we all had.

Although this is beneficial, I believe the most help will come from a mental health professional who is *also* a Veteran. There are many of these in our country, but not near enough to serve the silent nation of ghosts; Veterans who have pierced the veil of two different worlds. Until there are enough, God bless those who have borne the battle...and continue to fight it night after night, and over and over again.

All men are frightened.

The more intelligent they are, the more they are frightened.

The courageous man is the man, who forces himself, in spite of his fear, to carry on.

—General George S. Patton, Jr.

For
The Four Horsemen,
The Magnificent Seven,
the Steel Horse and her crew,
Darrin, Joe, Top, John,
and those who have borne the battle
Shoulder to shoulder with me on many fronts
so that our children and grand-children
may enjoy the sweet taste of freedom.

God Bless you all.

CHAPTER ONE

Definition, History, Physiology and Dynamics of PTSD

When *we* try and define PTSD, what do we really think about? Honestly, do we read into it as the disorder it is or simply dismiss it as a dressed up name for a series of symptoms that most people would rather ignore? Or do some just see it as a politically correct term for something that sounds so much worse, such as “*shell shock*”?

The truth is that most people would rather not look as deeply into this issue than is actually needed. And there **is** most definitely a need. Whether we agree with the past, present, or future government policies, we should perhaps realize the need for nothing more than simple understanding for those who have stepped forward for the greater good, their country, our freedom, and rights that both you and I enjoy every day of our lives. As Veterans, whether former or active, we realize that we are not the policy makers; we are merely the instruments of that policy. Personally, I wish that more Americans could make this distinction which would, in turn, residually create more clarity for these same people.

The following is a common, textbook definition of this condition. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): A common anxiety disorder that develops after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm *occurred* or was *threatened*. Family members of victims also can develop the disorder. PTSD can occur in people of any age, including children and adolescents. More than twice as many women as men

experience PTSD following exposure to trauma. Depression, alcohol or other substance abuse, or other anxiety disorders frequently co-occur with PTSD. *Persons with PTSD often feel chronically, emotionally numb. Through the decades, this was referred to as “shell shock,” “battle fatigue,” or “combat stress.”* The diagnosis of PTSD typically requires that one or more symptoms from each of the following categories be present for at least a month and that symptom or symptoms must seriously interfere with leading a normal life:

Reliving the event through upsetting thoughts, nightmares or flashbacks, or having very strong mental and physical reactions if something reminds the person of the event.

Avoiding activities, thoughts, feelings or conversations that remind the person of the event; feeling numb to one’s surroundings; or being unable to remember details of the event.

Having a loss of interest in important activities, feeling all alone, being unable to have normal emotions or feeling that there is nothing to look forward to in the future may also be experienced.

Feeling that one can never relax and must be on guard all the time to protect oneself, trouble sleeping, feeling irritable, overreacting when startled, angry outbursts or trouble concentrating.

If, from this somewhat precise and psychologically technical definition you are thoroughly confused, don’t be surprised. No matter what thought may have been conjured in your mind upon reading the above definition; know this one thing. As we live through this ever-evolving society, our definitions seem to change over time. Time in and of itself is a funny thing in this regard. It has a way of morphing how society views certain topics; not so much within the realm of reality but as it suits the immediate need. Political correctness if you will. This seems to be done with the forethought of what the future interpretation might be. The theoretical buzz-phrase of “Today is simply shaping tomorrow” may be considered to fall into this category; however a more true statement may have never been spoken.

If by chance you do not have at least one symptom from each of the aforementioned categories, this does not preclude you from having

PTSD. Some symptoms or signs of this condition will perhaps manifest themselves over the course of time.

No doubt some readers will disagree or simply not understand my commentary on this subject, assuming that my opinions are tainted due to my being a combat Veteran and career First Responder as well. That notwithstanding, I suppose that perception is reality in many cases, and in that train of thought we are all set in our ways to some degree. However, throughout our history we have made progress in society, culture, and technology. This may be true, yet one of the most fundamental of all issues still remains at a very primitive level. This is the common will to ignore things that don't fit our "cookie cutter" mentality of the way we perceive things should be. It has been said that "perception is reality," and that applies to both sides of this coin to a degree. For those with a more antiquated perception, I would suggest that they talk to a Veteran to see how times have changed.

Throughout the years, we all have compromised different issues in our lives. Nations have done this to achieve certain objectives as well. In the case of our country, we know that we cannot remain steadfast with regard to every issue because we live in an ever-changing world. Flexibility, however, is a lot different than compromise when it comes to public perception regarding issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The public consciousness has been well aware of this condition over the years; however it was largely ignored unless people were directly affected. Even then, the understanding we have today did not exist even so much as ten or fifteen years ago.

The need for understanding on a large scale still exists, and in this day and age the sphere of influence is even larger. With Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen serving in multiple tours in the Global War on Terrorism the chances for exponential growth of this condition are almost immeasurable. And along with this explosive growth are needs that will have to be met, but always seem to be in a shadowy second place to the demand. More simply must be done.

As a Veteran, I, along with millions of my brothers in arms from the past, present, and future bear the burden of knowing what most people do not, and most likely will not ever know; and that is the responsibility

and true conviction of serving our great country. It is a double-edged sword that has to be wielded carefully for our own survival. I dare not say for our own sanity, because I know better than that. My own diagnosis of PTSD had made that abundantly clear to me.

We have all been through an event in our lives, at least one, which has ‘aroused our senses’ so to speak. For some of us that may be something like walking around a corner to be started by a colleague or family member. To others an emotionally significant event may be their being victimized by domestic violence or child abuse, or perhaps being engaged in combat while serving their country.

Although there are many symptoms and characteristics of those who suffer physiological effects of significant emotional and traumatic events, the following offer only a few, (though there can be countless) physical and emotional effects that are related to their traumatic causes.

When you sense danger, your brain activates the autonomic nervous system. This system has two branches that together control your body’s energy level in order to prepare you for ‘action’. The sympathetic nervous system controls your ‘fight or flee’ response and increases energy. The parasympathetic nervous system is a relaxation and recovery system. It simply returns your body to a normal state when it is safe to do so.

The sympathetic nervous system is all or nothing when activated and quickly turns on the following component parts. (It’s a great way for an emergency response system to operate.) You may have also noticed some of the following.

Warning Signs that have left the ‘Imprint of War’; the Unseen Battle Scars

Rapid Heart Rate and Breathing: The alarm reaction increases heart rate and breathing rate so that we are alert and our muscles are ready for action. These changes also help ensure that the muscles and brain will have enough oxygen and energy for an adequate defense. At the same time blood flow to the skin decreases which prevents us from losing as much blood, should we become wounded.

Sweating: Sweating helps cool the body during exertion, making it more efficient. “Cold sweat” is what some people feel when sweating occurs at the same time that blood flow to the skin decreases.

Tight chest, Tingling, Numbness, Hot Flashes, Trembling: Hyperventilation occurs when we breathe rapidly but do not expend the energy with muscle action (like revving down a car while holding down the brake) leading to tingling, numbness, hot flashes, and increased sweating. When rapid chest breathing and muscle tension occur at the same time, people feel chest pain, breathlessness, and choking feelings.

Upset Stomach, Diarrhea: Digestion isn’t needed during times of danger so the sympathetic nervous system shuts it down, leading to a dry mouth and an upset stomach. Since excess weight isn’t needed in times of acute danger, the body may eliminate the lower digestive track, which consequently causes diarrhea.

Blurred Vision, Feeling Disconnected or Unreal: Sometimes pupils dilate during times of danger. Although this improves night vision by increasing the amount of light that enters the eye, it can also lead to blurred or brighter vision during the day. These changes in visual perception, when combined with other physical sensations like those mentioned above, can contribute to feelings of surreal surroundings and such.

Stress-Induced Disease: Under stress, the adrenal glands secrete stress hormones (adrenaline, epinephrine, and norepinephrine), which interfere with the way the body normally functions. These hormones inhibit digestion, reproduction, growth, and tissue repair as well as the responses of our immune systems and inflammatory systems.

Vivid flashbacks: Recurrences of images from the war or other traumatic events that are painful, intrusive repetitive, and undesired

Nightmares: These are disturbing in nature, often with associated sleep disturbances

(i.e.; insomnia, nighttime awakenings)

Social Distancing: isolation, alienation, and withdrawal. Remaining detached or emotionally distant from others, even those who may be considered closest to them; even in their presence

Emotional Distancing: Difficulty or inability to experience or express emotions

appropriately (for instance, crying when sad or grieving)

Hyper vigilance: Remaining on “high alert” status and scanning the surrounding environment continuously. (To this day, in a restaurant I still prefer to have my back to the wall.)

Personal Space Sensitivity: Obvious startle responses to loud noises, being approached or touched by others

Hypertensive thoughts: Excessive boredom with the commonplace and ordinary aspects of life on the home front, thrill-seeking and looking for the “adrenaline rush,” while posing unnecessary risks to self and family members

Self Edification: Finding little worth, meaning, or purpose to life on the home front and longing to be back in the war zone to find it.

Confusion/Anger: Preoccupation with bitter and angry feelings directed towards a society or government for maltreatment, exploitation, and failure to keep promises, as has been the case with Veterans of previous wars.

“Destiny Challenged”: Feeling confused, angry, or cynical in regard to one’s fate in life; pessimism and hopelessness about one’s future and any possibility of altering what lies ahead.

Triggers

Sights, sounds, smells, actual physical surroundings, and situations that are similar or suggestive of the war zone

Powerful emotional states of mind that are reminiscent of those experienced in the war zone (terror, rage, grief, adrenaline rush, etc.)

Repeated or current exposure to traumatic events by the Soldier or significant others, which may include any degree of victimization, assault, racism, or catastrophic losses

Anniversary dates or reactions such as holidays, birthdays, times of the year, or specific dates that are reminiscent of significant events in the war zone

Media exposure to war zone events that are traumatic in nature and clear reminders of actual events (i.e.; terrorist attacks, events recounted relative to those experienced), whether similar or dissimilar to actual war zone events; television exposure or movies with similar scenes, settings, or events that occurred in actuality

Music, lyrics, or other entertainment stimuli that elicit feelings related to those experienced during or following previous traumatic events

Experiences involving significant losses, such as death of a loved one, divorce, separation, financial or job losses, geographic relocation, serious illnesses, loss of bodily functions or parts, or imminent death

Authority conflicts involving medical, governmental, religious, command, or supervisory personnel, etc.

Please realize that this short list of symptomatic triggers is not all encompassing. There are many, hundreds if not thousands of events, smells, sounds, and situational criteria that can initiate a 'trigger'. Unfortunately, there are too many to name. The best thing that I have found is to avoid certain things in my life. I no longer watch war movies of any sort. This has typically propelled me into a two or three day cycle of very unpleasant feelings, moods, and behaviors. Sometimes it is very hard to stay away from what we are most intimate with, what we know better than any other. And sometimes we feel the pull so strong that even one single factor alone is enough to draw us into a deep, dark, and scary place.

War Zone Survival Modes

One of the most primal survival tactics is the instinctual and genetically based fight or flight reactions such as those utilized while engaging and destroying the enemy; withdrawing and retreating in order to return to combat missions day after day. This is called sustained trauma. This may later lead to excessive guilt, humiliation, regret, and rage in regard to taking human lives in order to survive and protect the lives of others. This may occur in theater or return to haunt the Veteran many months or years following redeployment.

Emotional detachment: Denial of feelings to protect oneself from the horrors of war; self-anesthetizing to escape feelings of rage, fear, anxiety, shock, repulsion, depression, and grief. The negative side to this is remaining detached and unable to experience a normal range of emotions following the return to family and "civilian" life on the home front; perfecting the ability to function at a level where emotions are unavailable.

Tunnel vision: Preserving an intensely focused state of mind to assure full attention to tasks and missions at hand, while unmindful of surrounding events. The inability to switch out of this mode may severely impair relationships with loved ones and prevent full enjoyment of what

life has to offer. The individual's focus is rarely on tasks or activities that are not related to potential life and death scenarios, even if none are currently present.

External discharging of emotions: Finding means to discharge built up stress, anger, frustration, grief and loss, fear, anxiety, and an assortment of negative emotions, critical to survival in the combat theater; these must be set free to thwart the fueling of continued internal struggle and anger, previously directed at the enemy. It may be extremely difficult for Soldiers to free themselves from accumulated anger and rage in the face of insurgent and terrorist tactics and enemies who wear no standard or recognizable uniform, resulting in constrained emotions that may “detonate” when least expected at innocent people in their surroundings, other Americans in the combat theater, or loved ones at home. It may become all too easy to bury feelings until they escalate to the point of eruption or to continuously socially isolate one to prevent this from happening. This is typically a ‘black or white’ area. A happy medium is difficult to find, but can be achieved through a consistent and dedicated effort.

Challenging of faith in a higher power: Many may find that faith cannot sustain them when forced to confront killing and brutal crimes against humanity in order to save their own lives and the lives of their fellow Soldiers. Spiritual conflicts are frequently carried home, with lingering questions as to why a higher power would allow one to carry out the taking of human life, for Chaplains to bless troops before engaging the enemy, and for so much human suffering and loss of life to occur. These conviction-based individuals are constantly reevaluating their own morals and values. This may bring about significant distress and a multitude of unanswered questions that seemingly remain to badger and plague the soul.

Potentially Negative Survival Strategies and Techniques

Rage, Agitation, and Frustration: Focused rage directed at the enemy promotes survival in a war zone, but may not serve the Soldier or his/her family well on the home front. In the current Global War on Terrorism, both in Iraq and Afghanistan, the enemy uses covert operations, the element of surprise, and hasty retreat as techniques during battle. These characteristics are very similar to guerrilla warfare in an urban setting. The insurgency is often not recognizable from non-combatants. It becomes all too easy to bear and unload rage against an unseen enemy and to carry an unbearable burden of frustration during wartime, particularly in response to a stealth enemy. These feelings become a constant, and can replace other, more positive feelings through prolonged exposure. These feelings can certainly escalate with continuous and intense combat exposure and in the face of the multiple losses of life and devastating injuries. Unfortunately, harnessing such compressed wrath, agitation, and the overwhelming desire to act upon impulse back home may have undesirable and potentially dire consequences. These have shown to be debilitating circumstances in several areas to include family relationships, parenting, and employment.

Dehumanizing the Enemy: Wartime training fosters a standard detachment tactic; one that dehumanizes the enemy and to perceive them as evil, immoral, cruel, and inhuman. Though there may be great truth to this, such an approach endorses racism and the development of negative stereotypes, mind-sets, and language, such as diverse and racial nicknames aimed at the enemy. Every generation of combatants has had these, such as 'Zero's in WW II, 'Zipper heads' in Vietnam, and 'Towel Heads' in the middle East. It is much simpler to seek out and destroy an enemy for which one has developed tremendous hatred, rather than an adversary who is seen as good, honorable, and fighting for a just cause. This kind of intense loathing can lead to condemnation of those who are of differing races, creeds, religions, and ethnic heritages, poisoning and

polluting attitudes over the course of a lifetime and justifying the very rationale for the war itself in the minds of the Soldiers who fought it.

Social Isolation and Alienation: Emotional detachment is readily promoted by withdrawing from others. On the other hand, the remarkable bonds formed in times of hardship and adversity can sustain brother and sister Soldiers through what might otherwise be unendurable. This is a double-edged sword in wartime, with the overwhelming losses of fellow Soldiers occurring too frequently and in rapid succession. Time and time again, removing oneself from the nearness of human contact to avoid further agony when Soldiers are maimed or killed becomes the mode of emotional survival. On the home front, Veterans may also become uncomfortable relating to anyone who is not a Veteran, as no one else could possibly appreciate their experiences. Some war Veterans refuse to become involved with other Veterans themselves, to evade interactions and avoid any discussion of painful and disturbing memories and images.

Substance Abuse: Alcohol and drug abuse are the most commonly used means of numbing oneself out from what one prefers not to feel. Traditionally, alcohol usage has been promoted in military circles, and is usually low-cost and very readily available. Even in harsh and/or combat environments, Soldiers have demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness in the acquisition or manufacture of alcohol and recreational drugs. Soldiers who arrived in theater with substance abuse problems may return with even more serious problems. There is also the potential to acquire a habitual use or abuse problem in theater, seemingly as a survival strategy to escape the psychological wounds of war. Back at home, it may become all too easy to fall back on this habitual pattern in times of difficulty.

Risk-Taking and Thrill-Seeking: The adrenaline rush of wartime is a potent obsession that can be physically, behaviorally, and psychologically addictive. A craving for danger can be a hard habit to break. Though this may permit survival in combat and combat-related

missions, becoming a thrill seeker may be very difficult to surrender upon return to the home front. Looking for life in the fast lane and living on the extreme edge of disaster can, and is likely to plunge the Soldier right back into memories and emotions that characterized their wartime experiences. Like a drug addiction, there is no simple switch for shutting this off. For those not employed in high risk occupations (fire and rescue, emergency medical services, law enforcement, Special Forces, Rangers, Paratroopers, and so on), the need to satisfy the urge for excitement may lead to devastating consequences. There have been a startling number of Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans killed in single-occupant vehicle accidents upon return to the United States. Others may try to live life on the wildest side possible, engaging in excesses of speed, food, drink, and whatever extremes are available to them. There is rarely a happy ending for these Soldiers.

Gallows Humor

Laughing about the endless horrors and chaos of war may be absurd and otherwise inappropriate, but finding amusement in the horrible atrocities witnessed, forges bonds of camaraderie and friendship in times of devastation and loss. Though seemingly odd to the general population, this is, in its most simple form, a coping mechanism. Initially, this allows Soldiers to stop themselves from confronting genuine feelings in regard to the abominable and repulsive nature of war. This will not, however, remove associated feelings and images from the mind of the Soldier and may only serve to delay in dealing with recurring issues. Irreverent humor can sometimes be healthy and adaptive during challenging times in life. On the opposing side is the tendency to transport anger about what has been intolerable back to the home environment. This could result in longstanding cynicism, rage, and the probability of derogatory, critical, and insulting remarks in the face of mounting frustration.

When I was serving as a firefighter for the United States Army at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, I was part of an event that exemplified this theory. There was a small structure fire that suffered a fatality. While my station

Captain and I were carrying this individual out in a tarp with poles on our shoulders, I was at the ‘foot’ end of this configuration when my Captain suddenly stopped, took a breath, and said, “You know what, Breland; they’re a lot easier to tote around when all the juice is burned out of ‘em!” I simply agreed, laughing at the same time, and carried on. This type of morbid, or ‘gallows humor’ is again, nothing more than a coping mechanism. Unfortunately, by this time in my career I was well seasoned and fell right into it. The layman may view this type of humor as sick, twisted, or otherwise. But then again, he doesn’t have to be placed in such situations either.

For many who have been traumatized, a common reaction is the psychological subversion of the same trauma that is manifested through nightmares. Although we have no control over the degree of intensity or the frequency of our nightmares, many features of the sympathetic nervous system are identical to those experienced during the ‘initial’ or actual event. On the other side of the coin, however, the reactions described under the parasympathetic nervous system are experienced typically in a much less stressful environment. In a nightmare, for instance, the direct psychological trauma will end upon waking up, but may continue in the aftermath of that day, or longer. The physical manifestation of the psychological aftermath may still recur afterwards as well.

There have been many times that I have had nightmares from past combat scenarios, including the days immediately following the original events. However, I took comfort in waking up from these nightmares after I had returned home. I can’t say as much for my family, now experiencing these events for the first time with me. But from my perspective I felt much better being in my own home and not concerning myself with spinning up for the next mission. Instead, in the comfort of my own home I was still rattled from the recurring nightmares, but quickly realized a ‘knee-jerk’ sort of comfort in realizing that I was indeed safe. It’s very similar as I imagine, to riding in a speeding vehicle and coming to a sudden and abrupt halt.

The National Institute of Mental Health lists the following as some of the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:

Flashbacks, frightening thoughts, and nightmares (especially when exposed to something reminiscent of the original trauma)

Emotional numbness, sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, and irritability or outbursts of anger

Often, feelings of intense guilt are common

A Department of Defense survey conducted during a post-deployment debriefing found that in a surveyed group of over six thousand Soldiers and Marines per year since 2003; that 17% met the initial criteria for a diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in 2003 alone. In successive years, the percentages have only risen. Percentages may look pretty, or softer on pie charts, but this number equates to over one thousand of America's sons and daughters. This also does not include those who were seriously wounded. And when we consider that over the course of the first year in the dual-front Global War on Terrorism that the United States deployed almost one million men and women to this theater of operations, the numbers become almost staggering.

This is one of the key points that I have wanted to make. Do not mistake my quoting percentages and variables in the conditions under which PTSD is developed. I am not a politician, nor would I give up my position that I served. I would serve again if called, regardless of my diagnosis. Simply stated, it is that due to the *volume*; the sheer numbers of those serving and returning with PTSD is that the system that was designed to deal with these issues was, and possibly still is, woefully out of its depth.

Due to the need for actual numbers with regard to forces on the ground, coupled with the fact that the Active Duty forces could not meet the actual amount of troops required; it had become necessary to delve into both the Reserves and National Guard forces as well. This in and of itself is not overly complicated as a concept. However when we realize that members of our National Guard and Reserve components of the military reside in every city, state, and territory of our country the picture becomes clearer.

With due regard to our military, if such a high number of our forces are returning from a combat area with PTSD, then logically it makes perfect sense that this disorder will not only affect the service members

themselves but permeate every community in our nation as well. When Private First Class Joe Snuffy comes home from a year-long tour in the Middle East, is it right for us a community to expect anything less than to see certain changes in Joe's behavior. I believe that it would be ignorant, and utterly ridiculous to believe anything otherwise.

If every community in our great nation prepared itself for these ongoing and recurring events, it makes sense as good neighbors, friends, and family members that we would not be so ill prepared for these troops coming home. Our communities would benefit, and overall our troops would receive better care. Governmental resources being what they are, that being oftentimes scarce is no excuse for us not to pull together and make sure that our families and communities do the best we can to cope under the circumstances.

Up to now you've read some of the more common physiological impact and effects that PTSD can manifest. If we step outside the box, so to speak, we would realize that the deep seeded psychological impact doesn't end when the plane goes "wheels up" to bring Joe Snuffy home. Under these conditions however, it is very beneficial for one to be removed from the conditions and circumstances from which the conditions were first acquired and in some cases compounded over time under that same sustained trauma.

The True Enemy

We have discussed many of the signs, symptoms, and physiological manifestations that arise with this condition. Many, if not all of these factors are the result of enemies past in one form or another. No matter what the condition or set of circumstances which acted as the catalyst for these unfortunate after affects, there is another major factor to consider.

No matter how many deployments a Soldier might have, nor how many firefights that have ensued; we can never evade the true enemy of *time*. Time is inevitable, and with it comes a less controlled element of expectations. The only realities with the continuum of time are the 'consequences', albeit positive or negative, of our experiences. These

consequences also manifest over time and may rear their ugly heads, so to speak, in the form of symptoms of PTSD.

I have walked this earth for nearly four decades. And in that time I have had many experiences, both in and out of a combat zone. As a matter of fact, I saw my last combat zone over three years ago, and to this day I still experience things a little differently than I used to. I used to get a jolt out of being near a vehicle back-firing on an American road. Some may liken this to an explosion, or the perception of a 'danger close' scenario. The interesting part about my current reaction to this stimulus is that I do not "jolt" anymore. In fact, I do quite the opposite. I am very calm, and things seem to enter into slow motion. At the time of such an incident, my thoughts seem to align with perfect clarity. Apparently my sympathetic nervous system has remained in perfect working order since my last combat tour.

As a former firefighter in the U.S. Army, it would seem that this mental skill set would have made me a perfect match for this line of work. I actually believe that I was matured and refined into this skill set; however now the only difficult part is reliving it and being able to turn it off. I must have got a lifetime warranty on this characteristic, because to this very day, I haven't been able to locate the 'off' switch.

It would seem by this reaction, to not only back-firing vehicles but to other scenarios of a similar nature that I fall immediately into the 'fight or flee' mentality. And I never flee. I never have, and God willing; I never will. I say "God willing" because the pattern of reactions that I have come to know all too well puts my own well being in harm's way from time to time. As I sit here and write calmly write these words, it makes perfect sense to me that to react this way at every turn is certainly not healthy living. However, even while medicated I cannot seem to evade this reaction. Some of us have to live on a hope and a prayer.

Make no mistake; there is no sure fire way to avoid the true enemy of time. It has been said that 'time heals all wounds'. I would certainly beg to differ, as would I'm sure many of you out there. Under the broad umbrella of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, some of the physical and quick mental reactions may dissipate, or fade over time; however in some cases it is only over time that some symptoms may manifest. These

manifestations may also come to offer new reactions, whatever they may be. Some may be purely emotional, while others bring on bouts of anger, rage, or violence. I'm sure that time may heal *some* wounds, but I would never commit to saying all.

This inconsistent factor, yet ever-present variable of time has but one strength, and that is a head-to-head battle with one individual...*you*. Time is never-ending, and literally has all of itself that it will ever need. We, however, do not. The only allies against this patient and never-wavering enemy are those who love and care for us. Our friends and family know us perhaps better than most, and in this regard are more apt to see even the most subtle of differences in us. We are painfully aware of those who know us, yet are dreadfully afraid of being 'found out'. Suffering from this condition is bad enough, but to be 'discovered' in such a fashion creates a feeling of intense vulnerability in us which causes outbursts, feelings of withdrawal, or rage against friends, family, or other people who we would otherwise accept without question.

I have mentioned on numerous occasions that, if we don't expect our people to be at the very least, a little bit different after experiencing a consistent and long period of trauma, such as a year-long combat tour, a shift on a major working fire, or a hostage standoff; then how humane and realistic are we really being? It's only fair, much less common sense for us to realize that when our brothers and sisters who volunteer to place themselves in these positions for us, for the greater good; it only seems right to cut them a little bit of slack.

In recent years, we as a society have all but forced our own government into a position of all out support for these individuals. Yet I still see the scenario play through over and over again of people with such an ignorant, almost loathsome mentality towards the afflicted that it literally makes me sick to my stomach. Make no mistake; it is the government's responsibility to take care of these Warriors, however without a grass roots campaign of unyielding support from the general populous it appears to only be a farce. Soldiers are very perceptive, and can see through these transparencies like a child can see right through an adult.

RON AND HELEN BRELAND

The nation which forgets
its defenders
will itself be forgotten.

—Calvin Coolidge

CHAPTER TWO

Causes of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

It is in our human nature to seek out the cause for most things. That's what we do. We question things. Truthfully, we question most things when given the opportunity. When we talk about causes of PTSD, this may sound to some about as ambiguous as causes of the common cold. The few causes that I will discuss here in this chapter are some of the most common, and also the ones which have contributed to my current condition. Of course we could go on and on with the seemingly limitless list of variables which could cause or otherwise contribute to PTSD, but there are only so many pages in this book. I do not speak on behalf of any particular group, organization, or community; but only from my own personal experiences.

Understand first and foremost that I am not a doctor; nor have I ever claimed to be one. However, it doesn't take much more than common sense to figure out how certain things came about in your life and how they are applicable to certain conditions. That being said, let's begin.

Although the primary focus of this book is PTSD in Veterans, please do not be mistaken. You do not have to be a Combat Veteran, or even a Veteran who never served in a combat zone to experience this debilitating condition. My father, also a combat Veteran told me years after my days in uniform that I probably had PTSD long before I ever slung a rifle over my shoulder.

Coming from a broken home as I did, the effects of a dysfunctional childhood to include the presence of alcoholism, abuse, and many other

abnormalities presumably contributed to this disorder before I ever even entered my teenage years. Unfortunately, in our family this was only the next phase of a repetitive cycle. My father once told me that the definition of stupidity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. It's funny how as my father grows in years; so does his intelligence and internal wisdom.

With the passage of time and the evolution of several aspects of our lives we (hopefully) become smarter and better educated in the dynamics of this 'cycle', as it were. With each generation's passing, advances in health, technology, and the very way we live is improved. With the advent of time we can see how the thoughts, philosophies and inventions of a few have revolutionized the way we live.

In as much as there are an unfathomable amount of issues and problems in the world today, there are also an equal amount of potential and viable solutions for those same issues. When we look at those who are in service to their communities, there are many reasons for First Responders to 'naturally' develop this disorder through their line of work, however, very little is understood outside of this inner circle regarding how this comes to be. Aside from certain occupational calamities such as running into a burning building, chasing an armed psychopath, or kicking doors down in the Al Anbar province of Iraq in the middle of the night; PTSD is one very serious occupational hazard.

As a third generation firefighter, there is a little known factoid regarding one of those generations. As a traditional firefighting family goes, the truth is that my father followed his wishes to help others down a different path after the fire service....by becoming a police officer. I say this because as a Veteran of Vietnam, my father who then became a firefighter and then joined the law enforcement community; he had certainly seen untold horrors in several arenas.

Whether or not you serve on multiple fronts, such as my father, or remain in one of these discipline for a lifetime, we have to be aware of the constant compounding of events that are possibly incomprehensible. How does a police officer walk the beat for twenty years, watching kids killing kids; all the while hoping and praying that his baby at home will never know such horrors? Does the firefighter never think about his own

children as he holds a child who could not be saved? Perhaps a Soldier doesn't think about his newborn at home, which he has never seen, as a child no older than his kid sister aims a weapon at him to take his life. Perhaps. However this is doubtful at best.

Within any career, there are certain aspects which are not as desirable as others. While most First Responders find their particular niche and strive to make a difference in the world doing what they love; this mentality is somewhat realistic but of course has its risks as well. When we experience an incident, event, or set of circumstances which end in tragedy or is seemingly filled with injustice; we ourselves are often overwhelmed. After all, we are the Type A personalities, the go-getters, the ones who risk life and limb to save others. Yet when this happens, we typically question ourselves first, second, and third. Whether or not we assign this blame to ourselves, we are still filled with a level of sadness or disappointment which if left unresolved can become a crippling factor in both our personal and professional lives equally.

Human Senses—The Subtle Triggers

The human senses are what allow us to sample our environment on a daily basis. They are an invaluable part of what makes us human, and although many people have either been born without one or more of their senses, there have been huge technological and medical advances over the years to assist these people to overcome these handicaps.

But only two of these senses are based on chemicals—smell and taste. Smell and taste allow us sample the chemicals around us for information. But smell is different from all the other senses in a very special way. A smell from your distant past can unleash a flood of memories that are so intense and striking that they seem real. These vivid realities from our past are never truly that far in our distant past.

Another kind of memory is called episodic memory, which includes our narratives—the stories we have in our minds. These are temporal, like rules, but are amazingly flexible. They can be a matter of remembered personal experiences, or memorized history lessons, or pure

fiction. I have a suspicion that these contribute greatly to our sense of identity.

Both semantic and episodic memory involves the hippocampus. The hippocampus seems to be involved in working memory, and seems to be responsible for the transfer of information to the cerebral cortex, which is clearly the focus of most of our long term memory. If there is damage to the hippocampus, we have trouble developing new semantic and episodic memories. If the damage is to the left half of the hippocampus, it is verbal memory that is most affected. If the damage is to the right half, it is spatial memory that is affected.

The hippocampus is also a part of the limbic system, and as such it shows why there is such a powerful relationship between emotional situations and strong memories. Exceptionally clear memories of emotional events, ones that have a near-photographic quality, are known as flashbulb memories.

The last kind of long-term memory is called procedural memory. You know how to drive a car, play rugby, ride a bike, hammer a nail, and so on, without giving them much thought. Procedural memory involves the cerebellum (as well as the motor cortex and the basal ganglia) which makes sense in that many of our rule systems involve movement. This may explain infantile amnesia—the fact that most of us cannot remember much that happened before our second birthday: If these early memories are mostly procedural, they may not be easily available to “higher” parts of the brain.

The Simple and Unforgettable ~AK-47 Assault Rifle~

* * *

I wanted to bring up this point as to how a single factor can make an impact on not only one, but multiple and concurrent generations. It may not necessarily be a ‘cause’ per se, of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, however I seriously doubt that there is a single Soldier that has served in a forward area within the last fifty years or so that isn’t intimately familiar

with the sound that an AK-47 makes when it fires. If I'm wrong then I am; however I have not run into a single one yet.

When Mikhail Kalashnikov created the AK-47 Assault Rifle, he was motivated for many reasons to successfully develop a weapon that would be easily and mass produced at a low cost, as well as facilitate a foot Soldier's primary need to fire on the move without stopping or being weighed down. The AK-47, including its multi-generational enhancements and modifications was the solution.

Although there have been many versions, add-ons, and manufacturers over time, there's just something about this weapon. It is unmistakable, whether in sound or in form. I doubt that there are very few American boys nowadays that can't recognize this piece of history. For one reason or another, many know this weapon at first sight. I believe though, that there is a silent majority out there that can recognize this weapon in their sleep. These blessed souls can recognize this weapon by sound. As a member of the nation of sixth-sensed individuals, I myself can discern this weapon among others without the benefit of sight.

As one in a long line of military Veterans in my family, I unfortunately cannot claim to be the first; however hopefully the last one in my line, that this weapon has personally impacted. And when I say a long line; that is exactly what I mean. A member of my family has served in one branch or the other of the military since the Civil War. As young as our country is, I am certain that I am not the only person who can claim this. However some traditions, such as intimate knowledge of the AK-47, are perhaps not worth carrying on.

CHAPTER THREE

Predisposition of PTSD: Helping Professionals and Critical Incident Stress

We may not think about the helping professionals within our communities on a daily basis, until we really need them of course. My guess is, however, that this was not always the case. When we were children, most of us thought of what we wanted to be when we grew up. Children for the most part are caring, giving souls who have a very open and understanding nature about them. This is of course until they get a bit older and the harsh realities of the world are introduced to them in short order.

For many of us who have at the very least physically overcome situations or circumstances might lend itself to the belief that we can assist others in doing the same. I, myself have been accused of this a time or two. However, the fact remains that we all have our own thresholds of tolerance to difficult stimuli, including traumatic stress among others. Some people can immerse themselves in professions and environments which perpetuate constant stress. And some cannot. For those who cannot devote their lives to such careers or lifestyles; there is no shame in this. The truth of the matter is that we're all wired just a little bit differently from each other. Again, some of us can handle it and some cannot.

The First Responder community throughout our nation is a vast and diverse group of individuals who work together for the collective good.

Firefighters, Police Officers, Paramedics, and many others risk life and limb every single day to protect us from a myriad of threats and circumstances. Within this line of work, I have found over the course of many years a common thread that links these people together. That thread is not specific to the discipline or job, jurisdiction, or anything work related. These individuals all serve what I like to regard as a *higher calling*. This higher calling as it were is not just a popular buzzword to describe our modern day heroes but an accurate depiction of what compels these individuals to do what they do. This particular calling is not for everyone.

You already know my stance on Soldiers. They are my heroes. I have served alongside them for nearly two decades and although going to war may be considered by some to be an occupational hazard; it is so much more than that. I believe that the same applies to the civilian sector of our nation with regard to First Responders.

As a young child in the 1970's, I recall visiting my grand-father at his fire station. He served on that same Fire Department for forty years. It still makes me wonder about the passing of time through the decades. The technology and education that we had access to during my career in the fire service was far more advanced than in my grandfather's day. However he still did it, as did many both before and after him.

For example, I have his Captain's helmet from many years before he was appointed to the position of Fire Chief. The fire that permanently scarred this helmet, yet thankfully did not take his life occurred in a three-story hotel structure. When his engine crew hooked up to the nearest fire hydrant, it went unnoticed by all that this hydrant was purely cosmetic, as it served a pet grooming facility next to the hotel. The hydrant was completely dry and incapable of delivering any water to the live-saving hose lines. By the time came that this critical error was discovered, the structural integrity of the building was compromised, and my grandfather fell through to the lobby from the very top floor. Thankfully, his injuries were minor, and no one was killed during this horrible fire.

As the generations passed over time in much the same way that ours exists today, we simply do the best that we can with what we've got. All resources available aside, the development of technology and such over

the years has made First Responders on all levels safer than generations past. I often look at that old helmet in my den at home and wonder how anyone could have worn such an 'unsafe' looking piece of equipment. In its day though, it was state of the art.

Thank God for progress.

And as much as these individuals do of their own volition, society still has certain expectations that are associated with our heroic public servants. Firefighters and Police Officers for example, are expected to be completely dedicated at all times, completely fearless, and emotionally stable to a fault. This is not only unlikely, however even with the most intense training our own emotions and personal history come creeping into our lives. Stressful situations such as emergency conditions, which First Responders find themselves under great duress often, allow these issues to surface. Each incident, crash, shooting, cardiac victim or fatality from a fire is a building block which itself may be a breaking point or potentially lead up to one.

There are some coping mechanisms which have been developed out of necessity throughout the different Responder disciplines. I say out of necessity because of course even though Police Officers may understand that others will go into burning buildings instead of them, they also understand that they are the ones who will respond to a midnight shootout instead of the firefighters. Honestly, I've heard both sides of the story. And even though we've evolved through the centuries, firemen still don't particularly like the idea of being shot at, and I don't know a cop out there that will run into a burning building when everyone else is running out. There is a mutual respect, but the love of one or the other drives these chosen few to make that ultimate and potentially sacrificial choice.

But with this life of service; whichever one it may be comes potential consequences. If you ask any First Responder if there's a particular incident from throughout their career that has stuck with them it will most likely be a moment where they saved a life and felt the true pride of making a real difference, or one where a life was lost. The Responder community is highly trained in this day and age; however that doesn't

stop feelings of guilt or despair from overcoming those who experience a fatality even if they couldn't do anything about it.

In our Creator's infinite wisdom, he did install some pretty unique features within our humanity. These features are not so much flashy features such as 'optional extras' that you may find at an automobile dealership, but mechanisms sewn so deeply into us that their automatic response and reaction to certain situations is so phenomenal that often it takes our brain some time to catch up.

As human beings, we thrive on our ability to experience emotions. Often these are extreme, and very draining. The human mind is an immeasurably complex entity. We have the ability to retain volumes of information. The human memory is one of the most incredible and reliable databases on the face of the planet. Now, we may not always remember every single thing that we've ever experienced; however our capacity to instantly file away individual thoughts into short-term and long-term memory banks is quite a feat in and of itself.

Most of the larger emergency service organizations take these harsh occupational circumstances into consideration and have either an agency Chaplain or the availability of licensed health professionals available to assist in dealing with Critical Incident Stress. Though this is an improvement from the past, there is one barrier that commonly gets in the way within the First Responder community. Most Responders typically don't like to talk about such things with those outside their own particular discipline or family. Within that fraternity of each discipline exists a bond; an inner circle that 'outsiders' will rarely experience.

Outsiders, who include mental health professionals, oftentimes find it difficult to talk to Police Officers and Firefighters when they themselves have never experienced a fatal shooting or a car wreck in which lifeless bodies have had to be extricated. Although these are horrible incidents that take a very special personality to deal with, response personnel will usually prefer to keep their feelings 'in house'. They may talk to each other as a crew, or just to a direct supervisor, but the majority of the time it has been found that feeling vulnerable and divulging such things to outsiders is forbidden.

After my diagnosis of PTSD in 2001 I was a hardened shell that was tough to crack. Being a Firefighter within the military made the challenge of seeking as well as receiving help especially difficult. I was once in a support group session with approximately thirty other combat Veterans right before I was determined to be medically disabled. The group facilitator was a young Captain and clinical psychologist who thought it might be a good idea to start such a support group. What she failed to realize, however, is that simply being in a room full of combat Veterans (which she was not) was not conducive to a successful experience.

By immediately announcing to the group that she was not a Veteran of combat, she quite unknowingly set herself up for failure before the support group session ever began. The fraternity of combat Veterans is much more than a closed circle, so to speak. It is a circle that is seared shut upon returning home and can only be welcome to others of the like. The First Responder community is similar in many ways to this mentality. Outsiders usually do, and will probably continue to have great difficulty gaining access into the inner sanctum of these groups.

It is not too difficult to understand that most Soldiers and First Responders alike love their chosen professions. These are very rewarding, highly proficient, and technical professions that mandate a lot of training and dedication. Personally, I feel that my career was a worthy investment and a life well spent. As I am sure that most will agree however, we are certainly not in this type of vocation for the monetary rewards or the undying loyalty and gratitude of those we serve.

Many Veterans and First Responders come to change their view over time, especially if afflicted with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Although most of those polled viewed their careers and professions as still being a worthy expenditure of time and effort, not all were as optimistic. This poll of both Veterans and First Responders with PTSD showed that many in each category felt slightly despondent after continuing with their careers after a diagnosis of PTSD. Some responses included the onset of a continuing cynical attitude, feelings of distance and avoidance from situations or events reminiscent of their work, a loss of pride on several fronts, the inability to make and keep friends, and

extreme grief reactions regarding death and suffering of any kind. Partial or complete withdrawal was another commonly reported reaction.

Although it is extremely rare for those who serve in this capacity to experience a psychological breakdown during an actual event or situation; these reactions are typically delayed. In some cases, a reaction, whether short-term or long-term may occur days, weeks, months, or even years later than the original incidents which acted as the original trauma.

With these professions comes another distinct factor in the survival of the individual. Most of these people are what is referred to as 'Type A' personalities. These are the overt, go-getters that are looked upon to do the work that no one else would rather do. These are the blessed few that are charged with untold responsibilities and are willing, as many have, to lay down their lives in the line of duty. Make no mistake; no one ever held a gun to someone's head and made them choose this life of service. That notwithstanding, these caring individuals have had to find certain coping mechanisms to survive in this environment. It is, in effect, its own subculture of our society.

If necessity is the mother of invention; this group of extraverted individuals has learned to succeed through a diverse array of experiences and methods for dealing with each. Some of these techniques may work in the short term, however very few work effectively in any sort of lasting fashion unless professional or peer support is involved.

As a very overt Type 'A' personality, I have to admit that although I am certainly no expert I have tried several of my own methods. I can vouch for the fact that we typically stick with what we know, whether it works or not. This of course isn't always wise; however no one ever accused me of having a high degree of wisdom when it came to taking my own advice.

CHAPTER FOUR
***PTSD in the Military:
A Combat Veteran's Tale***

*'Till Duty Do Us Part'—Three Days in Hell
In Memoriam*

Whoever does not have the stomach for this fight, let him depart.
Give him money to speed his departure since we wish not to die in
that man's company.

Whoever lives past today and comes home safely will rouse himself
every year on this day,
show his neighbors his scars, and tell embellished stories of all their
great feats of battle.

These stories he will teach his son, and from this day until the end of
the world, we shall be remembered.

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for whoever has shed his
blood with me shall be my brother.

And those men afraid to go will think themselves as lesser men as
they hear how we fought and died together...

—Major General William F. Garrison
October 6, 1993
Task Force Ranger
Mogadishu, Somalia

The modern day translation and excerpt used to begin this chapter is derived from Shakespeare's great tragedy, *Henry V*. Prior to the Battle of Agincourt, King Henry V motivated his Army with these now famous words. Against overwhelming odds and on foreign soil, King Henry V rallied his men into battle with this powerful mantra on October 25, 1415.

On October 6, 1993, only three days after the Battle of Mogadishu, Major General William F. Garrison chose these same words to comfort his men as they mourned their dead in the largest single battle, at that time, since the Vietnam War. Nearly six centuries after the original St. Crispin's day speech, those words spoken at the Task Force Ranger memorial ceremony at the Mogadishu Airport were, I believe, as comforting as when they were originally spoken.

Our Commander had me and my buddies to serve as an armed escort to the Airfield that day for an unrelated mission; and we all found ourselves, upon our arrival in an informal formation at the outer perimeter of the ceremony. At that point in my short career, I had never seen so many General Officer's in one place. I also know for a fact that there wasn't a dry eye on that entire airfield; including mine. It was the first time that I'd ever heard 'Taps' played by a live bugler, and to this day that shiver has never left my spine. In the midst of tragedy, such true words were never spoken than they were that day. It is truly amazing that the same words, spoken over half a millennium apart and under different circumstances could be equally poignant and penetrating, even on opposite ends of a battle.

In late 2001, I was in the United States Army, serving in Alaska as a Platoon Sergeant. At the time my unit wasn't a deployable one, and other than the day-to-day issues that come with the perils of leadership. It was a considerably easy tour by comparison, and I probably shouldn't have felt as stressed as I did at the time. Many folks; however, might be inclined to disagree with this. Soon after September 11, 2001, the operational tempo of my unit picked up due to increased and arduous taskings for Post defense.

I was also moved from shift work at the fire station to the unit some months earlier to alleviate the strain of my wife's stressful pregnancy.

Helen was having a serious bout of morning sickness that didn't seem to want to give in. The Army by no means had to do this, but by the grace of God, and an awesome chain of command I was allowed this levity. My First Sergeant, Commander, and Operations Sergeant were all family men, and this helped both Helen and I considerably.

Although they were all my superiors, these were some of the finest men that I'd ever served with. John Belles, my Operations Sergeant was a genius as far as the Army and its inner workings were concerned. He had held a variety of positions throughout his career, and was a well-rounded Soldier. He was my senior in so many ways, however never had to pull rank with me as he was ever-willing to help with anything I asked. My First Sergeant, Rex Benedix, was a fiery red head with a shortly trimmed high and tight haircut. He was a former Drill Sergeant, and rumors in the firehouse ran rampant that he hated firefighters as he was coming in from a senior command staff position. I soon came to find that this could not have been further from the truth.

I found his 'no slack' approach to leading a unit this large comforting, and more like me than most others in the unit. Our leader, and the man ultimately accountable for the unit was our Company Commander, Captain Paul Tappen. He was a father of five, like myself, and very approachable. As an officer he had a tough assignment, but as a man he was very kind. Like John and Rex he was very family oriented as well.

Now that I've painted a picture of how nice my professional life and environment were; in retrospect it doesn't seem that stressful at all. At the time, however, I was going through a lot personally. I had still been experiencing nightmares from my last two combat tours and justifying to myself that because I was a Soldier that this was merely an occupational hazard. I supposed that it was something that I'd just have to learn to live with. *'Suck it up and drive on!'*, as they say.

This was eight years after my first combat tour, and the first time that I decided to talk to someone about all of this. I had promised Helen that I would, because I didn't like feeling the way I did all the time. This included bouts of deep seeded anger and lashing out at my wife and children unjustifiably. I know for sure that Helen was tired of it, and I

didn't want to be the reason that made her and the children feel uneasy in our own home.

Under the same theory that I don't expect my wife to understand how I feel because she's never been there. I too am not going to pretend to comprehend her perspective either. Since PTSD has few positive effects, I can only liken it to a spouse living with an alcoholic or something of that nature. Having lived with two myself growing up, I can honestly see the fundamental similarities.

There is one thing that I feel I must explain before I go on. For most, the military is an ego-driven society. Much like professional athletes, entertainers, and the like, Soldiers are very proud of who they are, what they are, and what they do. And in an era where so much scandal is raised in the fields of professional sports and entertainment, Soldiers are some of the last true American heroes. They are not pompous or self-centered.

On the contrary they are some of the most giving souls that I have ever had the pleasure of associating with. The following three stories—my personal three days in hell—are not meant to portray bravado and such. However, please try to imagine every detail, if you can. Only then will you have a small glimpse into three of the most memorable days of my entire life; ones that have burned so brightly in my past that they have left a permanent shadow on the wall of my soul.

* * *

Two Shots, Two Kills—Somalia 1993

War is evil, but it is often the lesser evil.

—George Orwell

It was the morning of October 4, 1993. To be more precise, it was the 'wee' hours of October 4, 1993 and many of us were involved in an after action assessment of what had happened the night prior.

The night of the massive firefight of 'Blackhawk Down' fame was a busy one for many of our nation's military members, as countless attacks were mounted throughout that night anywhere that there was an

American presence. Small pockets of the warring clan factions; supporters of General Aideed to be sure, used the catastrophic events of downtown Mogadishu as a diversion and an excuse to exact their own personal forms of vengeance. It was as if the blood was in the water and the sharks were looking for any excuse to attack. And our base camp was no different.

After almost three months of constant guard duty, the 2-22 Infantry out of Fort Drum, New York was brought in to perform these tasks. After the first Blackhawk helicopter had fallen in combat on that 'Black Sunday' of October 3, 1993, the entire country was on full alert. The Quick Reaction Force was activated, and meandered through the base camp in a slithery and unpredictable pattern so as to close any gap within any of our stationary guard forces. I had volunteered earlier that morning, and was placed on the Quick Reaction Force. The QRF, which was comprised mainly of members of the 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment out of Fort Benning, Georgia was truly a sight to behold. These guys were the physical manifestation and embodiment of all things "HOOAH!". They were rock solid professionals and they lived for the next mission.

During the night, four Somali 'gunmen', who were actually still in their teens climbed through the wire, slipped between the double stacked 20-foot shipping containers which made up our perimeter, and started shooting. This was obviously a suicide mission; having chewed *kebat* all afternoon had given them a false and chemically induced sense of confidence. As they encircled our base camp in pairs, the four Somali's squeezed off rounds consistently, but not very tactically; nor with any great success in precision or accuracy.

I was paired with a Ranger and we were told to post ourselves at the main gate of the camp. Two more young Somali's had been captured already, and we were to keep them secured until the fight was over. When the shooting got louder, one of our detainees started to shout and attempted to give up our position. The young Ranger with me simply butt-stroked the Somali in the head with his rifle which immediately silenced our new friend. When the Somali in my charge started yelling as well, I shook my head in disappointment and followed suit. I'd never

butt-stroked anyone up to that point with exception of a few in a training environment. I have to admit that it's very effective.

The shooting was getting louder because apparently the two pairs of gunmen started at a certain point on the other side of the camp and ran around the perimeter in opposite directions. The front gate, which was our location at the time, was apparently where the four would meet again. Directly across from the main gate was a corner to a building; and a door which was the entrance to a barracks facility for the base camp Commander and his staff.

Right about this time, a young Lieutenant came walking out that door wearing his PT shorts and T-shirt, shower shoes, and a 9mm pistol in a shoulder holster. Very unaware of his surroundings, he finished yawning he yelled, "What the hell's going on out here?" The four young Somali's replied with a hail of AK-47 gunfire volleys that should have dropped that Lieutenant with little to no effort. The hand of God Himself must have been protecting that man, because not a single round struck his body.

When the young Ranger and I saw the Somali's rounding the corner and heading straight for the Lieutenant, opening fire; we posted up on a pile of bricks, each of us with a knee on the neck of our silenced detainees. "You go left, and I'll go right!" he told me. I was amazed later on that night at how instinctive it is to put a man in your sights under the worst of conditions. I fired only two rounds at the two gunmen on my left. In what seemed to me to be a surreal frozen animation of time, I saw neither of the gunmen move their legs. The gunfire stopped sharply; their bodies moving lifeless through the air for a millisecond like a cartoon. Within the shooting community this is what's called a "photo finish" and I'd now seen it firsthand. I had placed two clean head shots, which killed the gunmen instantly and before their bodies hit the ground. I had never seen anything like that before, much less been a part of, or the cause of such a thing to happen.

I wasn't sure which shocked me more; the fact that I had just killed two men or that I had fired the two miracle shots of my life. I have always maintained that fear is a great motivator; and it certainly was that night for me. The young Ranger got off one clean head shot and the other was

in the neck. That made me feel a little cocky for a split second, and then he spoke to me. As we looked over at the four dead Somali's in front of the barracks building, he stood up and said, "Nice shooting." Then he started laughing, and as I gazed over at his direction I saw that the young Lieutenant was still standing there, his PT shorts drenched in his own urine. He hadn't been shot, but he surely felt the fear of the moment and his reaction to the clear and present danger was obvious.

After a short time we were assembled for our After Action Assessment, and that Lieutenant (now in clean clothes), presented me with a 10th Mountain Division coin without ever saying a single word. I couldn't seem to decipher his expression as he stared blankly at the floor during the debriefing. On the way out of the meeting, he silently and quickly made his way over to me and with a quiet handshake, slipped the coin into my hand. I'm not sure whether or not his pride had been wounded, or if he was still in shock himself; deeply appreciative on the life that he still had to live. I was just glad that he was still with us.

* * *

A Mine Strikes Only Once—Kosovo 1999

Do you see a man skilled in his work?
He will serve before kings;
he will not serve before obscure men.

—*Proverbs 22:29*

As a firefighter, I had become accustomed to responding to all sorts of emergencies, including motor vehicle accidents. Back at Fort Bragg there were several each and every day. With a working military and civilian population of well over 250,000 people commuting every single morning, it was almost inevitable. But working a car wreck on a downtown street at the height of morning rush hour traffic is quite different than doing so in combat. In a combat zone, sometimes the only criterion for having a catastrophic incident involving a vehicle is driving in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Sometimes, all you have to do is drive over a land mine.

Unlike many other weapons, a mine only strikes once. But with the 'one shot' philosophy of this weapon usually has a huge price. The detonation of a land mine filled with twenty-two pounds of explosives is devastating. And for a single vehicle, it is almost always a fatal encounter.

My team and I had been dispatched to a grid coordinate where only the day prior some Special Operations Forces were dispatched to utilize their unquestionable diplomacy skills to quell a local village dispute. In the Balkan region, the culture permits and almost mandates that a dispute be decided with an incessant amount of arguing. This is where our Special Operations Forces come in pretty handy. The American troops arrived at the village in question the evening prior, whereby the driver backed his vehicle in to an open area which was used as a parking area. Apparently his right front tire had missed the land mine by only millimeters while backing up, and the front quarter panel of the vehicle shielded the mine from being stepped on by passersby.

The following morning, while pulling out to leave the area the driver turned his wheels in the opposite direction. When he pulled the vehicle forward the mine instantly detonated, killing everyone inside the vehicle. When this occurs, this is known as a 'Catastrophic Kill'.

When my team and I arrived to the scene, I have to say that it was unlike any 'standard car wreck' that I'd ever seen. The top of a hard-shelled HMMWV (Humvee) is arched slightly at the top to allow for a swiveling gun turret to be placed into operation during travel. Horizontally, at the elevation of the gun turret is approximately forty inches from the deck of the inside of the cab of the vehicle.

When we arrived, the gun turret was laying flat on the deck. The impact and sheer force of the explosion had crushed the vehicle beyond anything I'd ever seen. I'm not sure why, but I seem to recall thinking that the occupants couldn't possibly still be inside the vehicle. In reality, between the force of the blast and the material of the vehicle there was no way that they could have escaped. I had seen people ejected from vehicles in accidents of the past; but in this case this was truly too much to hope for.

We utilized hand tools to pry the passenger door open. When we managed to open the remnants of the door to a point where we didn't have to strain to see the inside, I knew instantly that this one particular Soldier was dead. As much as it pains me to say it, he died quickly, but violently. This man was a warrior. I wondered how many lives that he'd changed or saved during his service. In what seemed like a myriad of thoughts in just minutes, I snapped back to reality and maintained my composure. I urged my men to take great care in extricating the remains, and that every professional and personal effect would be placed in contact with the remains until we turned everything over to the mortuary affairs group.

Almost like a patient who is in a coma, but who receives the very best of care; we showed the utmost respect to those remains and effects. That day forced us all to take a long, hard look at our own mortality. In an instant any one of us, or all of us could be gone. The only solace that I could offer to my men or myself for that matter was that this man did not die alone. His fellow Soldiers, my men, had taken care of him to the very end in some respects. When I think about those moments, even to this day; that's still about as good as I can muster without welling up.

* * *

“Ambush!”—Iraq 2004

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

—Edmund Burke

As a seasoned firefighter and Soldier by now, I had experienced death a number of times and by the hand of God managed to assist in saving a few lives as well. Death is never easy, but to a combat Soldier it is a constant and silent companion who walks side by side with you until you both meet. There are a few moments that have come to me during my time in combat that I thought I could actually feel my own death coming, though it thankfully never happened like that. There were close calls that

brought the two of us closer than I had ever imagined, but somehow did not.

I will tell you this much. When death comes to you, you can actually feel its very presence. And it is at that very moment that something in our own psyche drives us to do things that we would probably never do; sometimes even things that we, up to that moment may have never even considered. I am certainly not a hero in my own eyes, but I have undoubtedly walked with many. The crew of the “Steel Horse,” my gun truck crew during our tour in Iraq is certainly among them. Their place of honor in my lifelong walk with heroes is sealed for eternity.

It was late March of 2004, and we were escorting a logistics convoy from Ar Ramadi to Al Asad. The Air Base at Al Asad, also known as Forward Operating Base (FOB) Anaconda was huge, and came complete with a middle-eastern style restaurant, a Chinese take-out place, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. It was a desert paradise as far as base camps are characterized. However, the looming cloud over our heads went unseen by all as the three previous attempts to reach Anaconda had failed and ended in either an ambush or a huge firefight requiring air support from allied gunships.

As we turned onto the main, long stretch of road that would take us the majority of the way to Al Asad, the sky was slightly overcast and the trip was uneventful thus far. As the trail end of the convoy made the turn, a bright, young Second Lieutenant offered an optimistic forecast. He mentioned that just before we departed our Base Camp, he talked to a fellow Lieutenant over in the Intelligence shop about how the road we were on was “green,” and that it should be smooth sailing all the way up north. This “green” status was determined by the early morning patrols that would go out and clear the roads of obvious Improvised Explosive Devices and other such hazards.

In what seemed like a span of about thirty seconds from the conclusion of the Lieutenant’s radio transmission, I heard the hail of AK-47 gunfire and the distinct ‘*whoosh*’ sound of incoming Rocket Propelled Grenades coming towards us. I immediately keyed the microphone on my radio and notified the convoy and our Command group that the road was no longer ‘green’.

When in doubt, state the obvious.

My partner and fellow Squad Leader, Nick Johnson was in the lead vehicle, and in a matter of about a minute the fire was so intense that our convoy had been sheared in half. My buddy Nick was in the lead vehicle and taking fire, as were we. The enemy had planned and executed a well-coordinated attack. Logistically speaking, the insurgents had their stuff together with weapons stashed and ready to fire about every fifty meters or so. They would simply run from one stash to the next and continue firing. As it turned out, this gave the appearance of there being a larger opposing force than there actually was.

The convoy commander radioed over the net that those who hadn't passed the cutoff point should fall back and regroup. That included our vehicle, but I really didn't like the idea of separating us any further, or any longer than absolutely necessary.

The road was very narrow, and a three-point turn was out of the question. I detached my microphone from my chin strap, and got out of my armored gun truck. I didn't want my driver and friend, Jon Simmons to accidentally drive off the shoulder even a little bit for fear of detonating an IED and getting us all in worse shape than we already were. As I opened the door to get out of the truck, Jon looked at me like I was crazy, and I felt more vulnerable than ever before. I could hear the miniature sonic booms of AK-47 rounds cracking the air around my head, and I worked as quickly as possible to get us turned around and out of harm's way. This was one of those moments when death was close to me....very close. For a moment Jon got out of the truck, and taking a stance on one knee fired a riveting shot which killed an insurgent instantly, dropping him to the ground. We were both very blessed as those miraculous moments passed by in what seemed to be an eternity.

I remember thinking instantaneously that if they killed me, then maybe Jon and the boys will get the truck turned around and get back to the rally point. I thought about the pre-addressed mint green envelope that was in my left breast pocket that Jon and my crew knew to mail to Helen in the event that I was killed. I could almost picture one of them unbuttoning my pocket to retrieve it, and prayed that I wasn't still alive to feel the tug on my pocket buttons. By that time, I would certainly be

dead. At least I prayed for that, so that I wouldn't feel one minute of the heart-wrenching pain in knowing that the envelope would be in the mail to my darling Helen shortly. By the hand of God, we made it back into the truck and back to the rally point; all of us intact.

As we regrouped, I told the LT that we needed to go get Nick and the others whose vehicle was now disabled. They also had three wounded at this point, and were sitting ducks. The LT agreed, and our truck led the charge through the constant hail of incoming fire with returning volleys of fire ourselves. My M2 .50 caliber gunner lit up the 30-foot high dirt shoulder to our left so intensely that we literally 'paved the road' as they say. Every Soldier in my truck was firing at everything that moved. Conversely, everything that moved was also shooting at us. I spied two figures off to my right. Our heavy machine gun was focused on our left, so I scanned our right side.

A very large Iraqi in a long white *dishdasha*, or 'man dress' as we called it was firing at our vehicle, so I took the shot. I nailed him squarely in the chest, and I instantly saw the white material of his gown turn to red. The figure next to him tried to flee, but could not escape the inevitable bullet from my rifle that followed. I was firing left-handed (I'm a righty) over bumpy terrain at about forty miles an hour. God himself guided those bullets, just as he did years before in Mogadishu. I felt more hopeful about the imminent outcome, and suddenly felt as though I had the faith of a Saint. We were now somewhat safe on our right side. At a road intersection I tossed a smoke grenade out the window to signal where we had contact on my side.

As the disabled vehicles came into sight, I keyed my microphone once again and told Nick that we were coming in hard and fast towards his position. All proper radio protocol was out the window as I told Nick "I'm coming for you brother!" I never would have imagined laughing at that moment, but I simply couldn't help it as Nick responded with "I've never been so happy to see a white man in my entire life!" Nick was a stout black guy from Tampa, and had grown up pretty hard. He was a great guy; and as you can see even in the face of diversity and incredible odds he still maintained his sense of humor.

In the end, we quelled the attack, and repaired what we could on the vehicles there in the middle of the road. Our wounded were attended to, as everyone worked very quickly to get us back on the road and back to Ar Ramadi. There were moments during that battle that were absolutely surreal to me. Amidst the battle, as your heart rate and adrenaline levels push through the roof, your brain slows down some to see some things with absolute and perfect clarity. I would almost compare this to driving a stick shift. The precise amount of clutch and gas will keep things running properly; for without the right amount of either one you would be completely stalled.

Please allow me to explain a little bit about Murphy; in particular *Murphy's Laws of Combat*. Murphy, the fictional character who delights in presenting with stinging clarity the irony of our daily lives has thirty-one Laws of Combat. Although these laws are intended to be humorous, you can easily see how realistically they sometimes come into play; especially during this ambush.

Murphy's Law of Combat # 4—When in doubt, empty your magazine

Murphy's Law of Combat # 14—The easy way is always mined (or at the very least “Ambush-ready”!)

Murphy's Law of Combat # 16—When you have secured an objective, don't forget to let the enemy know about it!

Murphy's Law of Combat # 17—Incoming fire has the right of way.

Murphy's Law of Combat # 18—If the enemy is in range, so are YOU!

Murphy's Law of Combat # 28—If you take more than your fair share of objectives, you will surely have more than your fair share of objectives to take.

As we drove back to Ar Ramadi that afternoon, I thought about Murphy, and just how ironically right that son-of-a-bitch could be.

* * *

The events of the three stories that you've just read are very similar, yet have very major and distinct differences between them when it comes to the psyche of a Soldier. In the first story you received an inside look into the perspective of someone who had never killed another human being prior to those moments. For me, personally, I can't tell you the weight that this situation created in my life. For those who do not know, it might be thought that this is a simple solution: "You killed the enemy or they would have surely killed you." It's not exactly that easy. This may be logical, as an outside perception that has the benefit of being objective. However, when you're the one squeezing the trigger, this perspective dissolves and becomes nothing more than that outsider's perspective. Nothing more.

As I squeezed the trigger that night in Somalia, I felt the adrenaline of my enemies, of my allies, and my own all at once. In an instant, the hand of God himself guided my bullets to stop the heinous actions about to take place. It was a peak adrenaline rush, but not the one that I was looking for. Just like that shadow that gets lit up so bright that it becomes a frozen image on the wall, this highly charged and emotional event has 'burned' its place into the history of my mind.

In the second story you can clearly see that this involves the death of a fellow Soldier. I didn't know this man, nor did I ever serve with him; however the thought of recovering that massively mangled vehicle with his body still trapped inside is yet another mental image that I'll never forget. It matters not that this man was not in my unit. Nor is it of any great significance that he never knew me. I can tell you though that as a fellow American I handled his remains and effects with the utmost care; like that of a newborn baby.

In the years that I'd responded to car wrecks, plane crashes, house fires and the like; I was accustomed to presenting my level of care with a decent 'bedside manor', if you will. This of course was not necessary in this case due to the casualty being deceased. I suppose that I really think about it I just wanted to treat this young man like I would want to be treated under similar circumstances. Even though we'd never met, he

was my brother and I'd never spoken so much as a single word to him until after his passing. Somehow, that didn't really matter.

In the last story, regarding the ambush in the Sunni Triangle of Iraq, we see that death walked with each and every one of us that day. And even though we only suffered minor casualties that day without a single fatality, it shows that the closeness of a tightly-woven team like ours shared many things, including our souls. It was a time for us to be ready to give it all or not at all. We all gave all.

It's been said many times that Soldiers will go to war for their country, but will die for their friends. I could not agree more. The circumstances and events that surround this ambush outline this perfectly. On that day, death was a shroud covering each and every one of us, separated only by an invisible layer of hope and prayer that could only be penetrated by a piercing bullet. And had the bullet struck, death would have become a part of us, and peripherally, each other in a sense. I can say this because as I first met my young troops, I loved them like my children; charged with their care. By the end of that year they were my brothers.

To this very day, they still are.

And for those who have loved and lost; whether a husband, wife, father, son, mother, daughter, brother, or sister, I can offer no better words than those so gracefully uttered by an outstanding American who also gave his life in the defense of righteousness.

I pray that our Heavenly Father
may assuage the anguish of your bereavement,
and leave you only the cherished memory of the
loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours,
to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of
Freedom.

—Abraham Lincoln, November 1864

CHAPTER FIVE

The Romanticism and Glory of Battle: Past and Future

War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things.

The decayed and degraded State of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse.

The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made so and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.

—John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

Countless are the times that I have heard a reference from a young man or woman with regard to the “glory of war.” True, this mentality has resonated through the history of time and in all nations; however it should be noted that since the dawn of time that this honorable mantra is not, has not, nor should be taken faintly. The profession of arms is steeped in tradition over the centuries, and is not to be taken lightly.

I have felt the fear, the sting, and the victory of battle, as generation after generation of young men before me. I have felt the silence of death following me; breathing down my neck as if to take my last breath from

me, and watched that very breath exhaled into eternity from those who have fallen. This silent and final breath is a calling to me to carry on. And I shall.

These moments are filled with both sadness for the lost; yet the solemn pride that is their own, and is now infinite. It is my debt of honor to pass these moments on to fall upon every ear that will hear them. This is an intimate, deadly serious honor that is my mere token of appreciation to those who have gone before me. And in their honor, though I am older now; I would gladly go again to embrace death until either I force it on the unrighteous enemies of my God and country; or it consumes me. There is no greater love, or value of one's life than to serve in this way. There is no greater honor than to give one's life in this way either. This is not only a historical fact within the Profession of Arms, but is also derived from a direct quote from the Holy Bible.

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life
for his friends.

—John 15:13

The following testament to all warriors, “The Warrior’s Code Of Honor” is derived from an unknown author from a website entitled www.militarycodeofhonor.com. As I believe that my own words are inadequate in creating an unforgettable epitaph for those who are unknowing in the ways of the Warrior, allow me to share The Warrior’s Code Of Honor with you.

The Warrior’s Code of Honor

As a combat Veteran wounded in one of America’s wars, I offer to speak for those who cannot. Were the mouths of my fallen front-line friends not stopped with dust, they would testify that life revolves around honor. In war, it is understood that you give your word of honor to do your duty—that is—stand and fight instead of running away and deserting your friends. When you keep your word despite desperately desiring to flee the screaming hell all around, you earn honor.

Earning honor under fire changes who you are. The blast furnace of battle burns away impurities encrusting your soul. The white-hot forge of combat hammers you into a hardened, purified warrior willing to die rather than break your word to friends—your honor. Unbeknownst to civilians, some things are worth dying for.

Combat is scary but exciting.

You never feel so alive as when being shot at without result.

You never feel so triumphant as when shooting back—*with* result.

You never feel love so pure as that burned into your heart by friends willing to die to keep their word to you. And they do.

The biggest sadness of your life is to see friends falling. The biggest surprise of your life is to survive the war. Although still alive on the outside, you are dead inside—shot thru the heart with nonsensical guilt for living while friends died. The biggest lie of your life torments you that you could have done something more, different, to save them. Their faces are the tombstones in your weeping eyes, their souls shine the true camaraderie you search for the rest of your life but never find.

You come home but a grim ghost of he who so lightheartedly went off to war. But home no longer exists. That world shattered like a mirror the first time you were shot at. You live a different world now. You always will.

Your world is about waking up night after night silently screaming, back in battle.

Your world is about your best friend bleeding to death in your arms, howling in pain for you to kill him.

Your world is about shooting so many enemies the gun turns red and jams, letting the enemy grab you.

Your world is about struggling hand-to-hand for one more breath of life.

You never speak of your world. Those who have seen combat do not talk about it. Those who talk about it have not seen combat.

The hurricane winds of war have hurled you as far away as Mars, and you can never go back home again, not really.

After your terrifying—but *thrilling* dance with death, your old world of babies, backyards and ballgames seems deadly dull.

People you knew before the war try to make contact with you. It is useless. Words fall like bricks between you.

Serving with warriors who died proving their word has made prewar friends seem too untested to be trusted—thus they are now mere acquaintances. Earning honor under fire has made you alone, a stranger in your own home town.

The only time you are not alone is when with another combat Veteran. Only *he* understands that keeping your word, your honor, whilst standing face to face with death gives meaning and purpose to life. Only *he* understands that spending a mere 24 hours in the broad, sunlit uplands of battle-proven honor is more satisfying to a man than spending a whole lifetime in safe, comfortably numb civilian life.

Although you walk thru life alone, you are not lonely. You have a constant companion from combat—Death. It stands close behind, a little to the left. Death whispers in your ear: “Nothing matters outside my touch, and I have not touched you... *YET!*”

Death never leaves you—it is your best friend, your most trusted advisor, your wisest teacher.

Death teaches you that every day above ground is a fine day.

Death teaches you to feel fortunate on good days, and bad days...well, they do not exist.

Death teaches you that merely seeing one more sunrise is enough to fill your cup of life to the brim—pressed down and running over!

Down thru the dusty centuries it has always been thus. It always will be, for what is seared into a man’s soul who stands face to face with death never changes.

This work attempts to describe the world as seen thru the eyes of a combat Veteran. It is a world virtually unknown to the public because few Veterans talk about it. This is unfortunate since people who are trying to understand, and make contact with combat Veterans, are kept in the dark.

I offer these poor, inadequate words—bought not taught—in the hope that they may shed some small light on why combat Veterans are like they are.

It is my life desire that this tortured work, despite it’s many defects, may yet still provide some tiny sliver of understanding which may blossom into tolerance—nay,

acceptance—of a Warrior's perhaps unconventional way of being due to combat-damaged emotions from doing his duty under fire.

A Purple Heart Medal recipient who made a promise to remain an unknown Soldier.

Member of the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH).

Life Member of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

~~~~~

There lives a true dichotomy in the life of a Combat Veteran. It is difficult to explain, yet understood by most who hear of it. The youth of our country, throughout history, have typically been eager to serve. Let us not forget that it was the “Greatest Generation” that won a World War, and stopped tyranny and anarchy from destroying the very world it was trying to consume and rule over.

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,  
“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”  
And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”*

—Isaiah 6:8

This “Greatest Generation” was not one of seasoned Veterans. These ‘men’ were barely men at all. They were from a different time, with different values and a deeper and untainted understanding for the basics of life; of what was really important. Our entire world was saved by young men barely old enough to shave. Many had never known the company of a woman, the privilege of becoming a father, buying their first car, or any other “simple” pleasure in life. Most were seventeen, eighteen, or nineteen years of age. And many did not ever come home.

And though I believe wholeheartedly that the current Global War on Terrorism is just as important as World War II; with the potential impact that it can have on the entire globe, I have to speak my piece. I believe in my heart that the young men and women of today are the best trained

most intelligent battlefield instruments that we have available today, just as those were in World War II.

There are several obvious differences between the two generations, clearly, that make these two wars different at face value. We, as citizens, have all but total access through the venue of media in any form or fashion that we prefer. This is literally unprecedented, and for those who fought and served in World War II it must be unimaginable. The technology that is available is of course a huge advantage. Our brethren of our grandparents time did just fine without it, and had they had the advantages of the twenty-first century; I dare say that the War would not have ended in 1945 but well before.

The grit, gumption, and assertiveness of those young men of the past is no different than those today; however those serving today are subject to outside pressure from the opinionated masses that wave their freedom of speech around on a banner that they themselves have not purchased. As a fellow Soldier, now and always, I have to pass on a quote from the man that I believe to be the greatest leader of all time. “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

I have fought a good fight.

I have finished my course.

I have kept the faith.

—Timothy 2:4:7

## CHAPTER SIX

### *The “Last Letter”*

Through the words of those who serve  
come those final thoughts eternal  
that will pin themselves to the hearts of loved ones  
until their last breath.

There is an age old tradition among Soldiers. For generations upon generations, members of the Armed Forces at all levels of rank, station, and from every corner of the globe throughout history have partaken of this time honored and very personal ritual. I do not want, in any form or fashion to make light of this rite of passage. For many of us, it is so much more than a ritual; it is a responsibility. I wholeheartedly believe this with every fiber of my being, and take this task very seriously. This letter is perhaps the last marching order of a combat Veteran; a daunting last effort that will hopefully share our innermost being with those we love when we can no longer speak ourselves.

I distinctly recall writing my “death letter,” as it were. I have written one for each of my three combat tours, and with each one comes somewhat of a bittersweet moment. I describe this moment as bittersweet because the letter itself provides a sense of closure to a degree; yet, for my wife it will give only a narrow sliver of light through a keyhole of my last moments. This is the letter that I wrote for my darling Helen and our children that I referred to in Chapter 4.

The following words were never so personal; however I felt the need to share them as it provides a glimpse of our mentality when we most felt that we were most likely to pierce the veil. This ultimate sharing of things intimately personal has not even been read by my wife before now. We share everything in our lives, but I wanted to allow her the opportunity to read this letter in her own time and by her own choice. I can only hope that these words come to shed some light on what may have been my final thoughts half a world away.

*My Darling Helen,*

*Although it pains me somewhat to put pen to paper on this occasion, I feel that I must in that you will truly know that I was thinking of you until the very end. Yes, my love; if you are reading this, then I am gone now. I need you to know that I feel that dying for a cause well founded is not a crime, nor a shame. Know that I fell giving it my all, and that this letter has only reached your hands by one of my brethren in whom I have trained and have well placed a sacred trust.*

*First, allow me to say that I feel that I owe my life to you. My life changed considerably for the better when you came into my life. You have not only enriched the quality of my life overall, but the thirst for which I lived. Please do not be too sad, my love. Life is so very short, and although we have lived many lifetimes in our years together; it is truly not over. You are my life, and although we are not together in a physical sense, know that I am ever-watchful, and will still do my best to protect and watch over you and our children as God permits me.*

*You are the very core of me, and the reason that I not only lived, but lived with the fervor with which I did. You are God's greatest gift to both our children and I, and I could never begin to show my gratitude. Throughout my life I have loved many things, but I have never been truly in love before you. You have taught me so many things, and made me a better man in the process. You have shown me what true and unconditional love is, and again, I am forever grateful. When I think of the times that I have truly looked into your eyes, I believe that I have seen the face of God. You have told me many times not to place you on a pedestal, but in my heart and mind there is no other place for you, my love. Quite simply, you are what love is to me.*

*Much like our time apart with the war, you will continue on with our children. Your strength is an example to them, and you will gain it from them as well. Please do not allow them to weep forever for me. Ask them to be thankful for the time that*

*we had. I only hope and pray that I could impart some worldly wisdom on them when we were together. Please impress upon them that their young lives were, are, and always will be among my life's most cherished moments and blessings that are, without a doubt, some of the major highlights of my life. Through all of life's accomplishments, none are as great as God's gift that we are able to leave our mark and our legacy on the world through our children. And what wonderful children that we've been blessed with.*

*Please know that through our conversations and letters in the recent past I have relayed to you that the level of evil in this place is unlike anything that I've ever seen. As we are considered the enemy here in this land, it is somewhat expected that we should be viewed and attacked as we are. However, I have seen and heard of things that are truly evil that these people are willing to do to each other. It is truly sad, and I only hope and pray that my brothers carry on and continue to fight on the side of God, that we may be truly victorious not only in the battle among men, but in the battle of good against evil that truly exists here. May God bless the good people of this land and touch their hearts with the wisdom that they so desperately need.*

*I pray for our own, and respect our enemies. I say respect because these people will one day be accountable to God, and I only pray that their souls are saved as well. I know that it will be hard for you and the children to understand this for quite some time, but please try. There is enough hatred in the world today, and although I am gone from this world, I am not gone forever. I will patiently wait for you my love, as one day I know that I will be able to hold you again. On that day, I will truly never let go as we will be together in eternity. You have known me to be impatient over many things throughout my life; however, you are, as always, worth waiting for my darling. And you always will be.*

*I always thought that I couldn't possibly love you more than I had, however in death my love for you is truly boundless and without end. Rest your heart, my darling. I know that this time is rough beyond words for you. Know that my love is never-ending for you, and that Almighty God is watching over you in my stead now. I always have loved you, even before I knew you. The thought of you was an impossible dream, a miracle for me. And when you came true my life was truly fulfilled. Anything after the day we met was just a bonus for me. There are not words to describe what an enriched and blessed life you gave me. I only hope and pray that I could have given you a fraction of the wonderful life that you gave me.*

*Please go now, and focus on yourself and our children. They adore you, and will watch you intently to see how to get through these times. Please be as strong as you can, my love. Know that I am still with you and the children as well, and that one day we will be together again.*

*Always,  
Ron*

~~~~~

For our Children:

Gary,

My number one son! What can I say? What words can I utter that will offer you some slight bit of comfort during these days? You were my first child; my son, my dream come true to carry on our family name as I have been so proud to do.

You have grown into a fine young man, and although life rarely hands us the situation that is ideal to us you have to realize that God is never going to give you more than you can handle. You must be thinking that it sure is easy for me to be able to say this now, after I am gone. You're right, of course.

Many of the blessings that I've had during my life are still coming your way. The day that you were born was truly a miraculous one for me. I was so unsure about having a child, and my ability to take care of you. But, over the years as I watched you grow you taught me as much as I ever did you. You are an incredible young man, and you have so much to offer the world. You are intelligent, handsome, and have a good head on your shoulders. Please do not ever waste the precious gifts that God has given you.

You are a leader for your brothers; Austin and Bailey. I regret that your mother and I did not handle our marriage better, and that ultimately you and your brothers paid the most costly price. I cannot go back in time, however I want you to know that I have never stopped learning, gaining experiences, and enjoying life for all it's worth. If I can offer you a bit of sound advice at this time, it would be to do the same.

Please don't take a single minute of your life for granted. That is the only true regret that I have over the course of my life. Taking anything for granted means losing something; time, a relationship, or even the love of your life. When they are of age, please share this with your little brothers as it is so very important.

GHOSTNATION

Know that even though we had much less time together than either of us would have preferred; I have loved and cared for you as strongly as if we had lived together every minute. You are my son, my blood, my legacy. Always pray when you are in doubt, as well as to give thanks. God will never guide you down the wrong path, or give you more than you can handle. I love you my son. God bless you!

Love,
Dad

~~~~~

*Kevin,*

*My buddy Kevin. I truly hate that this moment has come, and that I will not get to see you become a man. I have faith in you, your mother, and your sister to get through these times together. I know that they may seem overwhelming now, but in time things will be better. This too shall pass.*

*Since your mother and I met when you were seven years old, I have always believed that I have accepted a charge from God that I had another son. The son that I have in you is special, and over the past few years I have come to love you and care for you like no other. I have never viewed you as my stepson, or anything else that would place a barrier between you and I. You are my son. I think that this is an important point, and I don't want you to ever forget that.*

*I cannot count the times that we have been in a restaurant, a store, or somewhere in public and someone would comment on how much you look like me. They'd say, "He looks just like you.," or "You look just like your Dad." I could not be more proud during those moments. I still contend that it's a blessing that you look more like your mother than me, but I would surely never complain about that either.*

*In the days to come, your mother and sister will go through some rough times. Knowing your mother, there will be much sadness over me not coming home again; however, you are now the little man of the house. I know that this seems like the impossible, but God will guide you as you go along. You are strong willed like your mother, and your big heart will carry you through these times as well.*

*Please know that I have always loved you like my own. Regardless of what happened in your past with your mother's marriage to your father, and the subsequent hard times that followed that; know that I would never have married your mother if I wasn't willing and able to take you on as my son as well. Thank you for being*

*our ring bearer at our wedding. An act of faith and dedication such as that is rare for someone of your age, but you have always had what it takes. Very few people in your life will seem to 'march to the beat of their own drum'. You are one of these people, and your life will one day bear the fruits of this character. Be proud of who you are, and always be true to your God, your family, and yourself.*

*I may have never told you this before, but I truly admire you, son. I admire your heart and your ability to love as you do. Years of war and hard times in life have made me jaded and callous in some ways. Please don't let this happen to you. I have learned over time that it is very easy to love from afar; but why when you don't have to? Trust your heart, and remember the things that I have tried to teach and impress upon you. I always did so with your best interests at heart, and in trying to prepare you for manhood.*

*I know that you will turn out to become a fine young man. Regardless of where life's path takes you, be true to your family, yourself, and your heart. If you do this, you cannot go wrong. In times of confusion or doubt, do not be afraid to turn to God for the guidance that you will no doubt one day need. No one knows everything, and you never need to be afraid to ask for help.*

*I love you son. You have enriched my life beyond what I can describe to you. You have taught me more than I have ever taught you, and although I haven't always recognized those times as a blessing; they truly have been. Remember to pray each night, and love your mother and sister with everything that you are. God bless you son!*

Love,  
Dad

~~~~~

My Princess Abigail,

I cannot put into mere words what I would like to say to you right now. You are the true blessing that I have always hoped and prayed for. You are Daddy's little girl. I have had sons for years now, and although they have enriched my life beyond my wildest imagination, I was not ready for what you would do to my heart.

In the short time that I have had with you, I have come to know a side of myself that I didn't even know existed. You are the gentile spirit that has tamed your Soldier father into a Daddy. As a baby, you and I took naps together on our couch, and I

GHOSTNATION

would just watch you sleeping for hours. Cradled in my arms, I remember you catching your breath in your sleep, and your pink cheeks glowing and begging to be kissed.

There is nothing like the unconditional trust of a little girl in your arms, nestled and peacefully asleep in her Daddy's arms. You are the miracle that only your mother could have given me, and the world. I can only dream of what awaits you in your life. I have not only the highest hopes for your happiness, but pray that all of your dreams come true, my angel.

Some might look at you as a little girl that is growing up without her Daddy. To that I want to say that you will never be without me. I will always have an eye on you. Whenever you think of me, just know that all you have to do is call for me, and I'll soon be there. The last thing that any of us wanted is for us to be apart. Nothing could keep me from you, my little Princess.

When your mother and I first met, it didn't take me long to know that if we ever had a child together, that that child (you) would have the best Mommy in the whole world. Your Mommy is a very strong woman, and she loves you with all of her heart, as do I. She will help you grow into a fine young lady, and one day you will look back on your early years as a precious time with her. I did the best I could to find you the best Mommy in the world, and I believe that I've succeeded.

You are my little Princess, and you always will be. Know that I have always loved you and I always will. Follow your heart, and you can do anything that you want to! I love you my darling daughter. God bless you!

*Love,
Daddy*

CHAPTER SEVEN

War From Another Front...the Home Front

For my Darling Helen,
who faced my demons of battle long after
the bombs had fallen and the smoke had cleared.
Always,
Ron

When I asked my wife to give her perspective on this subject, I sincerely felt as though I had the added benefit of having a subject matter expert on my side with which to provide you with yet another angle on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Helen sees PTSD differently than I do, and due to this has volumes of input that only *she* can provide. Living with a husband who has been diagnosed with acute PTSD cannot by any means be easy, and God love her for staying with me through the years of horror-filled nightmares that infiltrate my sleep night after night.

~~~~~

First I want to say thank you to my loving husband for all his support and compliments. He has been the best thing to have ever happened to me. I am by no means an expert on any subject much less him. I, however, do love him with all my heart! There has never been, nor will there ever be anyone that I am more proud of or have more respect for than my husband.

Before I really go into living with my husband and his disability, I would like to give a little history of our love through my eyes for the women who read this. I feel it is important to understand how I truly feel about my husband before you can objectively comprehend anything I have to say about his disability.

When I first met Ron he was the man I never believed existed. My father had died when I was three years old, and I was the third youngest of nine children with only one parent. I grew up with five brothers who really didn't care about much but themselves. Through a few stages in my life, there were a couple of my brothers that were supportive of me although not for long because their lives always lead them away from me. I was basically out of sight and out of mind for them. I was previously married to a man for eight years who kept his brain in his pants and did not really want anything to do with our son we had together during that union. I never believed that fairytale relationships were real; most of the men in my life were not at all reliable. So, when I met Ron I really was in disbelief.

Ron was the most attentive person I had ever known. He told me he loved me at least a hundred times a day, wrote me poems, and the "Story of Us" (I loved his version of how we met). He was always calling me just to tell me that he missed and loved me. Quite regularly he would call the local radio station and make requests and dedications (they knew both of us by name). He was always understanding, and brought me candy and flowers just about every day at work. He spent time with my son, and I was never in need for anything if he knew about it. He would stay up with me long hours even when he had work the next day. I felt like gold, as if for the first time in my life I really felt like I was worth something.

I was just out of a horrible marriage. My self esteem was almost nonexistent and I was in so much disbelief that any man could actually be this attentive. I was very apprehensive, and noncommittal to say the least. It took me a while to warm up to the idea of someone really loving me and that this was not just "the new stage." I went through a lot of confusion with my emotions, and I put Ron through a lot of pain because he knew he loved me and wanted to be with me. But I was truly scared. I moved to a different state to get my head clear, and it worked. I missed

him so much it hurt! I knew then that I really did love him and that he was my forever!

One morning, about two months later, and separated by thousands of miles I told Ron I only wanted to be with him. He told me he received orders to be stationed in Alaska (he was at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina) and he wanted me and my son to go with him. He decided he was going to drive across the country to spend a few weeks with me and my son in California, prior to continuing on to Alaska. Once there, he would get our home set up, and then my son and I would drive to Fairbanks from southern California when he was ready for us. About three weeks later, my son, my cat and I hit the road. At this point I would have gone anywhere to be with him! We arrived in Alaska and he had our home with everything we needed all ready for us. He even hand painted his childhood bedroom door sign over to match Kevin's Pokemon obsession at the time with his name and everything. He was waiting outside like a little child waiting for the ice cream truck.

From that point I never wanted to be without him again. When Ron asked my son if he could marry us, I was the happiest person on earth. Of course when he asked me I said yes! A little over a year into the relationship I got pregnant. My son was nine years old and we were all excited. Ron was ecstatic that we were having a baby together, and could hardly contain himself. I was scared but very excited to be having a baby with him. At this point the new stage had tapered off and little things like the dedications and staying up long hours were no longer happening. But our relationship was still good, and we were truly in love.

Ron was in the Army as a firefighter stationed at Fort Wainwright, Alaska when one of the most catastrophic events in America's history occurred. On the morning of September 11, 2001, Ron was on duty at the fire station. Upon hearing of the news, he immediately called and woke me up to tell me what was happening. I was pregnant, and holding my nine year old son close to me. We were sitting on the floor in front of the television when Ron got home. We were all so saddened by the horrible news, and I had been crying for a while already. We wept together for hours, praying for all of those poor souls.

Pretty much after that day Ron was mad. He started talking about going over there and killing the people who did this to our country. He had already had two combat tours prior to our relationship, and he did not mind another. In Alaska he was non-deployable, so I was happy in knowing I would have him with me at least through my pregnancy. But little things started happening. He started getting really angry over every little thing. I mean to the point he would start screaming and cursing. He was not sleeping well at all, and would have really bad nightmares regularly. His emotions were like a rollercoaster, and you never really knew how he was going to feel about something. He started snapping at us all the time and regularly asking me “Why are you with me?” and “I am going to leave you because you deserve to be with someone better than me.”

I then told him I wanted us to go see a therapist, and we did. She was a civilian therapist off post. From the moment we sat in her office Ron sat in a defensive posture. Within ten minutes she asked him if he knew what PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) was. It was the first time I remember ever hearing about it. The situation turned from good to bad in mere minutes. I sat there while this therapist and Ron started arguing. Ron started to raise his voice and next thing I knew Ron stood up and said “Fuck you!” to her and abruptly walked out. I was embarrassed and all I could do was to sit there, looking at her. She said it was ok and we could try again another day. So before Ron and I left, he apologized and said he would go back. The second time was worse, and it only took him about five minutes in total to cuss her out and leave the room. She told me I should not marry him at that point. I knew that the love of my life was going through something terrible, and I was not going to just leave him when he needed me. Later that day Ron said he would go to a therapist on post and I agreed to that. The therapist on post was a man, but of course Ron found lots of things wrong with him too. He wasn’t a combat veteran, he was young, and he was using Ron as a guinea pig to learn about the Army itself as he had only a fraction of the time in the Army as Ron did. But the one thing the therapist did do was tell Ron he had PTSD. At this point, I was sure that Ron had PTSD.

So now I had to learn about this as much as possible to help and understand him. I started to read books about it and ask questions to anyone I could. Anytime I brought it up to Ron, he started telling me he was not broken and that it was none of my business. Then he started calling me names and telling me I did not know anything because I was a civilian who had never served in combat. I cannot tell you how many times I heard “You’re not a Vet!” Honestly it gets a little disheartening when you love someone who will not get help. Our relationship steadily grew worse. Although, even at his worst in Alaska, Ron still loved me and continued to show it. I stopped mentioning PTSD to him, as he did not want to hear anything about it. At this point, I was tired of trying.

After a long cold winter in Alaska, (seven months) I had our daughter, and things started to get a little better and he was focusing on her. He was so happy to have a girl. His family had not had a girl for over fifty years. I was happy I was able to be the one to give him his daughter. Ron is truly a man who loves babies and his daughter was his pride and joy. The man I loved started coming back to me and he started to be happy again. Then Ron got stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas.

When we arrived in Kansas, Ron was told immediately that he would be leaving for Iraq for a year. We were not even on post for two days when we learned this, and I felt that all we could do at that point was brace ourselves. Our household goods had just arrived from Alaska, and what wasn’t being turned upside down due to the deployment was still in cardboard boxes. Everything was scattered, and would surely not seem to take on any shape or stability until after Ron was gone.

Contrary to the thoughts and feelings of a lot of friends and family, Ron and I sat down and had a long, open, and honest chat about a week before he left for Iraq. This was his third combat tour, which, in those days was very uncommon. We agreed to tell each other everything that we possibly could during the deployment. A lot of families didn’t bother each other with the routine and trite details of everyday life on either end, but with a looming year-long separation on the horizon we felt that everything would be important at some time or another. Ron felt that he could handle this, and that this was a good way to stay connected to us as a family. After all, a year is a very long time. I was in complete

agreement with this, as I wanted to help keep Ron connected and support him in any way that I could from the home front. After two and a half weeks of constant training, Ron would board the plane for Iraq.

Through the many months that followed, we kept in contact as frequently as possible. We wrote love letters and postcards, sent packages, and even included audio and video tapes when possible through care packages. In fact, the first time that Ron heard his daughter tell him that she loved him came in the form of a videotape. He tells me still to this day that he wore out the tape by playing it every chance that he got. During his entire tour, I lived every second by the phone so as not to miss a single call from him. Thank God for cell phones.

While Ron was gone I made sure to be as supportive to him as possible. For me, the only way to do that was to be the best wife and mother possible. I took care of our children, the house, the bills, and anything else that would come up. I only hung out with my girlfriends whose husbands were also deployed. Out of respect for my husband I did not do anything I thought might make him uncomfortable or upset; like going to bars or anything of that nature. I know my husband truly loves and trusts me, but, with thousands of miles and a lot of emotions between us I wasn't risking anything.

I heard so many horror stories about women and their infidelity, and how it always got back to the Soldiers. Most of the time the story was worse than what really had happened. Too often though, these stories contained bits and pieces of the truth. All I could do was pray for the Soldiers and their families.

About seven months into his tour, I received a phone call that my estranged stepfather, whom I hadn't heard from in thirteen years, was in the hospital. He was not expected to live through that week, and it was very sudden. Because he was my stepfather for most of my childhood, the doctors decided to send an American Red Cross message to Ron's Chain of Command. This would bring Ron home to me, if even for a short time through this grievous time. Initially, the Red Cross message did not get through as the Insurgency had destroyed one of the U.S. Forces communication hubs in battle. Ron eventually got the message, and was

released to come home. He essentially had to “hitchhike” to Baghdad, and then to Kuwait to catch a flight home.

During the trip home, Ron called me from Amsterdam. My stepfather had already passed away, and it was very frustrating for the both of us. He finally arrived home two days after my stepfather’s death. It was a bittersweet time for me. On the one hand, our family had just experienced a death; however Ron was home after seven months of combat. We would be together as a family again, if even just for a while. I was so excited and I didn’t know how to feel. My stomach was full of butterflies and I was shaking. All I could think about was spending every second of every day together and doing as much as possible with the kids. It took Abby about ten minutes just sitting and looking at him before she went and sat in his lap. We could not peel her off of him after that; she is definitely a daddy’s girl.

Unfortunately, the excitement didn’t last very long. The night Ron got home he started talking about nothing but Iraq and his men left behind. He was happy to be home, but all he could think and talk about was them. I have come to find out since then that this was very common of the troops who came home on a two-week leave period during their tour. It was really hurtful and it broke my heart into pieces. I tried to be understanding as much as possible and swallow the pain because I knew he was only home for two weeks. I knew that God would help me get through it.

He wasn’t comfortable going to the store, driving anywhere, and he was always on edge. He was constantly checking over his shoulder, and always worried. He wasn’t sleeping and when he did sleep he had nightmares every night. He was always irritable and he started to get mad at me and the kids over even the smallest of things. Then he started to tell me how he wished he never came home. He said he should have stayed there with his men and took care of them; that they needed him more than us. I was so crushed and I didn’t know what to say or do. I felt like I couldn’t do anything right. The whole two weeks was nothing but fights and pain.

About three days before he was to go back, I broke down and started feeling like I was dying inside. All I could think about was him going back

and now not only do I have to worry about him getting killed but, how bad his PTSD was going to be when or if he came home. We went to see the Chaplain and all he would say was I needed to get over it and he needed to go back. I went home and cried, and to spent time with God. After I was done praying I realized I had to pick myself up and with God's arms around me I knew I could do it. So, we got Ron ready to go back and took him to the airport. After we got home that day, Abby kept running through the house calling for daddy. It took me and the kids a couple of days to pull it together and then the house went right back into support mode for Ron and getting through every day, one day at a time.

Five long and lonely months later, Ron came home in the wee hours of a cold September morning. I was dressed to the nine's with my hair curled and make up on. I wore a new black dress that I bought especially for that moment. I was even more excited than the day he came home on emergency leave. You see, I knew he was going to be home longer than two weeks this time. All the wives were standing in a huge aircraft hanger with flowers and kids freezing and tired just waiting for the soldiers to come marching in. I will never forget that they were playing music, and the song that the men marched in to the hanger to was "Kryptonite" by 3 Doors Down. It was the perfect song for our returning heroes! All I could think about was getting him home and taking care of him! Although it was hard for the kids to get back into the swing of things with dad being home, it didn't take very long. Things were pretty much the same as when he came home on leave. The biggest difference for me was that he returned from Iraq with his men this time, which made it so much easier on all of us. Because he did not have to feel guilty, I didn't have to feel like I was a horrible person for wanting time with him. The nightmares, the edginess, the severe mood swings and the yelling were all still there. You could tell that he was trying to relax and unwind even though it really was not something he was able to do. I felt terribly bad for him and I could not do anything to help him. I remember one day shortly after he came home we had driven up to the Class Six, a little liquor store. When Ron got out of the car, he started to walk in and a man walked out wearing a *dishdasha*. Ron stopped and stared at him, I thought

for a second that he was going to kill this man. All the man said to him was, “You know we are on the same team, right Soldier?” Ron was so mad and in disbelief that another Soldier on an Army Base that just had a whole Brigade of men return home from Iraq could have done something so hapless. Religion or not, it was very disrespectful and distasteful. We can’t pray in our schools but people like that can run around flaunting their religion. My husband was shot at and was constantly in harms way because of the extremist of this religion. My husband was over there trying to support peace and help create a better world for all of them and he can’t even get respect from his own people on his own soil. It is my opinion that this country was built on Christian morals and beliefs and anyone who wants to live or believe in something else should be happy that they are able to do so because of heroes like my husband and should never disrespect or be offended by his beliefs.

After a month or so of Ron breaking down and going through his severe mood swings I started to figure out little triggers that would throw him into these PTSD episodes. Movies, songs, and pretty much anything related to war or anything that made Ron get emotional and think about the war would make him start having crying spells. One minute he would start saying evil stuff like he hated me and that he was tired of us and the next he would beg for forgiveness and tell us we were all he wanted in life. Most of the painful words he would speak to me so that the kids could not hear him. I really was not sure if he loved me or hated me most of the time. When he started to go counseling and they finally put him on medicine for depression and the PTSD, things started to get gradually better. Sometimes he does forget to take his medicine and he will start snapping at every little thing. He gets really angry when I ask him if he took his pills, but honestly I do not know what else to do. He hates me reminding him; he said it makes him feel stupid.

After they put him on pills for the “official” diagnosis of PTSD they told him he was non-deployable and took his ability to carry a weapon any longer. Now because he was non-deployable they medically separated him from the Army. This was absolutely painful for Ron! The Army was his life; he had been in it for fifteen years and had reenlisted for an indefinite status. He did not want to be a civilian, he was crushed!

## *GHOSTNATION*

This did not help us in dealing with the PTSD! About two weeks before the end of his career he went and applied for VA benefits. That in itself was a huge process.

Today Ron is now one hundred percent disabled through the VA and he is still currently taking Anti-depressants and attending treatment sessions. He still has nightmares and severe mood swings although not as often. Every day is a new day for us all and I look forward to caring for and supporting my husband through his PTSD for the rest of his life for as long as I shall live!

If your spouse is going through any of symptoms or processes, please do not fear or hesitate in trying to get them help. It will be a long road, and no, there is no cure-all but yes there is hope. You can be a hero to your spouse, friend, brother, sister, or whoever may be going through this, and help them live a hopeful life. If God leads us to it, He will lead us through it! In Him we should always trust He will prove us strong enough!



## *CONCLUSION*

As great commentator Paul Harvey once said (maybe more than once), “Now you know the rest of the story.” Both Helen and I certainly hope and pray that our experiences have given you a better insight into this phenomena and medical mystery called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. We pray that you never lose the faith, hope every day, pray often, and never give up on each other. The road may not always be a short one, but the light at the end of the tunnel is certainly worth it. For the Soldiers and their spouses who read these words; God bless you, and thank you for your service. For the friends and family of Veterans; please be ever understanding and be ever-willing to lend a shoulder or an ear. And for the children of those who have PTSD; know that none of this is your fault, and that your friends or family who have this affliction love you very much. Peace be with you all.









