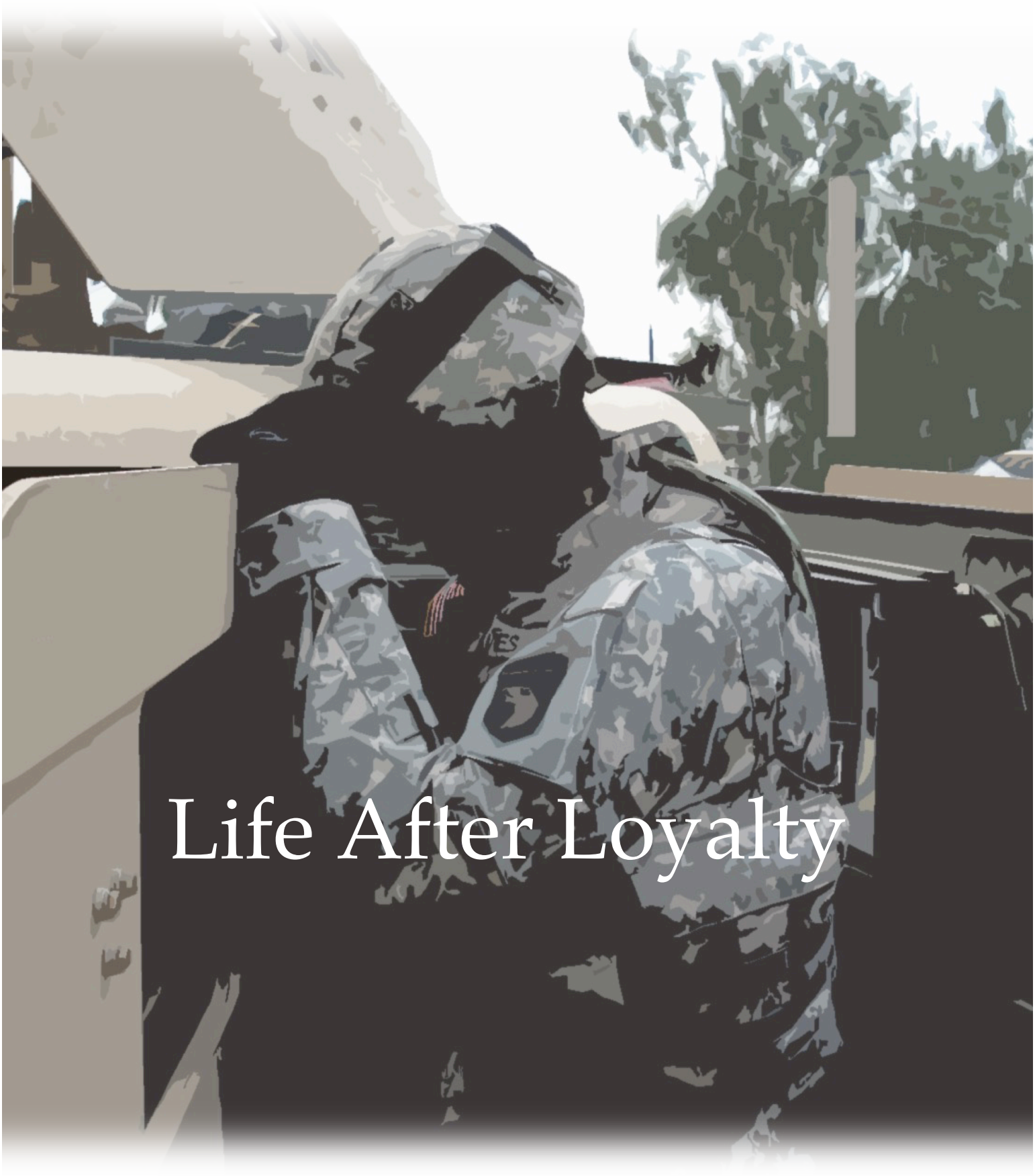

Life After Loyalty

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Loyalty

Lewis Nelson

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the soldiers of the 506th Regimental Combat Team "Currahee," 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) with special dedication to Bravo Company (Military Intelligence), 4th Brigade Special Troops Battalion.

Forward

When I began speaking publicly about my husband's struggle to recover from post-traumatic stress disorder, people occasionally asked, "Why didn't people used to get PTSD?" They labored under the misconception that since veterans of World War II did not discuss their psychological wounds of war in the same language that we use today, they must not have experienced them at all. In fact, as Jonathan Shay has convincingly demonstrated in his seminal works *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*, the signs of what we would label PTSD today are clearly present in the most ancient works of oral literature. Called "soldier's heart" after the Civil War, "shell shock" after WWI, and "battle fatigue" after WWII, each generation has struggled to frame and recover from this trauma of their war.

Despite widespread advances in the recognition and understanding of PTSD as a result of intensive efforts by veterans of the Vietnam War, many still carry fundamentally flawed misperceptions of who can develop it and of what it looks like. Only combat arms troops who were involved in frequent firefights suffer from PTSD, they imagine. All of those men experience frequent flashbacks, try to cope with

severe substance abuse, and descend into profound dysfunction: unemployment, homelessness. For some, that is indeed the course of the disorder. But not for all.

Combat support and combat service personnel also develop combat-related PTSD: modern wars do not have the "front lines" we may still envision from old movies. Every convoy is at risk from roadside bombs, every secure base can take indirect fire; medics are targeted, truck drivers return fire. (Troops and civilians who never deploy at all can also develop PTSD after surviving rape or other violent crimes, natural disasters, car accidents, or other traumatic experiences.) And while the symptoms of PTSD can reach an unmanageable level for some, many manage to function – succeeding professionally and, to outside appearances, thriving personally – for years or decades while nursing deep pain.

Lewis Nelson's book takes us on his personal journey as a military intelligence soldier through his combat experiences, the gradual disintegration of his marriage, and his eventual realization that PTSD was preventing him from being the man he wanted to be and living the life he wanted for himself and for his family. With grace and empathy, he opens up about his reluctance to admit problems and seek help until finally reaching a breaking point. In doing so, he shatters myths about what kind of person develops PTSD, what forms it takes, and – perhaps most importantly – its permanence. Lewis shares with us the beginning stages of his journey to healing, showing other troops, veterans, and family members that there is a path to reintegration and fulfillment even after years of numbness and pain.

I had the privilege of serving with Lewis at the 101st Airborne Division briefly before leaving active duty to help my husband on his own road to recovery after he sustained a penetrating traumatic brain injury and subsequently developed PTSD. I've seen firsthand how hard it can be to

admit that everything is not all right and to seek help – and to also see what a profound difference therapy in some form can make. May Lewis, and all who read this tender exploration, navigate through post-traumatic stress and find a measure of post-traumatic growth on the other side.

- Kayla Williams

Kayla Williams is the Director of the Center for Women Veterans at the Department of Veterans Affairs and author of *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the US Army* and *Plenty of Time When We Get Home: Love and Recovery in the Aftermath of War*

| Preface

I've been dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for nearly eight years and only recently acknowledged it. In those eight years, I was not the husband and father I set out to be in life. I love my children and they love me; I don't think I've been a bad father to them in any way. But I also know I haven't been my best. The woman I married was robbed of the man who was supposed to make her feel loved, beautiful, and desired. I was supposed to be her companion in raising children and building our family.

PTSD affected me in ways I am still discovering. I never saw my war experience as very traumatic and, when compared to the Marines and soldiers who cleared Fallujah, Iraq, or defended remote outposts in Afghanistan, I have a hard time saying anything was traumatic for me. But it doesn't matter; it still changed me. My brain chemistry was forever altered after my tours to Iraq, and possibly my later tours to Afghanistan. Writing is my therapy and this book is just a step in my recovery.

I also decided to write this book because I think America has the wrong impression about PTSD. I think Hollywood has portrayed combat vets as combative and

ready to explode at any moment. That may be true for a small percentage of us, but what I've witnessed is usually the opposite. It is soul-crushing anxiety and fear, bottled-up emotions, and a quiet, unfeeling existence. We're more likely to retreat to a corner or abandon a party then to choke slam the first guy that insults us. I think most combat veterans learn to cope with a majority of the after-effects without help, even if they are forever changed by their experiences. Others, like me, fail to acknowledge that most of the effects were related to our wartime experiences and neglect to deal with our PTSD-related issues.

I spent seven years thinking I might have PTSD, but didn't think I met the criteria. I never believed my experiences were very traumatic compared to what I would imagine many combat troops experienced. The life of a combat support soldier, after all, is far less kinetic and violent in most cases. However, almost everything I was passionate about in life changed after just one short tour in Iraq. My motivation and ability to be happy was stripped away because I ignored the warning signs. My anxiety, slowly growing until it exploded one day, was crippling my ability to function at my normal levels of enthusiasm and optimism.

Talking about it, admitting it, and dealing with it has helped me to regain proper emotional heath and while I may never be the man I once was, I believe happiness is once again within my reach. Life can be traumatic, but we veterans are resilient people and with the right help, we can overcome a decade of war and live happy, fulfilling lives. It all starts with knowing the subtle signs of PTSD and encouraging each other to seek help.

My wife of 11 years left me, and I believe the biggest reason we got to that point was because I didn't deal with PTSD. She is a large part of this story because she is the perfect example of how PTSD affected someone I loved more

than anything in this world. My inability to see what was happening to me, and her lack of knowledge about PTSD or how to deal with me after war, led to us falling out of love and to our marriage not working out. If this book paints her in a negative light in any way, please know that's not the intention. She is an amazing, strong woman who placed our family first and her own desires and needs second. I will never regret marrying her and will always believe she's the perfect mom for our children and that she was an awesome companion for over a decade.

Please know that this is just my own account. Take the time to research PTSD among combat veterans. It's usually not so easy to pinpoint our triggers or the source of our anxiety. We endured a lot of stuff, sometimes cruel and unimaginable, other times mundane but scary. I'm still on this trail and haven't reached the end, but starting the walk is the most important part.

Rather than just jumping right into my triggers, I've organized this book into three primary parts. I begin with a timeline of events to help you see how I viewed my own life and situations from the day I joined the Army, just after the events of 9/11, through the summer of 2014 when I finally admitted I had PTSD. I then analyze the anxiety and loss of emotions I felt after 2006, attempting to identify my own triggers of PTSD and the likely events that led to it. Finally, I talk about steps for identifying PTSD either for yourself, your loved one, or your friend with a short introduction to my road to recovery.

My main purpose for writing this book was to better understand my own emotional struggles. The reason I am publishing this personal account is because I really hope other veterans out there that feel the way I did may realize that help and a happy future are within our reach.

Chapter 1

It's hard to describe emotions that don't exist. It's hard to talk about feelings I no longer have. It's hard to look back at my last seven years and feel anything. And the worst part for me is that there is no one thing I can blame it on, no one thing that caused this. But I do know it's not who I am; it's not who I was—before going to Iraq at least. And while I may never be the man I once was, the true road to recovery is to start to feel, to allow those emotions to come, to allow myself to hurt, and to then start to heal.

No soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine is really prepared for what combat will do to his or her mind. We are persistently trained in survival; identifying, finding, and defeating the enemy; providing world-class logistics; and, persevering through pain and exhaustion. But no one is trained to cope with year-long (or more) tours to combat zones, working 12 to 18 hour days with barely a day off. This is regardless if we experienced death or violence day to day, just the mere knowledge that any moment could mean an explosion, mortar round, or bullet coming our way was enough to cause trauma.

We are all offered mental health screening as we return, as we return from combat, reunite with our loved ones and beloved country, and feel a general sense of safety and euphoria. But a few months later, as we realize we've shut off every good emotion in addition to the bad, it's really up to us to take the initiative to get help. And yes, it's readily available for those that are brave enough to admit they need it. Unfortunately, I was not one of them. I didn't allow myself to admit I had a problem because it all seemed so manageable. But I underestimated how much I had changed and how much it affected the ones I love.

I wasn't always unemotional and apathetic to the world around me. In fact, I was quite the opposite. As a college student, I would often be referred to as one of the happiest people on campus, always smiling and content. I found joy in the simplest of things. A few years later, as I was going through basic training at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina—just a month after 9/11 changed America for our generation— it was me that my fellow soldiers came to for encouragement. In fact, one soldier specifically came to me and said, "This really, really sucks and I know you're probably the only person here that can actually find something encouraging about today, so can you please tell me what it is?" And I did... it was a beautiful fall day outside and we were crawling through mud and getting paid for it. I think of that often now when I'm stuck in a cubicle plugging away at a computer and it is seventy degrees and sunny outside.

But Iraq broke my spirit. One of the things that kept me from seeking counseling was believing that my experiences didn't warrant help. After all, I never once had to fire my rifle at the enemy. I never had to fight my way out of a lopsided battle. I didn't come face to face with dead, mutilated bodies, and I was fortunate to never have lost a close friend. So why would I warrant mental health

counseling when there were soldiers who really needed it more than me? Well it turns out that we are all wonderfully made and my brain did the only thing it could to cope—it denied there ever was trauma.

And our military training probably didn't help matters much. We are trained early on to be mentally tough, to work our bodies and minds beyond their limits. Soldiers are faced with scary, daunting obstacles throughout their careers, and I commend each and every one of them for their bravery and perseverance. So it's times like right now, where I encourage anyone that can relate to what I'm about to write about to be brave again, acknowledge that this is something out of your control, and get the help you need.

Chapter 2

Almost daily I remind myself I'm a lucky person. I was born to great parents who love and respect me and did everything they could to make sure I had what I needed. I was born to a fairly middle-class family and never experienced starvation, poverty, or traumatic cultural or religious violence. I played sports, learned to play instruments, acted in theater shows, went on vacations, and attended a wonderful college. After my travels around the world, I have realized that I've lived a fairly privileged life.

Joining the military was not something I thought I'd ever do when I was young. However, by the time I actually joined, it had been on my mind for years. Almost every Nelson before me proudly wore the uniform, and I think part of me wanted to follow that tradition. My uncle, who was an Army recruiter at the time, first talked to me about it when I was a junior in college, and I realized I had never really considered it up to that point. But as a history major, I was fascinated with our country's military history. I began watching military movies and documentaries, reading more military history, and silently wanting to be a part of our storied traditions.

I graduated from Augsburg College on a cold, blustery day in December 2000 and immediately left Minneapolis, Minnesota, and drove non-stop to Charlottesville, Virginia. I had no real clue what I wanted to do with my life, just a head full of ideas. I originally thought I'd go to law school, but that faded completely by the end of my second year of school. Then I considered being a high school history teacher (and football coach) or a guidance counselor, but I didn't know if I'd ever be able to pay off my student loans if I pursued that line of work. So, there I was, in Charlottesville, Virginia, living with my parents.

Before long, I started really considering joining the military. I talked to the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) office at the University of Virginia about going through grad school and ROTC to earn a commission. I hopped in my car and drove all the way to Wisconsin to visit a dear friend of mine who was also thinking of joining the military. Together we took the ASVAB and talked to the recruiter about enlisting. She joined, I didn't. I drove back to Virginia knowing I wanted to join, but not able to commit.

So that is how I came to be a manager-in-training at a Budget Rent-a-Car in Charlottesville. I wasn't very passionate about it, but it was a job. Then one morning, I was driving through southern Albemarle County up US Highway 29 from my parent's house in North Garden, enjoying the beautiful mountain views and the way the sunlight was peeking over the mountaintops. I passed through Charlottesville and, as always, I eyed the signs for the University of Virginia and hoped I'd one day go there for a master's degree. And then I got to the Double Tree hotel, where we had a tiny little office in the lobby, and I noticed a group huddled around the small television set at TJ's Tavern, the hotel restaurant and bar.

I casually ignored them as I walked into the office, where my boss asked me if I had heard a plane crashed into

the World Trade Center. I kind of brushed it off thinking it was a small plane, and it was just an accident. But minutes later, one of the hotel porters peeked his head in and said a second plane had hit the other World Trade Center tower and there were rumors the Pentagon had been hit as well. I dropped everything and spent the next hour glued to the television, witnessing both towers collapsing. I still have a hard time explaining how I felt... anger or sadness doesn't really describe it well. I do know that I spent the entire night on the Army's website researching jobs and how to enlist. On September 12, 2001, I walked into the US Army recruiting center in Charlottesville to join the military and was sworn into the United States Army for the first time at the Richmond MEPS that Saturday, September 15th.

While a big part of my immediate decision to sign the paperwork was definitely patriotism, there's a good chance it would have happened regardless. The US Army was offering to pay off all forty thousand dollars of my college student loans, allowing me to start at the pay grade of E-4 (Specialist), and permitting me to pick my career field... all as long as I enlisted versus becoming a commissioned officer. It was an easy choice and I figured I could always seek a commission later if I liked the Army. To top it all off, they were going to send me to Monterey, California, to learn a foreign language.

After basic training in South Carolina, I flew to Monterey with at least fifteen other soldiers from basic training to attend the Defense Language Institute (DLI), Foreign Language Center. For the next year and a half, we attended intensive, eight-hour-a-day language training, with both physical training and common basic soldiering training before and after class.

It was at DLI that I met my wife. I was walking out of the dining facility (DFAC) one Sunday morning, and I saw this stunning blonde in her dress uniform. Being an

outgoing, confident guy, I didn't hesitate to talk to her. She doesn't remember this first conversation (she prefers to remember our second time meeting where she claims I was just creepily staring at her; I don't remember that part myself), but regardless, she kind of swept me off of my feet. Our talks of life, travel, and our amazingly similar worldview made my days of language learning and dealing with Army crap much more bearable.

In what I'll call young love and fear of losing each other to military separation, we decided to elope the same year we met. In a small ceremony of close friends on a balcony overlooking Monterey Bay, I married her on November 27, 2002. By the time I finished Korean language training at DLI in June of 2003, she was pregnant with our first child and decided to leave the Army and her Arabic language studies to be a full-time mother.

We had our first military separation as soon as I left DLI for technical training in West Texas. For five months I lived in the Army barracks while my wife stayed with family in Pennsylvania, enduring her first pregnancy mostly without me. I spent eight hours a day learning to be a cryptologic linguist, and we began learning of the many perils of long-distance marriage and trying to stay in love through phone calls.

We reunited in November of 2003 and together traveled to my first permanent duty station, Fort Campbell, Kentucky. In an ironic twist of fate, our marriage—because she was studying Arabic at the time—completely altered my military career. I had preliminary orders to go to Seoul, South Korea, a relevant duty station for a Korean linguist after all. However, the Army makes its best effort to keep Army couples together and there were not many options to co-locate a junior-enlisted Korean linguist and a junior-enlisted Arabic linguist. Even though she had decided to leave the military to be a full time mom, it was not until my

orders had already been issued. So even though I studied Korean and no longer had an Arabic linguist soldier-wife, I found myself in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) at a time when the entire division was deployed to northern Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom I.

Soon after arriving at Ft. Campbell, the rear detachment for my gaining unit (the soldiers that handle the administrative functions back home while the rest of the unit is deployed) decided I would not have to deploy to join the unit because my wife was about to give birth. In fact, on my first full day of rear-detachment duty, which involved scraping paint off of the floors of empty barracks rooms, my wife called me from Blanchfield Army Community Hospital to tell me they wanted to induce and deliver our baby that day, two weeks before his actual due date.

On December 15, 2003, we had our first baby and I took two weeks of leave to be with my family. By mid-way through the second week, we had received all of our household goods, moved into our first house together, entertained family members, and celebrated our first Christmas together in Tennessee (Fort Campbell is located on the border of Kentucky and Tennessee, and we rented a small house in Clarksville, Tennessee, from a woman that would become a dear, family friend to this day). I returned home one day to a voicemail from the rear-detachment commander, a sergeant first class whose name I no longer remember.

"Yeah um Specialist Nelson, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I need you to sign back in from leave. You're going to Iraq."

Chapter 3

"You're going to Iraq." Those words repeated in my head multiple times before I turned to my wife and repeated the message to her out loud. There was silence, and there was the shoulder shrug and helpless grin all too familiar among soldiers that just perfectly expresses, "guess there's nothing we can do but embrace the impending suck."

I returned his phone call and he told me to report the next morning to regular formation. I was very new to the unit; I'd only worked a half-day in reality. I didn't know anybody in the 311th Military Intelligence Battalion much less my own company, Delta Company. But that morning, I made my first four friends. All five of us were Korean linguists that had originally been told we wouldn't be deploying. The other four because they had just arrived to the unit from Korea, which as an overseas tour meant they would be given time back in the states before being asked to go overseas again - dwell time, as we called it.

It was already December of 2003 and our unit had deployed the previous February. Nobody had a clear answer of how long we would be deployed or what we'd be doing when we arrived. We were told the unit needed help with

redeployment—the process of returning soldiers and equipment from the deployment zone back to our home garrison—and it could be two weeks or six months, nobody knew. For the next four days, we were issued deployment gear, given extra immunizations (specifically anthrax and small pox), and shuttled through the deployment readiness process for a December 29th deployment date.

Back at home I had a two-week-old son and a wife who shared my fears. There were many unknowns and we had to have serious 'what-if' talks. I tried to keep it light-hearted, telling her that if I didn't come home, she'd easily find an awesome guy to love and take care of her. She didn't like that joke very much and our smiles quickly turned to tears. At one point, I was holding my son in my arms and tears just started to flow, and I prayed to God to please make sure I returned home to love this little boy and to be a good father to him.

I didn't let that fear bother me while I was at work, and probably tried too hard to pretend I had no worries about the deployment at all. And I'd say military-speaking, I had no real fear of the mission at hand; countless other soldiers had been there for nearly a year and while soldiers were dying on the battlefield, I didn't foresee that being my fate. After an emotional goodbye, where I asked my wife to simply drop me off and then go home to not lengthen the anticipation of separation, we boarded a flight at Fort Campbell and departed for Kuwait.

My total time away from home turned out to be just over one month. We departed December 29, 2003, and I was home with my wife and son on February 4, 2004. It was definitely a short tour, one that I would always have a problem calling an actual combat deployment.

The day after I arrived in Mosul, around the evening of January 2nd, our group of late arrivals flew into the Mosul airport aboard a C-130, in a combat landing that

made everybody want to projectile vomit their earlier lunch. We were put into transient tents near the tarmac and told to wait for our unit to come pick us up in the morning. That first night, none of us even had an issued weapon. But in the morning, a two-Humvee convoy arrived at the airport and a young private first class handed each of us a rusty M-4 carbine rifle and 210 rounds of ammunition. I asked for a cleaning kit and he laughed. Then we hopped into the back of the Humvee. Keep in mind that this was the first year of combat. We didn't have armored Humvees yet and here we were, sitting in the back of an open-air Humvee with rusty rifles.

Before deploying, we had received countless briefings about improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and the risk of attacks by Iraqis. We were told to be vigilant, keep our eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary, and watch for trash piles or other signs of disruption along the sides of the road that may indicate an IED emplacement. I can't even begin to tell you how comical those briefings seemed as we exited Mosul airport onto the streets of Iraq's second-largest city. Within minutes we were traveling through a city with traffic similar to Washington, D.C., with Iraqi children trying to sell us water bottles over the side of our truck and trash piles lined up on both sides of the street for our entire cross-city convoy. In other words, every single thing I saw would be classified as a threat according to our briefings, and at one point, both my friend and I had switched our M-4s from safe to semi-automatic as a kid with a stick pointed his imaginary gun at us. It was at that very moment when I realized my life was really no longer in my hands anymore. So I did the only thing I could do: I accepted that fate and never feared for my safety again.

In our very short time at D-Main, the headquarters for the 101st Airborne Division under the leadership of then-Major General David Petraeus, we would be mortared and

face sniper fire... and we would venture onto the streets of Mosul in our unarmored convoys, but I don't ever remember being afraid for my life. I had already given up that fear. This didn't mean I became reckless; as a soldier I followed my training and listened to the orders and advice of those that had been there longer than me (which was just about everybody).

The work was mundane and unrewarding. Despite being a military intelligence soldier, I spent the short deployment on convoy security, guard duty, and helping to pack countless shipping containers full of gear to return to the States. We were given one 15-minute phone call by satellite phone each week to communicate back home and could also get 15-minute chunks of internet at a Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) trailer on the base, as long as there was no one in line. Being the outgoing person I am, I made friends with the Turkish contractor that operated the MWR trailer and he would accidentally reset my timer if he knew I was talking to my wife. It was wonderful to be able to communicate back home, and I made a conscience decision to never tell her of the dangers, only that it was very safe and things were going well. But I hated that deployment; it made me question if I had even made the right decision in joining the Army.

If it were not for what lied ahead, I would have a hard time saying that trip to Iraq was even a combat deployment. But being the first year of conflict, the Army had not begun leaving equipment in place and signing it over to gaining units. Instead, the entire 101st Airborne Division would drive their trucks from northern Iraq back down to Kuwait in multiple waves of long ground assault convoys (GACs). Our GAC involved multiple trucks from the headquarters company of the 311th Military Intelligence Battalion, escorted by multiple gun trucks from the 187th Infantry Regiment, "Rakkasan" (the 101st Airborne Division's 3rd

brigade), and AH-64 Apache gun ships. The GAC took three days of exhausting, long drives with short rests sleeping on rocks beneath or beside our trucks and quick pushes through violent areas like Tikrit and Baghdad.

During the entire GAC, I was tense and on edge for what many of us believed would be an inevitable attack or IED on our convoy. By some miracle, it never came and our only harrowing moment was when one of our trucks skidded, causing its trailer to jack-knife just beside a village. For about two hours we stood guard over our stalled convoy as the villagers looked on.

My short tour concluded with about eight or nine of the most boring days of my life living in a warehouse in Kuwait waiting for a flight home. I spent my twenty-sixth birthday in a warehouse in Iraq scared of being blamed for throwing peanuts at a sergeant first class that threatened to smoke the living hell out of whoever was guilty... and I had a can of peanuts in my lap. But in a way, that week made my return home so much more pleasant. I had a week to forget about the GAC and to forget about Mosul, even though my stay was so short. I often think of my fellow soldiers and how they must have felt after being there so long, but I couldn't relate.

On February 4, 2004, we marched into a hanger at Fort Campbell with our family members in the bleachers ready to meet their soldiers. My wife was holding our now seven-week-old son in her arms, and I still remember how great it felt to give her a hug and a kiss and to hold my son again. There was not a sad thought to be had and never any thought that my short tour may have started an emotional change I wouldn’t notice for nearly ten years.

Chapter 4

Garrison life in the tactical Army can be pretty frustrating, but following a deployment it can be downright boring. For months after returning, we had no equipment because it was all being repaired, and we had nothing to do. My Korean linguist friends and I conned our way into a month-long Korean course on base, but even after that, it seemed like there was nothing to do but physical training and sitting around the platoon office.

Home life had changed as well. Leaving with a two-week old son and returning five weeks later proved to be harder than it sounds. In that short period of time, home life had drastically changed. My wife had developed a routine, knew where everything was in the house, and was dealing with all of the changes included in being a first-time mother. For me, I returned to countless reintegration briefings telling me to ease back into home life instead of just jumping right back into the mix.

Looking back, I probably wasn't gone long enough to have to worry so much about reintegration. But I listened to those briefings and tried to apply it at home, thinking I was being a good man for it. But in reality, I never actually told

my wife of that plan so I probably seemed like a lazy piece of crap for not jumping in and helping immediately!

Before I left, I would wake up at night when my son cried and offer to help. There was nothing I could do as my wife was breastfeeding, but I thought it was important to make that effort and she often pleaded for me to go back to sleep for my own benefit. I changed diapers, I cleaned up the house, and on one occasion, when she couldn't sleep because an air filter was making a wheezing sound, I got dressed at 2am, headed to Wal-Mart, bought a new air filter, and installed it so that she could sleep.

But when I got home, I did nothing. I could have easily re-assimilated and helped to form our family routine, but I relied on her to tell me what to do and, in her mind, she was just waiting for me to do it. For the first time, we started to experience real frustration with each other, but I would never have called us unhappy. The reality of it was, I felt less comfortable at home and more of my thoughts turned to work. The Army was my new high and all I wanted to do was be an awesome soldier.

There was quite a division among our unit back at Fort Campbell between those that deployed and those that didn't. I had deployed to Iraq and earned the privilege of wearing the 101st Airborne's famed screaming eagle patch on my right arm (indicating I had gone to combat with the unit). In a way, my five weeks deployed meant that I was in the club. But inside my head, I felt like an impostor. So I made it my goal to work really hard, be the best soldier possible, and earn my right to say I belonged in the 101st.

As the Army began to transform, the 101st gained a 4th brigade and reinstated the famed 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment "Currahee"—made famous by Stephen Ambrose and HBO's "Band of Brothers." They asked for volunteers to join this new unit and claimed there would be no deployments for three years. Joining meant I would have

to extend my Army obligation by one year, which I was happy to do: to join a famed Army unit and get three years to spend at home with my wife and child.

I was the 202nd founding member of the 4th Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 506th Regimental Combat Team "Currahee," 4th Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). The first year in our newly founded unit, I focused on training. I completed the Army's Primary Leadership Development Course, competed for the honor graduate and leadership award—but fell short on both—and was recommended for promotion to sergeant, a non-commissioned officer. I completed the Ted Sabaulaski Air Assault School—called the ten toughest days in the Army—where we learned the basics of helicopter operations, sling-loading, rappelling, and fast-roping. The training ended with a twelve-mile foot march that had to be completed in less than three hours, and I injured both of my knees at about the seven-mile mark while running downhill (something that would greatly affect my Army career in later years). But I finished in the required time and proudly wore the Air Assault wings on my uniform. We received new gear, attended training courses, and before long I was looked upon as one of the new unit's 'combat veterans' and leaders. While part of me was ashamed to call myself a combat veteran, I didn’t show it and actually, I shamefully used it to my advantage. I couldn't deny that I at least had some personal experiences the newer soldiers did not have. Because of this, I made every effort to be a knowledgeable trainer and mentor, and also a reliable leader, as I became a team leader in our platoon.

It didn't take long for the deployment rumors to start. The timing couldn't have been worse. My wife and I were expecting our second child and our unit was scheduled for a month-long training exercise in Louisiana. That was when we first heard rumors of another division-wide deployment

to Iraq, to include the new 4th brigade. When our newly-born daughter was just two weeks old, our unit packed our bags and drove to Fort Polk, Louisiana, to the Joint Readiness Training Center, and I left behind another new baby amid fears of what lied ahead and whether or not I would be deployed again that year.

Sometimes in the Army, it's the unknown that affects families the most. I have all the respect in the world for military spouses because many can never know just what they signed up for when they fell in love with a service member. The next few months we watched the rumors become warning orders of a potential late-2005 deployment to Iraq. It was already June before we knew for sure the Army intended to deploy us to Baghdad. It was quite an emotional time in our house as we now had two young children, and we weren't expecting another deployment until at least 2007, based on the 'three years of no deployments' promise.

The remainder of 2005 was very stressful in our household as our unit rushed us through intensive training in reflexive fire, clearing buildings, live-fire convoys, reacting to IEDs, combative mixed-martial arts fighting, and firing as many rounds as possible before packing our bags for a year. While many units try to give their soldiers time at home before deployment, we were rushing to fit in so much in such a short period of time that I believe we spent even less time at home as we neared our November deployment date. It was so bad at one point that as I would pull up in the driveway, my wife would open a beer for me and just hand it to me, with no words spoken, as I walked in the door. I tried my best to play with my two babies as much as possible, but there's no way to deny I was dreading a full year of combat and being away from my family.

Sometimes when we know we are going to miss something, we start to mistreat it—maybe our mind's way of

preparing for the loss. My wife and I talked less, had less sex, argued more, and generally had a miserable last two months together before she dropped me off at Fort Campbell again to catch a flight to Kuwait. But just one full day after I left, she wrote me the saddest email ever about how she could barely breathe or motivate herself to do anything. I don't think I ever loved her more in my life than at the beginning of that deployment.

| Chapter 5

The Army has a funny way of prioritizing training. Most of our pre-deployment training focused on infantry-like fighting skills. However, our platoon had highly sensitive and sophisticated technological gear and required a level of technical knowledge we had spent a total of five weeks practicing before we left the States. What that meant for us was that for our first month of the deployment, we were so busy learning new things and becoming familiar with the environment and intelligence targets that I hardly had any time to think about missing home. Make no mistake, I missed my wife and kids greatly, but my mind was fully engaged on accomplishing our mission.

Deployment had changed a lot in the nearly two years I was home. For one thing, we now only exited our secure compound ('leaving the wire') in armored Humvees in no less than three vehicle convoys. We also had great access to telephone and internet services; most of us paid up to one hundred twenty dollars a month for low-speed personal internet in our rooms. It was good enough for MySpace and the video chat service of preference.

As our skill and knowledge of East Baghdad increased, so did our unit's aggressiveness in removing terrorists from the battlefield. Without getting into the sensitive nature of our work or missions, I worked with ten of the smartest minds in the 101st Airborne Division (not really, but we believed it anyway) and together we compiled a full list of targets and helped our unit capture or kill most of them. The more successful we were outside the wire, the more the militia and terrorists targeted us with attacks.

In March, under four months into my yearlong tour, I returned home to Clarksville just in time for my daughter's first birthday party. For ten days, I took walks, played at playgrounds, traveled to visit family, celebrated a birthday, and enjoyed happy times with my family and no real conversation about Iraq except that it sucked being away from home and we were working long hours. Then on a beautiful spring day, we played on the grass in front of Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame knowing that in just one hour, I had to report to the airport to fly back to combat.

I think that last few hours were the worst. I had lots of thoughts of how I could get out of going back. Could I go to the hospital and tell them my knees were hurting too bad to go back? I did, after all, injure them the previous year at Air Assault School, and the Army had seen it fit to just offer me lots of Ibuprofen. Oh and yes, they hurt pretty badly every day, but I had just gotten used to living with it (with the help of pain killers). There was also my shoulder, which I had laughingly injured after falling down while doing a cartwheel in Monterey. But in my defense, our drill sergeants leading physical training told us to do them and the grass was wet.

But no, none of that was going to happen; there was no way I was going to not return to my fellow soldiers. I kept staring at my daughter wishing I could just hug her forever, sad to have missed her learning to crawl. I laughed

with my son, just wishing I could be home to watch him learn to walk and say more words than just 'moo.' I stared at my wife, so sad she had to raise our children without me, but thankful she had wonderful friends at home, also taking care of their children while their husbands were with me in Iraq. And then, in the saddest moment of all, I hopped out of our van, grabbed my duffle bag, put on my Army Combat Uniform patrol cap, and gave my family a final hug, kiss, and wave goodbye at the airport.

I often classify my time in Iraq up to mid-tour leave as being too busy to really miss home. We were so busy learning, experimenting, and figuring out how to operate. But after leave, that part was done and we had begun full-scale operations as a coordinated, organized fighting force. I'd say my remaining seven and a half months after I returned were pure traumatic, and on any given day, I could do nothing but miss my wife, my kids, and being home.

It all started in early April when we finally decided to capture one our top targets. My friend had completed most of the legwork, but in a twist of fate, he was on mid-tour leave as we finally received enough information to go after the guy. So that meant it was on me. On a muggy evening, I joined our artillery battalion on a raid for our then-number one target in the Zafriniyah neighborhood of eastern Baghdad. It was my second actual mission of the tour, my first being a simple reconnaissance patrol; other previous trips outside of the wire had only been convoys back and forth to other bases in Baghdad.

The night started out almost disastrous when our newly installed surveillance system shorted out our truck's electrical system while already outside the wire. We lost air conditioning and our top speed was about twenty m.p.h., much slower than the forty-five m.p.h. the other trucks were going. I should note that the air conditioning in the Humvees was not for convenience. In the heat of Baghdad, I

used to tell people it was just enough to keep us from keeling over in heat stroke. We lost all radio communications and the first two trucks of our assault force were quickly pulling away from us. Luckily we had a truck behind us too and we were able to reunite a few blocks from the objective. There's nothing like driving through Baghdad in a mostly disabled truck. What was even worse is that I was so focused on trying to get my equipment working again after the electrical short that, by the time I got it fired up on battery power, we were already at the target house so I dropped everything and joined the raid, already seeped in sweat.

I was with artillerymen, but make no mistake, they operated swiftly and efficiently like highly trained infantrymen. Within minutes we had cleared the objective house and gently cleared the neighboring homes. We did not know what our target looked like, and nobody we captured had claimed to be him in initial questioning. Another soldier and I began clearing out buildings across the street just in case he saw our assault force coming and was hiding out. At one point I realized we were more than one hundred meters from any other soldiers and were surrounded by four small out-buildings with no natural light anywhere near us. Together we cleared the four buildings and, at each door kick, I was convinced we were going to get shot. It just seemed like the stupidest thing to be doing and so I almost thought we deserved it. But lucky us... all empty.

The soldier and I entered the target home and began searching everything. We looked for weapons, IED-making materials, identification cards, electronics, or anything else we could use as evidence or to confirm the target's identity. I found an identification card with his picture and targeted name clearly written on it (according to our interpreter of course) and with that, we were able to confirm that we had

in fact captured our target and could head back home after three hours at the objective.

I could tell stories like this ad nauseam, but I wanted to just highlight this first one. At no real point in the mission did the enemy directly threaten our lives. There were no IEDs, no gunshots fired, and no resistance to our raid. Yet much like my first ride through Mosul, I reminded myself that my survival out here is hardly in my own hands. As we were clearing the out-buildings, I didn't have an ounce of fear, anxiety, or concern for my own safety even though I thought it was stupid.

The other reason I wanted to tell this story is because after we captured this Shia militia leader, attacks on our small forward operating base (FOB) began intensifying. We went from almost no attacks during my first four months to sometimes five-day-a-week mortar and rocket attacks. IEDs against our convoys also increased, and we targeted the militia for their use of the deadly explosively formed penetrator (EFP) IEDs that would almost always leave at least one soldier dead and another without a limb.

Our pace of operations was intense. For many of us, we worked no less than twelve hours a day and on days with missions outside the wire, we sometimes found ourselves awake for twenty-four to forty-eight hours straight. In addition to our analytical work being done on the FOB—think PowerPoint slides—we were planning and conducting two to three tactical missions a week to capture or kill terrorists operating in our area. What every soldier also knows is that no deployment is complete without frequent weapons and equipment maintenance, administrative tasks, formations, online trainings, guard duty rotations, babysitting of problem soldiers, counseling of soldiers for monetary or family problems back home, physical training, promotion boards, soldier of the month boards, room inspections (yes, these happened sometimes

even in Iraq), and the monthly counseling statements—I wrote up to nine a month for the soldiers I supervised on and off through our many platoon reorganizations throughout the year.

Then there were the real POGs, people other than grunts. Granted, as combat support military intelligence soldiers, we were definitely labeled POGs too, but I'm talking about the ones that worked bankers hours, took multiple thirty-minute breaks a day at the MWR, and refused to provide services outside of their eight-hour-a -day duty hours. In our situation, that was mainly our battalion support offices that tended to lose our administrative paperwork, confuse our requested mid-tour leave dates, and deny our paperwork for small clerical errors they could have easily fixed. While on deployment, there's no greater frustration than having to fix your own administrative issues, but only at the convenience of an admin clerk who's currently at the MWR playing checkers. Of course, these were also the soldiers that proudly wore their Combat Action Badges they earned that one time our building got hit with a mortar…the same building all of us were in at the time, but none of us would ever dare submit paperwork for that award without at least some risk of personal danger.

To add to all of this, there were those we left at home. For the single soldiers, there were concerns for their parents and siblings. I knew of at least two soldiers that had never even told their families they were deployed to the combat zone. For married soldiers or soldiers with children back home, there was a constant balance of sharing our lives in Iraq without scaring our loved ones. We learned to downplay the indirect fire attacks, IEDs, and work stress and put on our smiles and complete our theatrical act of seeming to care about the routines back home. Sometimes it was really hard to fake it.

We also had married soldiers discovering their spouses were lying, stealing, cheating, or doing other unimaginable things back home while we were in Baghdad trying to survive. All of these things caused anxiety and reduced focus, but also made us all hate being in Baghdad that much more.

I think that if I had returned home after six months, I could have recovered with a little bit of help. I may have been willing to talk about everything I had experienced up to that point. But the second six months of the deployment, my mood changed. I was no longer able to smile. I became angry at the smallest offenses and found myself arguing with superiors. I started having trouble sleeping or caring about whether or not I lived or died. For the last four months of my tour, I started wishing I would get hit with an IED or mortar in a way that would only injure me, but not kill me, so that I could go home early. I was even debating which body parts and how much of them I'd be willing to lose to get out of Iraq. I feel very guilty for having any of those thoughts knowing that friends and fellow service members have suffered that fate and probably never wished it upon any living soul, much less themselves.

At one particular low-point, I started leaving my weapon places. I believe I was a responsible, reliable soldier in our unit—definitely not the best soldier, but usually considered among the best. When I started making mistakes, it got the attention of my leadership. My company commander showed compassion when he found my weapon sitting in a training room following an equipment inventory. He asked me if I was doing ok, and of course I answered that I was just peachy. But he was concerned and told me that it is hard to motivate and hold soldiers accountable if their leaders are making mistakes. I never left my weapon lying around again. But it was just a small demonstration that I was losing focus and getting sloppy.

I earned a four-day retreat to a nice base in Baghdad by the U.S. Embassy complete with video games, a pool, and decent food called Freedom Rest. It was designed for soldiers to relieve stress and get a break, and it was not something just given away, it was earned. I earned two of those weekends but gave them to my subordinate soldiers instead of going myself because I couldn't stomach the thought of relaxing while they were working. But at my lowest point, my platoon sergeant cornered me in a room and with a straight face demanded I go on a four-day rest and recuperation (R&R) trip to Doha, Qatar.

It was while sitting at a Doha shopping mall, sipping a Starbucks, that I realized just how much I missed real life. My platoon sergeant was right to send me away for a few days; I was starting to be very angry and less effective. I don't like to admit to ever being 'stressed-out' but if ever there was a time in my life where I was, it was just before heading to Doha in August of 2006. I spent four days going off-roading on sand dunes, having luaus on the beach, swimming in the Persian Gulf (which was more like going into a hot tub), playing video games, watching movies, getting massages, and most importantly, drinking two beers a day. When I boarded the C-17 to return to Baghdad, I believe I may have actually still had a smile on my face.

By the time I returned to FOB Loyalty in East Baghdad, I was able to start the infamous countdown. I've never been a fan of countdowns and had only used it one other time, while separated from my wife in Texas. But by the time I returned from Doha, it was Labor Day and I only had nine more weeks to endure Baghdad. In eight weeks our replacements would arrive, and I could mentally start letting go of the job, or so I thought.

One thing that I've learned about the Army is that as a unit's deployment starts to wind down, operations start to pick up. I have always attributed it to commanders wanting

to make their last hurrah and chalk up some final successes for their legacy and officer evaluation reports. And so my final nine weeks in Baghdad, we worked longer hours and conducted more tactical missions than the previous six months combined.

It was during the final push that I almost got my wish multiple times. You know, the hope to get hit by an IED or mortar so I could go home early? Only, now I was already almost home so that desire was kind of gone! In that final push, my truck would be the intended target of two IED strikes; our entire assault force would find itself trapped—surrounded by approximately two hundred villagers throwing rocks and firing at us with assault rifles—a mortar would strike the opposite side of the wall I was sleeping next to one morning; my team would participate on a raid against an alleged suicide bomber safe house; and, I found myself a marked man to one our most dangerous targets.

But I made it. Once our replacements arrived, the same leadership that knew I had endured too much at one point decided I would be among the first to return home. They called it a reward for my hard work and while some leaders tried to block the early exit—one actually stated, "But who will train the replacements?"—I found myself boarding a CH-47 Chinook from FOB Loyalty by the end of the first week of November 2006.

Chapter 6

Rejoining my family after over eleven months apart was amazing. I had never felt so happy than when I was walking back into that hangar and seeing my family. I was a little sad that they forgot a camera to capture the moment for me, but I got over that quickly as I held my two kids close and kissed my wife.

Our first night, we put the kids to bed and had a little adventure. We settled onto the couch with a glass of wine and my wife looked up to find a guy staring at us through our living room window. Nothing like returning home to a peeping Tom! Then that night, I woke up at three a.m. to the sounds of gunfire in the neighborhood, followed by police sirens. It was funny that I had just left the most dangerous city in the world, and my first night back in Clarksville, Tennessee, my fight or flight senses were triggered twice.

After a short few days of reintegration training on post, I took a lot of time off to be with my family. I held my kids, we went on walks, we all held each other, and we smiled a lot.

It's hard to put into writing what it's like to return from combat and readjust to family life. For me, my mind

was very preoccupied with the deployment and what was happening in Baghdad. It was hard to just relax and live in the moment. I imagine my wife, who had run this household her way for a year, saw my return as another person she had to take care of now. On deployment, food was always available, I didn't really have anything to clean, and I definitely had no actual children to take care of, just soldiers. So on top of the additional burden of taking care of another person, she had to do it while all along I was barely talking about my experiences and hardly excited to do anything except holding my kids and thinking about work.

I'm not really sure where or when the problems really began. In fact, we have still not really talked about it at that level of detail. We made it through Thanksgiving, my son's third birthday, and Christmas with smiles on our faces. But sometime after the New Year, as my unit all returned from leave with their families, I noticed I was having a very hard time letting go of the 'mission.' Returning to garrison life after deployment is a surreal experience. Soldiers that excel in the combat environment often suffer in garrison life. We worked three- and four-day weeks for the entire months of January and February, our unit's way of slowly working our way back to the off-deployment training cycle, and the pace was just way too slow for me.

During those shortened weeks, time with the family was supposed to be the number one priority, but I couldn't make my brain stop wanting to work. I was finding work to do around the office, taking on additional duties such as the unit information management officer and unit prevention leader (a.k.a. piss test sergeant). I was making platoon key logs and standard operating procedures and as everybody was heading for the door at three p.m., I was trying to find something extra to do before going back home. I was avoiding home. I just wanted to work.

January to July of 2007 is all kind of a blur. It was my last seven months as a Screaming Eagle, and it just seems like so much happened. I started spending more time with my squad, which included many more get-togethers at my house. My squad was like family to me and my wife was like the squad mother, as most of them were single. She'd cook for us, tend to our needs, and then we'd leave her at home with the kids to go drink in Nashville or the bars of Clarksville. Don't get me wrong, she didn't let me do this all the time, but it's the fact that I preferred doing that to spending an evening with my family that should have worried me.

Then one day our 1st Sergeant (1SG-the senior enlisted leader in a company, which in our case consisted of about 150 soldiers) called a select handful of us into his office. He started slowly, "I've called you in here because all of you have an ETS [End Term of Service a.k.a. day we get out of the Army] date between 1 November 2007 and 1 February 2009. The 506th Regimental Combat team has been scheduled for deployment to Afghanistan in February 2008 and based on Army regulations, all soldiers ETSing within 90 days of a scheduled deployment are hereby placed in a stop-movement and stop-loss status. My heart sank. It was only February; we had only been home three months, and we were already on the next deployment schedule. I asked about terminal leave—using my remaining leave balance to essentially leave the Army early—and my 1SG stated that it was based solely on ETS date so that wouldn't make a difference.

Just to describe a few of these terms, stop-movement meant that I would not be able to leave Fort Campbell for another duty station. A popular way to avoid deployment is to reenlist in the Army for 'duty station of choice' and get a spot at a non-deploying unit somewhere. But if there is a stop-movement, 'duty station of choice' cannot happen until

after the stop-movement is released, or in this case, after deployment. Stop loss meant that the Army could keep you on active duty status even if you were past your contracted Army service end date. They can do this to any active duty soldier, regardless of number of years served. This to me is not a back door draft or unfair practice, it's something every single soldier agreed to when they signed their enlistment or commissioning contracts. The U.S. Government made it very clear that in exchange for a paycheck, training, and serving our country, they could ask us to continue doing it at any time we were still on active duty or up to eight years from time of enlistment. Oh yeah, that: the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR). If a soldier leaves the service any time before eight years, the Army can require them to return to active duty if needed—all the way up to eight years from the time of enlistment. It's not a scam, it's something we all knew and agreed to when we signed the dotted line. A fifteen-month deployment to Afghanistan would mean I'd be stop-lossed for the entire tour, plus ninety days before and after.

There was nothing to fight and nothing to complain about. My instant thought was that if I hadn't extended to join this unit, my ETS date would have been October 25, 2006, and I would not have been part of the stop-loss. But just the previous December I had also made the decision to extend my enlistment to accept a promotion to Staff Sergeant; if I had not done that, my ETS date would have been October 25, 2007, and I still would have been safe. I went home, head hung down, and told my wife the news. Her response was terse, "No. You're not going back. I'm not doing this again. I will leave the kids here and drive home to Pennsylvania, and you'll have to tell your unit you can't deploy because you have to take care of the kids." It was a radical statement; I had to clarify one part of it. "You mean you'd leave and I'd say you left me, but you're really not leaving me right?" She agreed that yes, this would be

temporary—just long enough to keep me from having to deploy again. I told her that would mean she could not come back at all until the troops were home, and she knew there would be no way she could go a year or more without her kids. To add more stress, she was pregnant with our third baby at the time. (The post-deployment baby boom around military bases is a fun phenomenon—I highly recommend searching that on the internet!)

It was in this mindset that we went to the 506th Regimental Ball in Nashville, in fact, it was the same week in February. It was so great to see everybody in our dress uniforms and when I go through the pictures from that evening, it's one of the highlights of my military career. Our regimental/brigade commander was a fine man, Colonel Thomas Vail. I had the pleasure of briefing him often during our deployment, and we had spoken many times informally as well. He had my respect and, I believe, I had earned his as well. At the Regimental Ball, he actually walked up to my table with his wife and specifically introduced me to her and I introduced my wife to them. He then pointedly asked me, "Sergeant Nelson, what are your plans now?"

I answered frankly, "Sir, I'm actually not sure anymore. I was hoping to leave the Army and be with my family more, but now it looks like I'm under stop-movement and stop-loss. I considered re-enlisting to a non-deployable unit; I mean sir, I'm not opposed to deploying again, but I have young children and another on the way so it would be nice to spend some quality time at home first."

He replied almost instantly, "Go see the retention office and if you want to re-enlist and go somewhere else, I'll sign a release for you to be able to move before the deployment. The Army needs more people like you so if that's what it takes to keep you in the Army, I'll do it."

I was a bit floored. Our brigade commander had just given us a way out, even though it meant serving more time

in the Army. My final month in Iraq, I made the promotion list for staff sergeant, but it required having one year time in service remaining to actually pin on the rank. From Baghdad, I called my career branch manager and he offered me reassignment to Hawaii, a three-year, usually non-deployable strategic job. I didn't take it because we decided it would be better to just leave the Army. So I turned down the November 1st promotion and flew home a sergeant. But after I got home we discussed it more, and my wife encouraged me to take the promotion and just extend to meet the one-year deadline because I deserved it.

So that's what I did and, in December 2006, I was promoted to staff sergeant (E-6). What that meant was that I was now eligible for a Training and Doctrine Command assignment. With Hawaii no longer available, I went to retention and asked for a four-year reenlistment with reassignment to either the language school in Monterey, California, or the technical school in San Angelo, Texas. With my wife's full support, I reenlisted in March 2007 with a July report date to Goodfellow Air Force Base, San Angelo, Texas—a minimum three-year, non-deployable assignment as an instructor.

With so much going on before moving to Texas, I would venture to say my wife and I were rarely intimate. In March, she miscarried just at the end of the first trimester, and while both of us were sad, I don't believe I really showed much emotion about it. Our children were hitting new milestones... or not. We realized our son was suffering from a little known about disorder called Apraxia. At three years old, he could still only say one word (moo), could not drink from a straw, could not jump or balance well when walking, and was slowly being surpassed in development by his fifteen-month younger sister. That meant a lot of struggles with Tricare—the military's insurance program—and scheduling appointments at the Blanchfield Army

Community Hospital on Fort Campbell, which was required for referrals and follow-up appointments. While my wife took on navigating that world, I was busy training new arrivals and diving deeper into the only world I felt comfortable—as a soldier.

In all of the moving parts, I don't remember us taking serious time to just talk about the deployment or our struggles and, for the first time in our marriage, we were arguing or ignoring each other frequently. I loved my children, but approached the situation methodically and analytically, with very little emotion. For her, I imagine she just wanted her compassionate husband back.

I was not content being at home. My entire life I always imagined how great it would be to be a husband with a loving wife and to be a father to amazing children. Right before my eyes I had a wife I found beautiful and loving and two children that could melt my heart. But I was not content being home. I found myself sitting on the couch staring out the window, or more likely enjoying my other solace—messing around on a computer. Instead of helping her with my son's medical struggles or playing with either of my kids, or just sitting and talking to my wife about how she was feeling, I was learning how to build WordPress websites, improving my ability to use Adobe PhotoShop, editing photos of the kids, learning about blogging, or exploring web-design tutorials. I could sense the mounting frustration as I grunted each time she asked me to do something. She would often tell me she felt like she was walking on eggshells around me, never knowing how I would respond to simple requests. So like any person would likely do, she stopped asking. As a person very passionate about treating women well, I now feel very guilty about putting her in this situation, but at the time I felt so unemotional and I didn't know how to change.

I started becoming heartless. On one occasion, we were driving along I-24 near Clarksville and the radio announced a soldier from Fort Campbell had died in an enemy attack in Iraq leaving behind a wife and two children. My wife commented that it was so sad to hear and my response was, "Well he was a soldier. At least he died for something and not something lame like a car accident." She glared at me in disbelief and said, "That's the most heartless thing I think I've ever heard you say." Amazingly, I had absolutely no emotion about what I said or how she responded and just shrugged my shoulders and kept driving.

I could sense I was being unemotional and discontent with life, but I really had no clue what to do about it. I kept figuring I'd snap out of it soon, or maybe a change of environment would fix the problem. I can only imagine my wife's own frustration as her face would light up at each new milestone our children achieved while I just slowly shook my head up and down trying to portray approval. In my head, though, I just wasn't feeling anything. I loved my kids dearly, but I found it hard to show my true emotions towards them - as if they were just somehow turned off. I was in this emotional funk when we packed our belongings and moved to Texas.

Chapter 7

Texas was kind of awesome for me. It was a place I could recover physically after four years in a light infantry division. It was a place I could work without fear of being sent back to Iraq. It was a place to work a standard work schedule doing something I loved: training soldiers. When I look back, I think it may have been a much better time in my marriage too, but sometimes I see things through a completely different lens. It was as if that change in environment actually did help my morale.

As an Army instructor for new cryptologic linguists, I was able to focus on remembering how to do my actual Army job as a Korean linguist, a skill I had not used since attending the course I was now about to teach. Having something other than Iraq to focus on helped me to stop thinking about the deployment.

It was also great to get real medical care again. Shortly after arriving at the Air Force Base, my Air Force doctor took one look at my very large medical file, which included countless pain relievers, physical therapy, and even a now permanent profile stating that I was no longer required to run. My knees were in very bad shape and my

shoulder was causing me a lot of problems too. But being at a smaller, non-tactical base, he had no issues referring me to an orthopedic specialist.

It turned out that during that twelve-mile foot march in September of 2004, I had torn my lateral meniscus in both knees. I did a year-long deployment, countless foot marches, and many miles on those knees in the three years between injury and diagnosis. As a former athlete that always took joy in my ability to run and jump, it was humbling to undergo knee surgery and the follow-up therapy and limitations. Even worse was the weight gain. There are few things more stressful as a thick-bodied soldier than being over the acceptable weight or body fat standards. In late 2007 and early 2008, I had surgeries to remove torn lateral meniscus from each knee and after each, I gained at least ten pounds.

I really didn't know my future in the Army, but I didn't want to spend the next three years worried about going on the Army Weight Control Program. It would have been humiliating to my pride! I tried to make the best of it and even took over our unit's profile PT—physical training for injured soldiers who were limited in activity in one way or another. I think I made the best of a poor situation and many of my students would thank me for taking care of them during our PT sessions instead of just telling them to walk for an hour.

While it was not something I expressed a lot, my changing body really affected my own self-confidence and my physical relationship with my wife. In addition to struggling to feel any real emotions at home, I now had a negative self-image to compete with as well. I never really knew what anxiety was and never figured out that I had it until I had my first true anxiety attack in 2013. However, now that I've learned more about it, I realize my anxiety actually started almost immediately after returning from

Iraq in 2006. Even though my wife was now again pregnant and we were expecting a third child, I don't think we ever have a healthy sex life again. I think my lower self-esteem and anxiety were definitely to blame, though the way I pushed her away after Iraq also completely affected our ability to communicate with each other freely, making it impossible to fix the problem.

So when I think of the successes I was having as an instructor, getting my knees fixed, and the joy of having a third baby, I often think Texas was a happy time. But when I think about the many social events or days I was fake smiling and pretending to have fun, I realize that in my head, I was having a hard time being content. I knew I was in a good situation and had made good friends, but when I look at pictures and remember our parties, I remember that I felt... nothing.

I think another reason I think happy thoughts about Texas was because the Army decided that my two knee surgeries and my definite shoulder injury were enough to initiate a medical board to determine if I was healthy enough to be a soldier. It was an exciting thought to me, getting out of the Army. I really didn't want to be active duty any more despite my love for the military, our country, and the definite pride I felt each time I saw myself in uniform. But after Iraq, I mentally knew that all I wanted to do was be home with my family. Even though I didn't feel much, I did know that my family was the most important thing in the world.

I know I couldn't have been too happy because I was constantly thinking of the next thing I could do that would be better. I was exploring some of the Army's special mission units, which were known for being a little more relaxed on the formal Army standards, but also for having a very intense operational tempo with frequent deployments. I was considering jobs I could do if I were to get out of the

Army. I was trying to find clients to build websites for and even traded a website for free sandwiches at a local restaurant. And I think I was doing better as a father, but I'll never think I did good enough. One thing I do know is that my wife and I were spending more time together, but our conversations were becoming less and less personal. By the time I left Texas, I didn't feel like I knew my wife as well as I should, but I didn't have the emotional capability to do anything about it.

When I got the notice I was going to be medically retired in November of 2008, I was so excited. It was the first true joy I think I had felt in over a year outside of my love for my kids. It's ridiculous to make that statement considering the friends I had made and the good things that were happening in our lives in Texas. But I was slowly losing the capability to feel any true joy or content.

We packed our van and left Texas for good the second week of November. With the help of a friend, I found a defense contracting job in Charlottesville, Virginia, back where my military career had all started. I had high hopes that our family would be the happy, loving unit I had always imagined. I envisioned being home, being involved with my children's school, taking vacations with my wife, and generally being a happier and hopefully less-poor man.

Chapter 8

On the surface, life looked great for our little family. Any review of our social media would be complete with smiling children, vacations, compliments, romantic gestures, wine drinking, and laughter. There were happy times, there were sad times, there were arguments, and while I often say I was incapable of true emotions after Iraq, I know that's not entirely true. I was very capable of being happy, but usually with the help of alcohol. I was very capable of being miserable, usually involving work. Otherwise, I was a mostly an unemotional, sad excuse for a husband and father in my opinion.

I spent six months in that first post-Army job before I was offered a better position in the Washington, D.C. area. My inability to be content was obviously a known part of our life, because my wife told me to take the job, two hours away from our house, but that she wasn't going to move unless I actually liked the job for at least six months. In other words, she was afraid of uprooting our family just to find out I was still unhappy and wanting something else, somewhere else. It should have been another warning sign for me, but I explained it away in my head that I was just

unhappy because I wasn't doing a job I loved. But to her, as she would later tell me, I had everything I needed in life to be happy right in front of me.

Six months into the job, I really loved the work. I was able to take Fridays off every week and what I saw as an ideal situation—three-day weekends every week—turned out to cause much turmoil for my wife. She would later tell me it felt like I was a visitor coming to stay at her house once a week, meaning that she had to abandon her routine every single week to take care of me.

In the beginning, though, everything seemed great! I would return home on Thursday nights and immediately grab my wife with a big smile on my face. I actually felt happy again and allowed some emotions toward my wife and kids to return. Every weekend to me started to feel like a mini vacation and after school started in the fall, I imagined every Friday I could spend the day with my wife alone. But it didn't take long for that day to become highly logistical and our weekends full of social events with our neighbors or watching other people's kids.

The excitement didn't last long. I think I've learned that in my lesser emotional-state, changes of environment or situation still had the ability to make me happy and emotional, but it never lasted very long. So despite the promising start, everything took a turn for the worse when, at the six-month mark, my wife changed her mind about being willing to move. In as few words, she said, "I'm not going. If you want to stay up there you can, but I'm never moving to Northern Virginia." I really loved my job with Northrop Grumman and envisioned a long career there. But after she said those words, I immediately began seeking work in Charlottesville to return to my family. The happy emotions were gone and my weekends at home no longer felt fun, just busy. I found myself tired all the time and never happy with anything. I was also a little hurt that the woman

I loved didn't care whether I was home or not, even though she claimed her decision was largely driven by her desire to avoid the traffic, congestion, and high expenses of living in the D.C. area.

I could sense the growing frustration my wife had towards me. I also started to not care. It would be about every six months that she would essentially explode on me with a laundry list of things I was doing that upset her. That would always get a response from me, mostly apologies, sometimes tears, and promises I would do better. At other times, I made it very clear I had no clue just how much she was doing for our family and made comments, never intentionally, undermining just how hard she was working at home raising our kids. On one particular occasion, I finally told her I was just depressed and didn't know what to do about it.

We were lying in bed, we had just had dinner with our neighbors, and I was not in a great mood. She was not yelling at me, but she was definitely upset with me, and telling me so. For years I had never admitted to be depressed, but that night, I just didn't know how else to explain it. So she asked me why and I told her it's because of Iraq. Her response was, “You don’t have time to be sad; you have children. If you're sad, just decide to be happy when you wake up and move on.”

I can't even tell you what that comment did to me. I was almost ready to talk about it. But after that, I was terrified of ever bringing it up again, because she made me feel ashamed for even feeling it. But it inevitably happened again. Another argument, another attempt to tell her I was sad, but that I didn't feel comfortable talking about with her. She responded, “Is this going to be a problem? Do we need counseling? Are we going to even make it?”

My mind locked into the last part of her questioning. Are we even going to make it? My heart sunk, and I could

barely breathe. I couldn't imagine going through life without her. So I assured her I'd fix it and be happier. And I tried.

The topic of counseling did come up a few times after that. But for some reason, it never really sounded like she was asking me to go to counseling. I later learned that she was, I just wasn't taking her hint. I was talking a lot, and I didn't realize I had withheld so much about my Iraq experiences and emotions because I felt like I was always talking. So when she mentioned counseling, it didn't seem as necessary to me because I had absolutely no problems with my wife at all. I thought things were going well and, as our closer friends began experiencing marital issues and talking about counseling, I didn't think we were anywhere near that point. I remember saying though, "We don't need counseling do we? I mean, I tell you everything I'm thinking." She agreed so I didn't think we needed it. That was a missed opportunity back in 2010 that I wouldn't recognize for years.

After nearly eighteen months of being geographically separated every week, I finally found a job back in Charlottesville and moved home. I was so excited to get home to my family and assumed my wife felt the same way. I had a big smile on my face as we were driving to a friend's house, but got immediately upset when the first thing she wanted to talk about were ground rules for me being home. I responded prettily angrily, "Can't we just be happy I'm home and see how things go before you start laying out rules for me?"

Her reaction was priceless. She laughed at me and didn't talk to me for the rest of the day. So in her silence, I moped in self-pity and self-doubt and shut down even a little bit more. It was never, ever an intention of mine to hurt my wife or make her unhappy, but I realized that I had unknowingly been doing just that. I internally vowed to do better.

But I couldn't deny that after so much separation, I felt like I didn't know anything about her anymore. I knew I loved her and my family and I did what I could to play the part. We argued a lot my first few months back and for some reason, I was always upset when she would tell me something she wanted me to do or about something that had to be done. I thought that she should just be happy I was home, as if I was so great! Everything in our life seemed to be so regimented and directed, and no longer fun. It may just be the reality of having three small children, and I was just in the wrong mindset to accept that reality.

After being home for less than a year, we started talking about another deployment. I was now a federal employee and my agency had multiple, rotating deployments to Afghanistan. We joked that we need our time apart to stay happy, and I was so happy at the thought of going that I volunteered to deploy the very next day. From April to November of 2012, I deployed to Kabul, Afghanistan, in a very different role than my previous deployments to Iraq.

Separation had become a sort of saving grace in our marriage. It's sad to say that we began embracing our time apart and would even joke that we needed it to keep from hating each other. We would also start vacationing separately, blaming the necessity on childcare; our plan to "divide and conquer" to fulfill our desires to travel the world by doing it alone while the other watched kids. It's almost tragic to think part of why we fell in love with each other is because we imagined ourselves traveling the world and now we were doing it, just not with each other.

From 2009 through 2013, I visited Minnesota, Wisconsin, St. Louis, Dominican Republic, Italy, and Germany without my wife. During the same time, she traveled to Ecuador and Ireland and was planning trips to Vietnam and Key West. The only trip we took together and

alone was a seventh anniversary trip in the fall of 2009 to Northern California where we originally met and married. We took family trips of course, almost all to tropical locations—a Carnival cruise to the Bahamas in 2011 and a trip to Jamaica in 2012 as I was returning from my first deployment to Afghanistan—and we had our annual beach trip, river trip, and family trips. In hindsight, these should have been signs: the traveling and the deployment.

I told myself I would never deploy again. I think a lot of soldiers say that they would never go back. I had once told someone they could offer me a million dollars, and I'd still not go back. But there I was on a C-130 flying toward Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, for a lot less than a million dollars. I was actually pretty excited to return to the combat theater and do relevant, timely work to help soldiers. But when the plane landed and the rear ramp of the plane lowered, I almost fell to my knees when I saw the flight line, smelled the all too familiar scents of deployment, and realized I was back 'over there.' Luckily that was a very short-lived anxiety attack, and I doubt anybody even noticed.

My six months in Afghanistan were not very fun. I didn't enjoy my job and became really disgruntled about my career and the way we did business. In fact, my favorite pastime became complaining about work and with each let down, I became more and more depressed. I've talked to many of the people I worked with and they didn't notice it as much as I did, but I was not a happy person in Kabul. I resorted to daily tea with the Afghans and evening cigars with my coworkers to forget my sorrows of being away from home. But it was also now that I realized my marriage was a bit broken. So I spent many months of my deployment thinking about how to go home and fix my marriage.

I was really excited to reunite with my family. I planned a week-long excursion to Jamaica at an all-inclusive

resort, and we planned it as a surprise reunion with the kids. I had a long mental list of things I was going to change when I got home. I was going to be romantic to my wife again, to do the little things to show her how much I loved her. I was going to make her feel beautiful again, which was something I had been slacking on for some time. I was going to make love to her often, and I was going to be happy with my home life. I was going to play with my kids all the time and take the time to listen to them talk, to read to them, to play games with them, and start truly playing with them again.

It's amazing how quickly that motivation dwindled after I got home. We enjoyed a wonderful week in Jamaica complete with laughter, romantic dinners, a couples' massage, sun poisoning, and a large shot of steroids and antihistamine in my ass. And then we got back to Charlottesville and real life just started to happen again. As painful as it is to admit, it may have already been too late for us. Even though I was trying to change, she was no longer interested.

I also went through a near-immediate change at work by moving offices. I was so determined to make a change at work that it became a top priority for me when I got home. My internal promises to be a better husband and father became too hard to follow through on as I found myself at an emotional loss to do the things I mentally wanted to do. Instead, I retreated to my standard response of emotionless discontent. I complained about work, found little motivation to do projects around the house, and basically spent most of my time sitting around drinking wine.

I can't really describe how disappointed I was in myself that after a strong start, I just fizzled into this boring shell of a man I was trying so hard not to be. It wasn't long before my wife and I were simply not intimate with each other and so another deployment looked enticing. It seemed like it took drastic life-changing events for me to feel

emotions and so I kept seeking them out. New positions at work, deployments, a new house - these were all attempts to feel something.

Less than nine months after I got back from Kabul, I was aboard another plane headed to Jalalabad, Afghanistan, for a four-month tour. I had a similar motivation to return home a better father, a better husband, and a happier person. I began telling her about how I wanted to quit my job and follow my passion. The problem was I was having a very hard time identifying just what my passion was anymore. I know I used to have them... for music, for sports, for creativity, for helping people. But now, I had nothing.

As the deployment wore on, I noticed our messages and phone calls were all very logistical—stories of my son's therapy appointments, driving kids to activities, her training as a volunteer firefighter, and the work needed around the house. I was a bit more emotional talking about how I wanted to be happier and a better man, how I wanted to leave my government job and find something I was passionate about, and how I wanted to have a fresh start. Her normal response was, "the grass isn't necessarily greener on the other side." It was a clear sign that her emotions toward me were almost as empty as mine had been towards her the past few years.

I couldn't be upset when she wrote to tell me she wanted a separation. I had not been able to fulfill my end of the bargain as a husband. It doesn't mean I was one hundred percent responsible, but I'll likely always blame myself for it. It was a very big wake up call for me. It was a definite notification that I have been living my life wrong and if I didn't make changes, I may live a long, miserable, lonely life.

Chapter 9

I realized I had issues, but I still didn't think it was PTSD. I thought I was just a bit depressed. I also wondered if it was just my wife I was unhappy with and maybe being apart from her would be what I needed to be happy again. I made up my mind that if I ever wanted to have my wife back, I needed to fix myself and be a happy person once more. I needed to rekindle the things I used to be passionate about and to be the man she married eleven years earlier. And, if in the end I didn't actually want my wife back and she didn't want me back, then at least I'd be a better man.

I still had a few weeks left to go in Afghanistan and had planned a three-week Europe backpacking trip on my way home as a way to wind down from the deployment routine. I had learned that trick my previous trip to Afghanistan and highly recommend it to anybody that deploys. That means it would be six weeks before I would have to face her in person after she asked for the separation. I spent the first three weeks journaling my heartbreak and the twelve-hour panic attack I had after she wrote me, then worked on building the confidence to go home and be ok with everything.

During those three weeks I made a lot of self-discoveries, and I wasn't impressed with my behavior. I still had not attributed it all to Iraq or possibly having PTSD, I just thought I was being dumb and needed to fix the problem by simply acting differently. I made lists of things I was going to strive for when I got back: going to the gym regularly, eating healthier, teaching my kids how to play sports, running with the kids, going hiking, learning to cook, and learning to be a completely independent man and single father.

Then I traveled through Europe with the goal of learning to be content and carefree, to allow myself to smile and have fun. I was very successful! I wandered cities alone, meeting other travelers and organizing nights out with people from all over the world. For two weeks, my parents and sister joined me as we visited historical sites around Italy and learned how to taste wine through the Tuscany Wine School in Florence. And when I boarded the plane in Munich, Germany, for Washington, D.C., I was confident, happy, and ready to reunite with my children.

Traveling has always been a refuge for me. A place for me to let go of my life for a bit, indulge myself in another culture and environment, and just let things happen naturally. It was talks of travel that led me to fall in love with my wife, and it would be new travels that I hoped would take me out of my funk.

I've always been sort of a wanderer. When I was seven years old, I hopped on my bike and started riding. Kind of like Forrest Gump going for a run, I got to the end of my street and thought, “let's just go to the end of the neighborhood.” Then I thought, “let's go down to the next street.” Before I knew it, I had traveled about two or three miles down a fairly busy country road in Prince William County, Virginia. I knew the route well of course, but I'd never ventured it outside of a car or my school bus. I also

knew that a friend from school lived there somewhere and so I rode through this far away neighborhood until I found his last name on a mailbox. Not positive I even had the right house, I knocked on the door and we played all day long. As it got dark, I rode back home and nobody even knew I had been gone all day. I kept this up for weeks. My older sister figured out I was doing it, but she never told on me. Well not until one day when I pissed her off and she changed her mind. I got beat pretty badly for that one and lost bike privileges for a long time.

I think my adventurous spirit was born from those early bike rides. When I was fourteen years old, I took a big risk with very little thought and moved to a small town called Hayward, Wisconsin, with my dad. It was summer, and I didn't know anybody in the town we moved to (which was about thirty miles from my grandmother's house where I did have friends and family, but they had no football team). Every day I would walk to the school and play basketball by myself for about four hours, and every now and then a group of girls would show up to practice. After three or four times, one of the girls, obviously their fearless leader or something, walked up to me and asked, "Who are you?" without the hint of a smile or welcome.

Turned out all four of the girls were the same age as me and would all end up being some of my closest friends, all of which I still talk to thanks to the miracle of Facebook. But their ringleader lived across the street from the place my dad and I were staying in and one day we were hanging out at her house. I noticed a photo album sitting out and started browsing through it. It was her and her family's trip to Europe from the previous summer. I was fascinated and asked her a hundred questions. I left saying, “one day, I will go to Europe.”

It took six and a half years to make that happen and a good chunk of college student loans. I took a four-week

study abroad course with about twenty-five other Minnesota private college students. We hit Milan, Venice, Padua, Florence, Pisa, Rome, Paris, and London. It was a whirlwind of two-hour a day lectures, alcohol, dancing, arguing, drama, and hangovers. To make matters way more fun, my ex-girlfriend was on the trip; we kind of planned it together the previous year (oops). Those four weeks were one of the most freeing experiences of my life.

I knew after that trip I wanted to visit all the places. All of them. The day that sealed the deal was a rainy day in Florence. By now we had been traveling as a group for a week, cliques had formed, people started hooking up, and everybody was getting very sick of each other. It started as a typical hangover morning where we yawned through a lecture about Michelangelo and then started the, "so what should we do today?" One of the students dominated the discussion and started calling people stupid, while another girl was instigating him with her moody responses, and as everyone turned to me as the 'diplomat' of the group, I calmly said, "I'm done with all of you, do what you want, I'll see you tonight at dinner" and walked off by myself. They laughed, and one or two started following me as I walked off, but as they noticed I was not waiting up for them, they turned around.

I pulled out my little Florence map and traced an outline of things I wanted to see. About two miles into my walk, I misread the map and thought I was walking on a road leading toward the city, but the map was actually showing the outline of the old city wall. So instead of conveniently ending up by the Boboli Gardens, I was now comfortably a mile south of the city heading toward wine country. By the time I realized my error, I had no clue where I was and saw no point in walking back the way I came (what fun would that be?), so I just kept going. Two hours later, I was still walking, not a clue where I was and only

about twenty dollars' worth of lira in my pocket. To make matters worse, this was only three months after dislocating my hip in a college football game. I ended up on a very tiny road lined with brick-wall fences, the kind I couldn't see over. The road was so narrow that at one point, a car came down the road and I had to hug the wall and suck in so it could pass. I left the group at ten a.m. that morning, it was now three p.m. and I had no clue where I was and had only seen one or two people. I wasn't really afraid, but the thought started crossing my mind, "how am I going to get back?"

Finally I hit a fairly high point on the road and I had a decent vantage point. I looked off in the distance where I thought Florence would be and saw nothing, not a great sign. I walked around a few trees and there, in the opposite direction from where I expected, was the clear tower of the Uffizi in Florence, very far off in the distance. I was both relieved and terrified at the same moment.

I walked about another mile down a road that I thought was heading that direction. A car finally drove up, and I kind of frantically waved at the driver. He didn't speak any English, and I made a car driving hand motion and kept saying Firenze??? Firenze?? He got the clue and motioned for me to hop in. He talked Italian to me the entire way, as if each of my head nods meant I completely understood what he was saying. I didn't. It took fifteen minutes by car to get to the edge of the city and he dropped me off right next to Boboli Gardens; it was six p.m. and our group dinner was at six-thirty. I arrived at the restaurant near our hotel at six forty-five, completely disheveled from my nearly eight-hour walk on a bum hip. To my great amusement, everybody was in a horrible mood but I had the biggest smile on my face. Turns out they spent the entire day walking the shopping streets of Florence, arguing about what stores to go into and where to eat, while I ended up with the adrenaline rush of

feeling completely lost in a faraway land. Four weeks of traveling Europe and I consider my eight hours of wandering the highlight of the trip.

When I took that trip to Europe, my travel map was almost empty. Beach trips with the family on the East Coast and then visits to West Virginia and Ohio to see family. I did fly to Korea as a five year old, so that surely counts, but that was the extent of my travels as a twenty year old. To this day though, when I need to get lost, traveling has always been my favorite remedy.

Chapter 10

It was after one of these freeing experiences that I returned to the United States the first week of December 2013. My top priority was seeing my beautiful children. I could not wait to hold them in my arms. My second thought was how things would be when I faced my wife. We all hugged, but I had a hard time looking her in the face. We had a ninety-minute drive back to our house, and I elected to sit in the back of the minivan with the kids. We handled dinner, stories, gift giving, and small talk. But then the kids went to bed.

I walked into the kitchen to my wife, sitting at our kitchen island with a bottle of wine in the middle. I motioned for it, we opened it, and we drank it... all. We talked calmly for nearly two hours that night.

It's hard to express just how much she meant to me. Despite my emotionless existence throughout the previous years, I always saw her as my security and source of strength. It's taken many months for me to understand these emotions I had for her, but I can ultimately say there was not a single thing in life more important to me than her and my children. I used to think to myself, “My job sucks, I’m not

heading where I want in my career, I don’t have many great friends nearby, but at least I have my wife and kids.”

When she first asked for a separation, I was completely devastated. I couldn't breathe without telling myself to, and I couldn't imagine a life without her. The first twelve hours after she told me, I was in Afghanistan working, but I can't tell you a single thought I had that workday that wasn't despair. Being kind of an expert at shutting off emotions, I went for a run that evening and decided this was probably inevitable so I shut down my emotions towards her the best I could. By that evening, we were having a discussion about how the logistics would work.

In the weeks before returning home, she and I had discussed a lot by email. Talking on the phone or by video chat didn't seem to be an option anymore so I reserved that for talks with my children. But in our emails we agreed that the best thing we could do for the children we both loved so dearly was be best friends. We both acknowledged our own shortcomings in our marriage, apologized for them, forgave each other, and decided to demonstrate that divorce doesn't have to equal pain and suffering. We clearly still had love for each other, but it wasn't enough to be husband and wife anymore.

So over a bottle of wine, I asked very calmly if she still felt the same way. I asked her if she thought eleven years of marriage was worth taking one last shot to preserve what we had started. Should we go to marriage counseling and give it a shot for a little while longer? But in the end, she acknowledged that it may help, and we may have a chance, but she was more worried that it was already too late and we would end up at this stage again in the future. I had never given her any indication I could change, and I had no reason to believe I could either. And that was the decision we made that day in December 2013. Since then, we have

never once discussed working things out; we've worked amazingly well together to be amazing co-parents and friends.

I'm very thankful for her. We had so many warning signs that our marriage was in danger, and we both had trouble acknowledging them. We were now separating and I was moving into my own apartment, so it was easy to attribute every positive change in my life to not being with her anymore. But for the most part, it was just freedom and alcohol giving me a temporary high.

A few months after being home, I was drinking a lot more wine, hanging out with my friends at social events, laughing, and having a lot of fun. But it wasn't just that, I was also playing with my kids better, learning to cook, not being frustrated with my job, and I remember that around March of 2014, I felt content for the first time in many, many years. My soon-to-be ex-wife even commented on how happy I seemed, and we both agreed that we had made the right choice.

Up to this point, I had done a good job of identifying my symptoms of PTSD, but I never knew what the cause was or the fact that all of this pointed to Iraq. So I tried an almost brute-force method of overcoming the symptoms using a phrase I had tried to live by in my twenties: when I wake up in the morning I can choose to be sad or happy, and I am going to choose to be happy.

I was doing some of things I was passionate about, like traveling (New York City, New Orleans, Tokyo) and learning more about wine. I was meeting new people, telling stories, and smiling a lot more. I had stopped being so tied to my work and didn't allow my career to dictate my emotions. That had worked so well that I was using a lot of my vacation to pursue travels and exploring my own town. Yet, my work was becoming more efficient because I stuck to

what I was hired to do and did my best to ignore the bureaucracy of working for the government.

I was feeling confident enough to start meeting other girls. It didn't come very easily as a separated, not yet divorced, single father. But I was enjoying the fun, get-to-know each other conversations. I got married in 2002 so I did not know how to navigate the world of online dating, text messages, and Facebook chat. The dating world had changed, and I was having fun learning to adapt to the new way of the world.

But before 2014 had even started, I had reminded myself this was not likely to be a good year. I almost wrote the year off before it even began knowing I would face new struggles I was not prepared to handle. And like clockwork, it happened. I think that most of the happiness I was having was because of alcohol. Of course I felt great - I was with friends enjoying wine almost three or four nights a week. Because I had the kids only two nights a week and every other weekend, I had a lot more spare time to be free. I don't think I was nearing alcoholic stage, and I was almost never getting drunk, but I was definitely drinking more than I ever normally did.

Without alcohol, I realized I was pretty lonely. I wanted the companionship I had by being married, but I didn't think I was even capable of loving another woman again. I was extremely lonely. I missed having the security of knowing there was a woman that loved me and a family waiting for me, even if I wasn't necessarily at my best when I was home.

Dating was fun, but I was having issues taking any woman seriously. I was indifferent as to whether they liked me or not, whether or not I wrote them or they wrote me, and at one point, I started to believe I may just be incapable of romance ever again.

It's hard to write about how war changed me without talking about how I was before war. When I met this beautiful blonde soldier at the language school, she was one of the most highly sought after soldiers in her company. Every time I saw her she had a little entourage of young men trying to woo her away. She had even gained the nickname "Man-Killer" by some of the soldiers because she not only turned down their advances, but usually added a decent sized jab as to why.

But I was fearless. I applied many of the things I had learned from a lifetime of being a socialite. I kept our initials talks short and sweet, leaving plenty of mystery for her to be intrigued about. When I decided to ask her out on a date, I wrote my phone number on a piece of paper, walked up to her while she was sitting with six other guys, slapped it down on the table and said, "Hey, I'm going to the Scottish Highland Festival this weekend. If you want to come, give me a call." And then I walked away, just as quickly as I entered the mix.

She called. And slowly we started talking more and more. We talked about travel, religion, languages, children, movies, and family. I began writing her notes on red paper almost every day, delivering her poems and stories as we'd pass on the language school campus. We took romantic getaways to San Francisco, Mount Shasta, and Lake Tahoe. When I knew I wanted to spend my life with her, I hand drew a 30-page book full of our past experiences, heart-felt notes, and ending with the words, "Will You Marry Me" and as she looked up, I had guitar in hand and played her Van Morrison's Crazy Love in a small, boutique hotel on Union Square in San Francisco.

As a young married couple, I loved to surprise her. During our separation while I attended school in Texas, I spent most of my free time compiling a scrapbook of our time together in Monterey that I gave her when we reunited.

If she went to see her family for the weekend, I'd lay out small hints around the house, the each leading to another surprise such as a new shelf, a painted room, or a small gift. I excelled at doing the little things right and wanted her to know that she meant the world to me. I can't remember the last romantic thing I did for her, but I'm pretty sure it was not after 2005. I stopped playing guitar almost completely around then. I no longer wrote her letters or notes. I no longer made her homemade books or sang her songs. I no longer surprised her with flowers and chocolates just because, it was usually only after she hinted or if it was a special occasion. I gave her shorter massages, less kisses, and showed much less interest in what she told me. And it wasn't because I loved her less, it was because I had become an emotionless shell of the person I once was.

I still thought I was incapable of that kind of emotion when I met a new girl for lunch in May of 2014. She was the fourth girl I had met from an online dating site, and I had not taken any of them very seriously. In fact, I was starting to feel like a jerk because I was very bad at writing them back or giving them anything but witty comments. My ultimate goal was to have fun people to hang out with now that most of my friends were married with kids. Most of the girls I was meeting through work had never been married before so they were terrified at my friendship with my wife and the fact we weren't officially divorced yet. I didn't take any of it that seriously, I was just enjoying meeting new people to pass the time until divorce and until I would be emotionally ready for a relationship.

After I had lunch with this girl, I realized that I could actually like her. She was beautiful, witty, and obviously intelligent. She was cautious, but not timid, and it was clear she had her priorities straight. She was also the first girl that didn't text me back after the meeting to say how much she enjoyed it. I was intrigued.

That night I almost wrote her again. But she had mentioned it was her kid weekend and there would be no guy meeting her kids unless it was a pretty serious relationship. I thought that was pretty smart, especially as this was all a new world to me. I decided to wait until after the weekend. But over the weekend, I realized I could probably really like her and didn't think I was capable of that kind of emotion to keep her happy, so I didn't write her.

I changed my mind the week after. I kept it short and sweet and basically just asked for a second lunch. Much like the excitement I felt at meeting my wife over a decade earlier, I found myself so intrigued that I wanted to know everything about her. We talked almost daily after that, meeting for lunch a few more times over the next few weeks. We even had marathon text sessions while I was traveling to New Orleans and Tokyo; I was getting pretty hooked.

It's pretty amazing to me that with so little actual interaction, I began feeling emotions I had shut off for so long. My love for music was coming back. She shared a few songs with me, and I had sensations I had forgotten about—the way a song could dictate your emotion and make your whole body sway with the rhythm. I started imagining playing my guitar, singing, and banging away at drums again the way I used to in my twenties. It was just before our third lunch together that something came over me. I had to stop and buy her a flower. Not a rose, I wasn't in love or anything, but I just wanted to show her something special so she knew I thought she was beautiful.

It wasn't just my love of music or my first thoughts of being romantic that changed. As we spent more time together, I began feeling anxiety and terror. Very real emotions I had shut down so many times before, but now I couldn't. I was afraid I was falling in love with this amazing woman, but one who was obviously not quite ready to fall in love with me. And it was because of this fear that all I could

do was admit that I was probably falling in love with her. With all of these new emotions, I was consumed in anxiety, scared to proceed any further, but wanting to more than anything.

But as I threw things out there to test waters, she would always reply with the same apparent level of interest. I began to feel safe with her and my anxiety reduced; I really didn't think she was going to hurt me. I had never really admitted how much losing my wife hurt on the inside; maybe I didn't even realize it did. I had become such an expert at not feeling that I buried those emotions. But now, I was opening up my ability to love and with it came the sub-conscience remembrance of heartbreak. So it took a lot of thinking for me to decide whether or not I trusted this girl to not break my heart and, two months after our first meeting, I decided that I did.

A much more emotionally mature version of me would have slowed down and acknowledged I was not ready for this. Of course, a much more mature version of me would have realized I hadn't dealt with my emotions since 2006. I made a conscience decision one night to just let it go, to trust this person, and allow myself to feel any and all emotions that came out.

In what I can only call horrible timing, and a situation neither of us foresaw or expected, she was still in love with someone else. Her seeing my emotions come out made her reflect on her own, and the end result was that she did not feel the same way towards me. This happened the day after I had made the decision to let it ride.

I immediately tried to shut that emotion down again, and told her I understood, even though I was sad to hear it. But it was too late, I had already opened up this floodgate and within an hour of hearing this from her, every terrible, horrible, unimaginable thought rushed into my head: fear,

abandonment, self-doubt, anger, and soul-crushing anxiety. It would take weeks for me to recover.

It was during the lowest of these moments when my very analytical mind searched for answers as to why I was feeling this way. There's no way this was simply the aftermath of being left by my wife. That was not the thought in my mind. No, it was the fact that I was feeling emotions I had not felt in so long and I no longer knew how to deal with them. At one point, I did try to shut them all off again, and with the help of a few old-fashioneds and a bottle of wine, I could breathe again and I even slept through the night. But then the next night came, and as I sat in my apartment alone, trying to accept that she was gone, I crashed so hard that I had no choice but to admit that every feeling I was having trouble containing that night, I could point back to Iraq.

While I had experienced anxiety before, I went through almost five straight days of crippling anxiety that prevented me from working, watching my kids, cleaning my house, cooking, or living. I lost ten pounds and while she and I were still talking through texts or online messages, I knew she was leaving my life for good, and I was losing grasp of my emotions. I don't know if this anxiety and heartbreak was unlike millions of other human beings. I hear songs all the time that completely describe how I felt that week, so I don't think it was completely due to PTSD. However, I had no control over these emotions and the only rationale I could come up with is that I hadn't felt them in so long I was afraid to lose them.

I did something unimaginable; I admitted it. Not just to myself, but to all seven hundred of my Facebook friends. Never in my life had I ever been so heartbroken that I couldn't function. This was obviously something more and it wasn't about her. It was about unleashing nearly eight years of pent-up emotion all at one shot. So in a very un-

characteristic Facebook status, I told my closest friends I believed I was suffering from PTSD and I needed help.

I made an appointment with the Department of Veterans Affairs for a mental health screening. My friends were amazing. The response I received was overwhelming. With their help, I began talking about my experiences. I began to remember my experiences. I began to spend days and nights in bed crying, remembering ever little detail of my deployments and how I should have felt. I remembered how much I missed my family, how much I couldn't have cared less if I lived or died, how much I wanted to lose a leg just to go home.

It was an emotional roller coaster with every success being met with similar failure. I wrote over ten many-thousand-word emails to the girl that broke my heart. Luckily I had the sense not to send most of them. It was a feeble attempt to grasp onto a person that made me feel again, but the reality was, she didn't love me and I couldn't rely on another person to fix my problems. Eventually those euphoric emotions would fade, and I'd likely be back to the emotionless man I once was... unless I went to get help.

As much as it hurt to admit, I wasn't ready for another relationship. But if that ordeal had not happened, I don't know if I would have ever figured out I needed help. I like to live life with no regrets and no bitterness toward anybody. So not only was I not upset with her for all of this, I'm actually thankful for her because my mind needed to feel that kind of raw emotion again to remember what it had been missing for so long.

Chapter 11

It seems odd that the only way I've been able to regain emotion is by remembering the most painful events of my life and allowing myself to be hurt. And I've been doing that. I've been thinking about the triggers of my anxiety and allowing myself to figure out why I feel that way. Then I've allowed myself to continue remembering, no matter what emotions it brings out. I've taken the next step and told somebody about it. This entire book is part of the process. I'm telling all of you about these painful-to-me memories.

Step one has been to identify my anxieties. I didn't realize how far-reaching my anxiety was until it hit panic attack mode. That led me to researching more of the signs and causes of anxiety. I didn't realize I had many of the signs of anxiety, but just never knew it because I was ignoring them. For example, ever since Iraq, I have had bouts of sweating and shaky hands in one-on-one conversations, when entering large crowds, or during any type of activity that resembles a combat threat. I never really equated that to Iraq. I would just internally be asking myself, "What's going on with me?"

It's empowering to be in combat wearing full combat gear, armed to the teeth with twenty bad-asses ready to have your back. But at all times in combat, our senses are highly aware and in the back of our head is the constant knowledge that anything can happen. It only takes one bullet, mortar, rocket, or bomb to change life forever. So as I began to think back to every encounter I had on the streets of Baghdad, I began to remember that while I was confident and carefree at the time, I was actually terrified every time I left the wire and it's ok. Our lives were in danger. And I know that every time we get behind the wheel of a car, we put ourselves in danger too, but being in combat, we knew we were among enemies that would love to hurt us. To cope I just buried the emotion of fear so I could function. Now in certain social situations when I have any doubts whatsoever, the anxiety comes, probably because I'm no longer armed to the teeth wearing body armor with the support of my similarly armed friends.

I'm a very confident person, and at least in my own mind, I'm also very charismatic. I'm an extrovert and have no problems meeting people. I'm not easily intimidated. Yet, there are times when I've been talking to somebody, and I start to sweat and can't keep my hands from fidgeting. It happened to me just recently when attending a Sunday brunch with a group of people I had never met before. There was not one intimidating person in the group, but I was sweating profusely and couldn't stop fidgeting. It subsided after about fifteen minutes, likely after I knew I was in a safe environment.

I've been allowing myself to accept that I was scared and had every reason to be. And I want to fully stress I was a combat support soldier, not an infantryman, artilleryman, tanker, pilot, or reconnaissance scout. I have the utmost respect for my combat arms brethren; so much so that I never imagined I could be suffering from PTSD knowing

what they had gone through on their deployments. But I was wrong. Our experiences were different, our symptoms are probably different, and our brains are definitely different. But just because I wasn't combat arms doesn't mean my life hasn't changed.

My primary goal in the next few chapters is to try to identify each of the things that bring me anxiety and why, mainly in hopes that other veterans can relate.

Chapter 12

On one particular day in Iraq, an American soldier had been abducted, and we were working around the clock to try to find him. We had some intelligence that he may be located in a house in eastern Baghdad and so we immediately loaded our trucks to search the area. At one point, as soldiers were searching the homes on the block, a co-worker and I found ourselves alone in a house talking to an English-speaking male who was very unhappy about the American raid. To gain rapport, my colleague removed his helmet and I followed suit, but the entire time we were in that house—which had no less than ten military-aged males and no other Americans but the two of us—I felt uneasy. I had immediate thoughts of being attacked or of our outer security pulling back without knowing the two military intelligence embeds were not with them. It was in the back of my head, and I should have been terrified.

This fear of being left behind in combat actually started earlier, during a training event in Louisiana back in 2005. I was the team leader for a small signals intelligence collection team and we were attached to 2nd Battalion, 506th Regimental Combat Team. They wanted to insert us into a

small village adjacent to a town they intended to clear to intercept the opposition force's push-to-talk radio transmissions (think Radio Shack walkie-talkies kids often play with in their back yard) and report their activities. After a very long, three-hour insert during the dark hours of the morning, my team and I cleared a building and set up a listening post on the top floor of a building.

Our first priorities are always security, then communications back to our headquarters, and then mission. We achieved all three and passed relevant information back to the operations staff to help our side win the mock battle. As communications dwindled, I began to move down to our security detail to talk about extraction. To my amazement, they were not there. They had left without us and in their place was a large group of mock, Iraqi National Police officers with not an American in sight. While none of our lives were at risk (it was only training after all) and the three of us could have easily eliminated them if they were a threat (in this mock combat environment), the reality of the training mission was that we had been left behind in (mock) enemy territory.

We continued to try and get communications with our headquarters to plan an exfiltration, but nobody was responding. I snuck over to a radio re-transmission site near the building, a radio set up with power amplification, to extend the range of our VHF tactical communication systems. We had elected to not bring our HF radio, which had a near unlimited range, because we knew nobody at headquarters would be listening for it. Finally, by some luck of timing, our military police (MP) unit showed up to give training to the Iraqi police role-players. In what turned out to be great luck, something I'd later be commended for, I linked our team up with the MPs and we provided Arabic linguist support for their training in exchange for an escorted ride back to our headquarters.

The fear of being left behind was really not that great, it was more the fear of being captured by the enemy and knowing what that would mean. If we could be left behind in training, there was a good chance it could happen in actual combat. I always imagined the worst fate I could ever face in war would be getting captured by the enemy alive. We're trained on the Geneva Conventions, what we are and aren't allowed to do or say, and how we should conduct ourselves as prisoners of war. That is all good and fine if a respectable nation that believes in the laws of land warfare capture us, but this would have been radical Iraqi Shia militia-men or worse, radical Iraqi Sunni extremists. There was no doubt in any of our minds that capture would likely mean body mutilation, torture, and beheading, likely video-taped and posted to some shady website for all of America to see.

If you've ever read about soldiers being taken in combat, it's usually after a lapse in established procedures meant to keep us safe. In one particular instance, it was a lone Humvee with three soldiers guarding a bridge. One truck is not enough to deter an enemy force. In another, an Iraqi-born American soldier interpreter broke all of the rules by walking off the secure American-controlled camp in civilian clothes to visit his family in the city. My buddy and I being alone in a house full of Iraqis with no other soldiers knowing our present location was foolish. Most of my fears from that event happened afterwards, not during, as I realized we had put ourselves in a very bad position all because we wanted to find our missing soldier.

When I think about the possibility of being a prisoner in either Iraq or Afghanistan, it sends shivers down my spine. My arrogant self imagines all of the ways I would fight to the death, resist capture, or try to escape capture if caught. There would be no video of me admitting American guilt, because I already know that with or without that my

head would be removed from my body. I imagine myself using every ounce of energy in my body to escape or at least take somebody out with me, something that would never be learned in America, I'd just be dead. And because I knew this reality existed, I can barely handle the thought of my children losing me.

I get anxious, sad, and scared anytime I imagine my children hearing the news that I am not going to make it home. It's one of the top reasons I never want to deploy to a combat theater again, even though I sometimes forget about that thought when considering how much I usually enjoy the job and the extra pay.

Very recently I took my children to a movie and there was a preview where an actor is about to fly into outer space to save the world. The trailer picks one primary theme, and that is the conflict of a father leaving behind his child to save the world, not knowing if he'll ever return. Just that short preview had me crying through my 3D IMAX glasses and I could barely keep up with wiping the tears. To say that recounting these memories has opened up my emotional fear of not being there for my children would be an understatement.

I am now wondering if I may also suffer from a fear of abandonment. I think that I've been unlucky in love in my life. Many of my stories of past girlfriends, or girls that I've fallen for, have very tragic endings. I've never left a girl that I loved, but I'm also not with a girl right now, so that should tell you how my luck has been. I sometimes think that heartbreak is just as capable of making us close off emotions as well, and I think my Iraq experiences along with my past experiences in love have really made me fearful of being alone.

This is something I will have to deal with for multiple reasons. Number one, I'm no longer in a combat zone. My risk of dying here is no greater or less than the average

American so if I don't want to live a life of fear and anxiety, I have to accept that life is precious and delicate, but to live it fully without worrying. When it comes to fear of being abandoned or alone, I have to realize that I can't generate my feelings of safety and love from other people. I'll need to remember that my past heart breaks are not indicative of my future, and that I've taken it all too hard because I've almost come to expect it. But if I allow myself to remain anxious and scared about this, I'll never be able to live a full life.

I don't want to give the wrong impression. I do not live my life afraid of taking risks - not in my activities, career, or personal life. I have pushed straight through the anxiety with reckless abandon. But if I do not acknowledge and deal with that anxiety now, I fear it will just grow, take control of my life, and make me a fearful person. So I'm acknowledging it now so that when I feel that anxiety in the future, I will know it's likely source, discount it and move on.

Chapter 13

Each night around three a.m. I wake up. I've been doing it for years. Sometimes it's just because I need to use the bathroom or get a drink of water, but more often than not, it's because an explosion goes off in my dreams. About once a week in Baghdad, I would be awoken by a car bomb exploding near our base. The bass of the explosion and treble of the blast aftermath made a very efficient alarm clock. In heartless emotion, I would think "better them than me" and wake up for my duty day. Then the mortars started flying and hitting our base. My fellow soldiers and I would joke about it and almost claim our frequent indirect fire attacks as a badge of honor. It's weird in combat how really scary things don't warrant much of a reaction, but back home, my son can slam the toilet seat down and I'm ready to dive for cover.

In combat we expect danger at all times. We become numb to it. One morning I was awakened to a mortar exploding on our base. I didn't even open my eyes and kept trying to sleep. A second mortar exploded, a little bit closer and louder. At that, I sat up in bed and when I looked up, my best friend had also just sat up in bed, obviously also

ignoring the first blast. We both shrugged at each other and lay back down. The third blast was so close and loud that without even knowing how, he and I were standing in the hallway. I don't remember anything but moving... no thoughts, just reflex. We laugh about that now, mostly because he screamed, “Ah! My laptop! I’m going back in for it.”

On another occasion, I was sleeping in a tent near the US Embassy in the Green Zone of Baghdad. Most of my bunkmates were diplomatic civilians and not soldiers with months of experience in Iraq. A rocket exploded nearby and while people scrambled from the tents seeking cover, the soldier I was with and I just put in our earplugs and rolled over. At one point, a civilian rushed through the door and yelled at the top of his lungs, "They're attacking us!!!!!!" I didn't even roll over, but I chuckled to myself and continued trying to sleep. Minutes later a sergeant major was tapping me on the shoulder and calmly said, "Hey sergeant, I know you don't really care about rocket attacks, but I need you to come to the hardened shelter." I could tell he wasn't worried either. I honestly didn't think it mattered if I was in the tent or the hardened shelter.

For the first few years after deployment, I would have my typical mortar dream at three in the morning, but every now and then the dream would take place while I was safe and sound in America playing with my kids. There is nothing more heart wrenching than thinking your children are in danger. In those dreams, I instantly grab them and rush them to safety with no regard for my own personal safety or the welfare of any other human being in my dream. This happens much less now, but just the mere knowledge that my brain interprets playing with my kids in America as a potential mortar threat is something I have to deal with as a father in the middle of the night.

So why is it that a popping balloon or a car backfiring can send us into an immediate panic attack? It's because we're home and we want to feel safe. But in the back of our head, we still acknowledge every loud sound as a threat. Here in America, we don't have body armor, assault rifles, quick reaction forces, or hardened bunkers. A car backfiring while I'm on the highway makes me feel vulnerable because my Hyundai doesn't have armor. A popping balloon freaks me out because it usually means my kids are nearby, and I go into instant protector mode. I don't know a single combat veteran that doesn't enter flight or fight mode at an unexpected loud sound. It may be part of life, but the only solace is convincing myself I'm home and I'm safe.

I can actually endure Fourth of July fireworks now, after seven years of dreading Independence Day. The biggest reason is because I've come to accept and expect frequent explosions on that night. But if one were to explode next to me now, I'd probably want to launch my laptop into the pool next to me and grab for my weapon (that I don't have).

After what we've experienced, I do not know if I will ever recover from instant adrenaline rushes and follow-on anxiety at loud, sudden noises. My son just slammed a toilet seat minutes ago and with no hesitation I yelled for him not to do that as my heart pounded and sweat formed on my forehead.

I may not recover, but much like I've learned to cope with July fourth fireworks, I hope that it will become less and less of a problem. But I want to write about it for all of those that live with, love, or have close contact with combat veterans. Loud, sudden noises remind us of potentially life-threatening explosions. Think about that the next time you are going to pop a balloon, bang a dish, slap your computer monitor, toss a load of bricks on the ground, put down a toilet seat lid, or drive a piece of crap car that backfires. It

doesn't mean you can't do it, but my wife learned to warn before she was about to make a loud noise if she had any control over it. She may never have known how much I appreciated the gesture. And next Fourth of July, if you live with or near a veteran, feel free to leave them a note or knock on their door to let them know you intend to light off fireworks at a certain time. It would likely mean a lot to him or her.

I acknowledge this source of anxiety in hopes that one day I will be only slightly alarmed at sudden noises, the proper kind of reaction that most humans in America have. I also say it so that my loved ones will understand that I am not trying to be a jerk when I instantly react with anger at an innocent act of sudden noise.

Chapter 14

Going into a large crowd is always stressful. For that reason I've avoided many things I love like large concerts, music festivals, public celebrations, and clubs. I love music and I love to dance, but as soon as there are more than fifty people in a crowded place, I want nothing more than to escape. The extrovert in me dies when I see a large crowd, and I want to retreat to my living room with one or two best friends.

On December 31, 2001, I was on leave from Army basic training and went to New York City with a German friend of mine. We shoved our way onto Times Square to watch the ball drop completely surrounded by so many people we almost moved like a stick on a wave versus using our own feet. Just the mere thought of that experience now makes me shiver. I don't know if I'll ever be able to go to the National Mall to watch fireworks in my lifetime or ever return to Times Square on a December 31st.

About a month before returning home from Baghdad, the 1-61 Cavalry, 506th Regimental Combat Team commander wanted to clear a village near their base that housed no less than fifteen high value targets, terrorists and

militia men, that were responsible for the deaths of American and Iraqi soldiers and policemen. On a beautiful Iraqi morning, more than fifty Humvees and Stryker combat vehicles loaded more than two hundred soldiers and Iraqi commandos to assault over twenty homes in the village. The raids were very successful and we moved to an abandoned Iraqi nuclear facility to catalog and question our detainees.

For two hours, we rested while interrogators talked to each of the detainees to ascertain identity and importance. At last, we were ready to return to base and as we neared the gates, we were met with approximately two to four hundred Iraqi villagers throwing large rocks at us as gunshots were heard in the background. Not knowing the source of the gunshots, we immediately placed snipers on high ground to seek the threat while the cavalry scouts fired warning shots into the air.

I was standing outside assessing the situation. We were the third truck in the convoy and large rocks were striking our truck and landing at my feet. Two Air Force fighter jets came from behind us and performed a low altitude, high-speed show of force to try and disperse the crowd. It was not successful. Next an Apache assault helicopter swooped low over the crowd and blasted them with ninety mile per hour winds from its rotor blades. If you have never been up close and personal with an Apache helicopter, I can attest it is an intimidating sight, but not to these Iraqis. It would take a convoy of Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and Stryker combat vehicle to eventually clear a path for us to exit safely. Our remaining force at that compound was outnumbered five to one that day with no way to escape except through the very gate they were blocking. So yeah, I'm not a big fan of large crowds.

In February of 2006, Sunni militants bombed the famous al-Askari Shia mosque in Samarra, Iraq, sparking a near civil war between the two Islam sects. In what I thought

was a crazy order, we were instructed to head to Baghdad's old city to guard Sunni mosques from Shia retaliation.

We entered the old city's narrow streets and immense crowds. We parked our two trucks at a Sunni mosque and stood on the front steps to deter attacks: six soldiers, two gun trucks and four guys standing on stairs with assault rifles to deter what could likely include suicide car bombs on a rival mosque. There was no escape from the crowd. They were everywhere. There was no possible way to scan for threats; our hope was that our presence alone would deter violence. And as far as we know, it did, but at the expense of a company of soldiers divided among the many downtown mosques foolishly standing guard against an unknown threat. So yeah, I'm not a big fan of large crowds.

Another sunny day in the summer of 2006, one of the 4th Infantry Division's armor units drove up on three males emplacing an IED. They fled, but they left behind a GPS with multiple waypoints saved in the memory. We decided to plan an operation to explore the waypoint with the most hits in hopes that it would be a large weapons cache. Well, it was a large weapons cache. When we arrived at the target house, a colleague and I with a squad of tankers were the first ones to the gate. We immediately jumped the wall not knowing what was on the other side. My buddy was among the first in the door and I was third or fourth. He and I immediately headed upstairs in pursuit of a female that ran as she saw us enter the house. I watched him pursue the female as she jumped from her roof to the adjacent roof, eventually halting when he drew his sidearm and yelled for her to stop in Arabic.

I was pulling guard from the roof after making sure there was no immediate threat. Downstairs, the tankers had uncovered the largest weapons cache discovered in eastern Baghdad during our deployment. While my friend worked to question the woman who lived in the house and the

immediate neighbors, I joined a group of tankers to find the male of the house. The four of us worked our way through large crowds to a garage identified by the woman as his workplace.

As two younger soldiers pulled guard, the sergeant first class platoon sergeant and I raided the small garage not knowing what we'd find inside. As we exited, empty-handed, we noticed the crowd was growing. Military Police units had arrived and were setting up concertina wire to isolate the crowd while explosive ordnance disposal teams secured the weapons cache. At one point we looked up and saw a large crowd marching toward us holding flags representing Jaysh al-Mahdi, the local Shia militia loyal to cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

Before long, we were surrounded by hundreds of Iraqis pushing against our perimeter chanting, "La, La, America!" or "no, no, America!" So yeah, I’m not a big fan of large crowds.

This type of anxiety in crowds is something I've heard echoed from many of my friends. It can come and go and, often for me, it's when I feel like I can't move around and leave freely. The worst experience for me is being stuck in a line trying to exit a building. But it also hits me at random times when I'm anywhere there are people I don't know. I am an extrovert and love social events, so I often push straight through my anxiety. But there are times when the people I'm with likely see my face become very serious and my senses on high alert and this is why.

Chapter 15

I've become very callous to death and sorrow. Since Iraq, I've consistently had a hard time feeling the appropriate emotions or knowing how to react to death. My grandmother passed away in May of 2014, and it took me seeing her in her casket at the funeral, while all alone, to cry. There's no greater woman that ever walked this earth than my grandmother, no greater story of self-sacrifice and unconditional love from a hardworking, Korean halmoni.

I previously mentioned the story when I showed no real remorse for the death notification of a soldier back at Fort Campbell. My wife had called it the most heartless thing she had ever heard me say. But soldiers die in war. Sometimes I knew them, but most often I did not. What was worse, sometimes I felt responsible for their death. There's no possibly way to cope with that at war except to shut off any emotional response to it.

It's been seven years since I made that statement to her, and I think I only just recently figured out why I was thinking that way. Being in military intelligence, we are often the ones briefing military commanders. On numerous

occasions, information and briefings my team or I presented to commanders led to missions where soldiers were killed.

On one particular occasion, misinterpreted intelligence led to us sending an intended target directly to the IED targeting it, and we lost one of our battalion medics in the IED explosion. It was only afterwards that we learned his vehicle was their intended target all along, and it was me that briefed the information to our operations officer who, in turn, directed them to go find and dismantle the IED. I'm reminded of this event often because that soldier was from the town I live in and there are multiple memorials in his honor that I see regularly.

On another occasion, our intelligence led to locating one of our key targets in a small village and one of my platoon's tactical teams participated in a raid to capture him. During that mission, they were ambushed from rooftops along the street leading to the objective and a soldier from our cavalry squadron was killed. He must have been one of the most beloved in that unit because I've never seen sorrow and anger like what the soldiers of 1-61 Cavalry, 506th Regimental Combat Team, demonstrated after his death.

It would be many months later, while going through old pictures and videos back home that I realized I had taken a video of that soldier while we were at a Tennessee Titans game in Nashville. We were in uniform to carry the large flag on the field during the national anthem. Later, while standing on the sidelines for the game, I shot a comical video of him and another soldier dancing along with the cheerleaders. I cried when I saw the video realizing I had him on film with me laughing in the background. I haven't told many people about that video, and I've protected it like a sacred artifact ever since. But seeing his joy in that video and knowing he lost his life chasing one of our targets is sometimes hard to bear.

These are just two times when I had to live with having a role in the loss of US soldiers. I think my brain couldn't handle the sadness and pain of the thought, so the loss of life became something I decided to accept as part of being a soldier. But I know there's more to this because now, and as I allowed myself to replay those events in my head and actually feel the right emotions, I find myself lying in my bed, curled up, and convulsing in fits of tears.

I faced the father of one of the soldiers at a memorial golf tournament a few years ago and still often drive over a bridge named in his memory. I don't think we made a mistake; we were just doing our jobs, but my heart aches every time I see any of their names. And when the radio announced another life lost in Iraq, my proper reaction should have been sadness, not the hardened, unemotional response I gave my wife back in 2007.

Now that I have let that go, I feel like I can properly grieve over death again. I don't like to see stories about troops dying in combat. I've been very close to many tragic events and even during my last deployment to Afghanistan in 2013; I attended a very emotional memorial service for task force soldiers killed during a raid that should have had me in tears. If I were to attend today, I know that I would be.

It's hard to live life thinking you may be responsible for somebody else's death. But I did not build the IED, assault rifle, or bullets that killed them. I did not hold them in my hands, assemble them, or fire them. I did not knowingly send any soldier into harm’s way; it's just the way life worked out. In war, much like accidents, death sometimes just happens.

I think most of us live just moments away from death on a frequent basis. That text message you wrote, looked up and realized you were now driving on the shoulder of the road... that could have gone the other way and you just caused a head-on collision with a high school kid. It was

never your intention to ever hurt anybody, and now the only way to cope with that feeling of responsibility is to accept that the act happened, grieve appropriately, understand that way too much in life is out of our control, and then move on.

If I'm ever in combat again and responsible for providing information that may send troops into harm's way, I will do it confidently, always keeping hope for their safety at the forefront of my thoughts. And if any shall perish, I will grieve accordingly.

Chapter 16

It was hard to see the good in humanity. On over a hundred occasions I read reports of cruelty on an unimaginable scale. In one instance, two Shia militia members were discussing a mosque member wearing short pants. One told the other not to worry about it because he kidnapped that member's wife and children, raped them, and killed them, and told him to follow sharia. The other laughed and told him he had done a good job. This is the bottom of the barrel of human behavior and for nearly one whole year, I was reading these reports daily.

It's hard to read about and witness these atrocities, then come home a compassionate person. Compassion and empathy had always been two of my greatest traits. My wife would often express that I'd do anything for my friends. My passion as a young man was always to do something to help others and make people happier. I considering so many different things at different times including full time para-church ministry, high school teacher, coaching, non-profit administration, designing effective work study and shelter programs for the homeless, and being a soldier. Yes, I chose

being a soldier because I thought it would help make a difference in the world.

One of the hard parts about being such an empathetic person is I begin to feel the pain of the people I see suffering. One of the things I've always been passionate about is sexual, physical, or mental abuse against women. It all started when I was in college and become a resident advisor (RA) for a floor of over thirty freshman girls. No, this was not a normal thing, but by this time I was a fifth-year senior and had an impeccable reputation at my college, so they decided to experiment with this concept because the alternative would have been to deny me the job in favor of a female candidate that had yet to be chosen.

We received training on counseling techniques, as our college understood RAs would likely be a college student's first confidant in their new college environment. I've always been a fairly confident man and thought that I would excel in this environment because obviously these girls would love me. And they did, but it was usually because of my cheerful naivety! I consider those girls all close friends and still talk to many of them regularly. But one of the most painful things I learned that year was how often women are mentally, physically, and sexually abused. My heart was broken often as I heard stories of jealousy, control, sexual assault, and rape.

To make matters worse, I heard news that a very dear friend of mine had been raped. I wanted to drive to her college town, find the men who did it, and introduce them to a very sharp pair of scissors. Of course, that type of anger would be counterproductive to calming her likely newfound fear of men. I began a new mission of advocacy against this type of behavior and it often caused me emotional pain, as I would hear more stories of this type of abuse. Having daughters has only accelerated my passion, and I imagine I'm only a few years away from many deep and serious talks

with my children about the power of abuse, how to avoid it, and how to overcome it.

To spend a year in a country where women are treated so poorly that they cannot even be seen in public uncovered from head to toe was devastating. To live in a country where a man's perceived mistakes are punishable by the rape of his wife and daughters made it hard to see the value in helping anybody in that country. With each new story I sunk into a lower and lower depression until I finally decided I no longer cared. I decided I couldn't continue caring this deeply for them while I had no way to do anything for them.

I can't begin to tell you how much this affected my happiness, especially after returning from combat. It made me callous to death, pain, hardship, grief, and desperation.

A few months after my briefing sent a soldier to his death, I made an internal promise to capture the man who did it. I wasn't the only one targeting him; 1-61 Cavalry also held him responsible for the death of their gunner and together, we were chasing him all over Baghdad. Then one day we had great intelligence on his exact whereabouts and confidence he wasn't going anywhere for a few days.

In a pretty high profile mission, we joined Iraqi Army soldiers and surrounded a fifteen-story hospital in eastern Baghdad. The Iraqi soldiers would provide external security along with a platoon from 1-61. Another platoon would use its four squads to secure the building and begin searching the fifteen floors. I was the point person, the one assigned to confirm the identity of the target and declare mission success.

Our approach was smooth; we quickly secured the hospital, disabled the elevators, and informed the doctors of our intent. Then the search began. I was razor sharp focused on capturing the man that had killed so many Americans, but the doctors, seeing me leading the search party, were

intent on getting my help. At every floor, American-educated doctors would stop me and plead with me for their need of medicine and antibiotics. At each floor I was witnessing the ultimate in human cruelty: children with arms sawed off, women who had drill bits inserted into their knee caps, kids with multiple bullet wounds breathing through machines, and amputees with puss pouring from their open wounds.

At one point, a female doctor shoved a child into my arms who had her arm amputated just above the elbow. She was lethargic and just stared at me with her beautiful brown eyes, the smell of puss and infection infesting my nostrils. A girl the same age as my own daughter, fighting for her life. The doctor was begging me for antibiotics and in one of the most heartless moments of my life, I shoved the girl into the doctor's arms and said, "I can't help you right now, get out my way."

We caught our man that day. I was rewarded with a 1-61 unit coin and hailed as an essential reason for the mission's success. The target himself, maybe recognizing me after having had so many close calls trying to capture him, handed me a signed wallet-size photograph of himself. I found the gesture odd, but I believed it was his way of saying, "Ok, you got me." Amid our joy of capturing our top target in the city that day, my dreams began haunting me. I couldn't believe any human being could do what I witnessed: the torture of women and children for the sake of their Allah and defense of their own religious sect. I'll never be able to tolerate abuse—physical, verbal, or mental—to women or children, but after that day, I had a hard time remaining empathetic.

I've had to accept what I witnessed was horrible. When I first allowed myself to replay what I saw in that hospital, I was curled up in the fetal position in my bed crying. The next day, I was driving to the D.C. area to meet

my parents and sister for dinner and I kept envisioning the beautiful voice and skin of the female doctor who shoved a lethargic angel into my arms and how I saw them both as a distraction to my mission. I could barely keep my car on the road as the tears flowed, and I wondered what anybody passing me was probably thinking.

But when I returned home in 2006, it was hard for me to show compassion or take joy in the simple things in life. I had to shut down such a large part of my emotional wellbeing just to prevent full-scale depression in Iraq. But while the denial of those emotions helped me to deal with the atrocities I was witnessing, I didn't know it was also denying me the ability to take joy in the good things in life.

I love my kids so much. I think that before Iraq, I would have been the most amazing father, always curious about what my children were doing and thinking, wanting to teach them new things, and smile with their every new discovery. But after Iraq, they could pull off enormous feats and while I knew I was supposed to happy, and while I could see the pure joy in my wife's face, I felt nothing. I did the best acting job I could, but emotionally... nothing.

In contrast, I was watching my youngest daughter walking up the stairs yesterday, swaying her hips side to side pretending to be sassy, and I almost cried at the sheer fact that my little girl was growing up and would one day be a woman. I've noticed that my son is very adept at computers, something that I am also good at and I've been missing the opportunity to pass this to him because I haven’t cared enough. I've since promised him we'd spend time together so I can begin passing on my knowledge to the man that I know will be a better man than me one day.

| Chapter 17

To say that combat and PTSD have made me completely unemotional would be a lie. When I'm not unemotional, I'm sometimes over-the-top emotional. I demonstrated that when my heart was broken last month. I sent numerous heart-felt emails to a girl that clearly stated she was in love with another. I cry a lot when watching television shows or movies, especially if it involves somebody overcoming their fear, a woman being hurt, or a child being hurt. I can get angry pretty quickly, especially if it involves work or a perceived injustice. Most importantly, I'm really great at harshly criticizing myself and feeling shame for past actions. So no, I haven't been completely unemotional.

I think the worst trait I acquired from the Army was defensiveness. I've always had a certain level of self-confidence and arrogance that many probably find annoying. But after Iraq, I would snap anytime anybody implied I was wrong. My wife probably bared the brunt of this attitude. When I think rationally, I have no problem accepting mistakes and apologizing, but for so many years,

I've been quick to defend my actions as soon as anybody ever challenges them.

The Army environment thrives on quick decision-making and we often say a bad decision made quickly is better than a great decision made late. So we train intensively and learn to trust our instincts. In combat, that means no second-guessing, just doing what you're told. I was in charge of anywhere from four to ten people at any given time, and I had bosses that demanded answers, not excuses. While not a traumatic experience, deployment made me spend over twelve hours a day for an entire year barking orders and not accepting any push back. If I was wrong, we were wrong. I had to accept that responsibility, but in return, I did not tolerate any type of resistance to my instructions. It's not a great way to live life, and it's completely contrary to my personality and desired leadership style. So part of recovering is admitting that I was a real douche-bag at times.

On one particular day, a highly respected soldier and friend of mine made a really cool discovery. He determined that an Iraqi male our artillery unit had detained for threatening civilians was actually one of our most highly valued targets. He told me why he thought this, and I told him to write it up and send it to various leaders in our unit. He was reluctant and kept telling me there wasn't much to say and after asking him twice, I exploded at him with months' worth of anger and told him to "just f**king do what I tell you and stop arguing with me." I felt about three days of remorse for talking to my friend like that. But he was right, and his email meant we were able to detain a dangerous terrorist. I wasn't always right. It's taken a lot of humility to go back and apologize to those I wronged in my role as a leader.

But this mentality started to spread into my personal life. I hope by acknowledging how bad I felt and how wrong

I know it was to allow myself to become angry as a leader, I will be able to leave that in my past and be the man I was meant to be: one that does not judge others, sees all others with compassion and understanding, and is slow to anger. I've tried to compensate for my anger in Iraq by closely studying what it truly means to be a leader and hopefully, one day in my lifetime, I'll have another opportunity to demonstrate it.

Chapter 18

War made me much less aware of my own mortality. While I am often terrified at the thought of my children not having a father, I am not too terribly worried about my own death. Because of that, I've neglected taking care of myself in the way I've always been trained and conditioned to do. I work out less, eat poorly, drink more alcohol, and generally have engaged in more self-destructive behavior than probably any other period of my life.

My parents raised me to be a good man, to always have manners, to respect others, and to make responsible choices. Sports reinforced that mentality but also introduced proper nutrition, hard work in the gym and on the sports field, and discipline to do what needed to be done. But I think after a few near-death experiences, I started to worry less about myself.

It also made it that much harder to be content with or understand everyday life back in the states. I had trouble caring about the state of my home or about what cereal to pick out at the grocery store. I did not have strong opinions on our friends, or where we went to go shopping on the weekend, or what outfit my wife should wear to dinner.

Nothing really mattered. My mind only felt at ease in the company of my fellow soldiers or with the help of alcohol, which I was smart enough not to depend on.

I remember the first time I was sure I was going to die. In the days of the Sunni-led Iraq under Saddam Hussein, there was a large slum of Shia Iraqis on the east side of Baghdad, now known as Sadr City. Sadr City was so volatile that we had stopped conducting missions there. We left that area to the Iraqi Army and Iraqi police, but conventional US forces avoided the area completely.

Our commander changed his mind on that policy and decided we needed to show a presence in the slum. A cavalry scout unit from our 3rd brigade (Rakkasan) came to Baghdad to handle the mission and asked for our support. A security patrol consisting of my truck, the Rakkasan unit, and an Iraqi Army unit headed into Sadr City for the first time in over a year. We were almost one hundred percent positive we would encounter an enemy attack. In fact, we were almost counting on it and were fully ready to defend against it. We were so sure of it that as we entered, the mission commander's radio call expressed the mood perfectly when he announced, "Brace for impact." And with every turn, and every slow-down in the narrow streets of Sadr City, the only reason I knew we weren't going to die was because the children were following us everywhere. Our mission ended early as a vehicle bomb ripped apart a bus stop, and we were redirected to provide security as the Iraqi police cleaned the scene.

Months later, not long after returning from my R&R trip to Doha, Qatar, one of my best friends and I were accompanying our armor unit on what we saw as a futile mission. The information that led to the mission came from a higher headquarters and despite both of us claiming the information did not look right, we joined our armor unit into

a dangerous area of Baghdad in hopes of capturing their militia leader.

We had a tag along for this mission, a Navy lieutenant that would soon take over a team of military troops that would plan and execute these types of missions in Baghdad in 2007. We had a great reputation for success so he came with us for the ride along, and we gave him an adventure.

As we proceeded down a dusty road with our lights off, our driver operating with night vision goggles, my friend was explaining our system to the lieutenant. We passed a school on our right and as we approached a clearing, a large explosion launched rocks, dust, and debris at our vehicle, which was fortunately just behind the blast range of the bomb. The bomb exploded equidistant from our truck and the truck in front of us, and I was the closest American to the actual blast. I will forever remember the way the explosion looked and sounded and the rush of adrenaline I felt. My training kicked in and as the truck commander, I took immediate action to get our truck out of the danger zone without ramming another vehicle in the confusion and making sure our crew was safe.

We pulled off into the clearing, set up a security perimeter, and began a clearing operation of the adjacent homes and school to see if we could locate the person who triggered the bomb. The first step was to look for secondary bombs. This may sound like the job for a trained explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team, but it would take valuable time for them to arrive. We were trained to spot the anomalies and so we began a thorough search in the dark. We found a command wire to the IED that exploded, meaning it was likely somebody manually triggered the device. The fact we were operating in the dark without headlights may have saved my life this night. I lifted my leg to kick a large rock and the soldier to my left grabbed my

shoulder and said, "Sergeant, wait!" I lowered my foot and saw what he saw - a wire running from the rock back towards the village before being buried in the ground. I may have been seconds away from kicking an IED buried under a rock.

We never did confirm or deny if there was an IED under that rock because we immediately backed off and then began clearing the homes. We needed help so I went back to my truck and grabbed the lieutenant. At this point, I was finding everything comical. We met in the middle of our trucks, which would provide an outer shield with their armor and our machine gunners standing guard. The platoon sergeant commented that we should work fast because we'd likely get attacked pretty soon.

I knew this lieutenant had never been on the ground in Baghdad before. He claimed it was his "first time out." So when they said they needed bodies and assigned me to clear the school, I knew I wanted him to join us. He was visibly frightened and frantically asking what he was supposed to do. I told him have no worries, just to stay on my hip and to keep his rifle pointed away from any of our backs. So the two of us, along with two junior enlisted tankers, assaulted the dark school building. We cleared the four rooms in less than two minutes, and we found the spool of wire likely used to initiate the IED that barely missed us. It appeared as if it had been thrown over the wall and so we moved quickly to the other side to clear the adjacent home.

In the search, the lieutenant would come running out in excitement, shouting, "I found an AK-47 and two magazines!!!" And we'd reply, "Hey Sir, they're allowed to have that." In the end, we didn't have enough evidence to detain anybody, didn't have the time to properly clear the area, and decided to just depart before what we saw as an imminent ambush if we stayed in place too long.

As my friend and I would recount that entire story, we almost always laughed. The bigger story to us became the Navy lieutenant and his fear and excitement of his first combat action. The way he rushed back to our office and when asked how it went, exclaimed like a child how we were hit with an IED, then cleared a school, then he searched a house and found an AK-47! But what was lost on us is that we were seconds away from actual death or dismemberment.

To make the story even better, two weeks later, the same friend and I were traveling down that same road. We had a different driver and a different machine gunner, and we also had no Navy lieutenant. Tonight was a bigger deal, the unit convinced that this would be the night we'd capture this guy. Because of the danger faced on this road, they decided to escort our vehicle between two M1A1 main battle tanks. While that may sound cool, I was mortified. If I were an enemy with a bomb and I saw three tanks and one armored Humvee, I'd probably attack the Humvee.

As we neared the spot of our last IED, my friend in the back commented to the driver that he should get ready for his first IED. He even began a countdown as we approached the school... 3, 2, 1... nothing. Oh well, not tonight I guess. But from my point of view, we were still twenty meters from the blast site. So I commented, "Actually it wasn't there, it exploded right there." And as I pointed my finger to the spot of the previous explosion, it happened again. It was as if my finger initiated the device. Our new driver moved briskly, almost rear-ending the battle tank in front of us, which had some visible damage, but once again, in the dark, the enemy fired it between our vehicles sparing us any loss of soldiers.

What was funny this time was that all we heard over our internal microphones was laughter. My friend and I were laughing hysterically. Finally I realized I hadn't done

what I did last time, take control. So I asked my gunner if he was ok, considering he had his head outside of the top of the truck when the bomb exploded. He replied, "Yep, but I got a lot of dust in my teeth." For some reason, that reignited our laughter.

Twice my friend and I were meters away from possible death. It's kind of hard to fear death after that. That doesn't mean I didn't. My last two days in Iraq I conducted over four tactical missions in our attempts to recover the captured soldier I wrote about earlier. Being so close to being home, yes, I was afraid of dying. I was confident it would happen because that's just how my luck would turn out. I had already turned in my body armor and ammunition, but because they needed me to go out, they reissued it to me and there was I was, in the most volatile neighborhood of Baghdad over and over again just days away from leaving.

As we neared the end of our deployment, we still had one major target we all really wanted to capture. After some intense analysis, I believed he was likely staying with a relative on the edge of Sadr City and thought I knew the exact block, maybe even the house, where he was staying. In another large-scale operation involving over twenty Humvees and ten Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, we raided the target house.

A young lieutenant disagreed with me on the ground and made a serious tactical error, one that allowed the target to escape. As we turned onto the block and I identified the target house, I gave the signal to begin the operation; the lieutenant decided to make one more pass around the block just to make sure. The mere presence of our vehicles would have been enough to alert the target as we rarely entered this part of the city.

I once again argued with the mission commander over the radio, but he commented, “We’ve already initiated

the left turn so we're going to circle the block and hit it on our return." What he did not anticipate were the low hanging wires and tight spaces that made a quick turn around the block into a fifteen-minute slow navigation. By the time we returned to what I believed was the target house, our objective had safely escaped the area.

As we entered his compound and isolated the men from the women and children, one of the men looked right at me and in perfect English, held out his hand and said "Welcome Sergeant Nelson." I never wore my name tape on missions again.

In what many of us would laugh about, we found out that our target did escape just before our arrival, and I had been labeled the "China Man." I was now a marked man by our then number one most dangerous target in Baghdad.

My last harrowing experience once again involved my best friend and me. We had been asked to support the 1st Infantry Division as they began to gain control of a largely Sunni-controlled area of eastern Baghdad. The Sunnis were the sect of Saddam Hussein and had more money and were generally considered much more dangerous in this part of the city. We received a report that multiple suicide bombers had a safe house in the area, and our higher headquarters wanted us to confirm the location.

At this point, we were past eleven months in Baghdad, and I was days away from going home. Our counterparts were new to Iraq and a little less combative. So we confirmed the house and as the mission commander received my confirmation, he did not give any follow up orders; he just kept driving. I offered two bodies to help raid the home over the radio and his reply was classic, "We're not hitting it now! There are suicide bombers in there!"

I looked at my friend in disbelief. Despite not having the rank to challenge a commissioned officer on the ground, I did it anyways. I replied, "Sir, that's the reason why we

need to hit this that house now! If we don't, there will be suicide bombers on the streets coming after us." He said he couldn't assume that risk, and we were to return to base to formulate our plan of attack.

The lieutenant colonel in charge of their battalion asked me to join him in a private planning room and asked for my assessment of the situation. I told him that by not hitting the house when we had the chance, we then risked the chance of them either fleeing, or being prepared for our return. I told him the lieutenant on the ground had made a severe tactical error.

He asked me if we'd return with him that night and, of course, I agreed. We raided the home as darkness set in and I was once again sure I was not going to be going home alive. But we made it... luckily for us they had chosen to flee, but unluckily, I'm sure an Iraqi security force member did not have the same fate at a later date because the bombers were still free to conduct their attack.

I now have the wonderful task of appreciating my own mortality, to not see my near-death experiences as comical. By admitting these events—and how horribly I dealt with them—I'm hoping I'll once again have the pride in myself, my family, and my own life to cherish every moment and take care of my health.

Chapter 19

It's very easy to dissuade a combat veteran from talking about his or her experiences. For the most part we don't want to anyway, so if the circumstances aren't just right, it probably won't happen. I don't want you to think that is something you can help. You may be a loving spouse, dearest friend, or a very dear boy or girlfriend, but that doesn't automatically mean we will want to talk about it with you. Maybe it's because we want to spare you the details of our negative experiences. Maybe it's because what we endured doesn't sound that bad when shared in stories or words so we don't want to seem like we're weak or complaining. As I've written this entire book up to this point, I haven't had one story that in itself would likely have caused me so many years of an unemotional existence, it's just all of this put together that turns us into different people.

I recently read, in a study financed by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and presented in August 2014, that many Vietnam Era vets learned to cope with PTSD, but as many as eleven percent have had PTSD ever since and may deal with it the rest of their lives. I am doing everything I

can to deal with mine, which includes regular therapy appointments with the VA, frequent talks with my fellow veterans to allow me to be ok with everything we experienced, and a conscience effort to identify my anxieties and tackle the source head on.

I've seen PTSD manifest in so many ways, for so many veterans. As a history major, I often studied America's greatest generation of World War II combat veterans. Many of them returned from the hardships of war changed men: silent, hard-working, and happy to live away from the hustle and bustle of urban life, satisfied to be raising a family and doing honest work. Many of them never spoke of their war experiences, some only as they neared the ends of their lives.

I see the same in my parent's generation of Vietnam War era veterans. I can't imagine the struggles these men and women faced without the public awareness and help currently available for PTSD. I think of the number of Vietnam veterans that struggled with alcohol, unemployment, divorce, and inability to discuss the horrors of war, continually internalizing every bad memory and emotion, likely for the same reasons I did. Many learned to cope, but I believe many likely sacrificed the happy, fulfilling life they were meant to live.

I do not want to fit into that category anymore. I already feel so much better in life, like I have a chance at feeling true happiness again. In such a short time, I feel again. My passions have returned. I feel true joy in the fact that my six year old just climbed to the top of a playground fireman's pole for the first time, the look of sheer excitement on her face echoed in my own.

If you have a loved one that seems distant, discontent with life, and not enjoying his or her former passions after deployment, there's a good chance he or she is suffering from anxiety and PTSD. For some it comes and goes, for some it goes away completely with no help. I am definitely

one that had my ups and downs, but I know I don't want that kind of life anymore. I just want to be back to my normal, caring, fun-loving, and responsible self. I would almost bet on it that your loved one feels the same way. Nobody wants to be sad, depressed, or anxious and if we could solve the problem ourselves, we definitely would.

I am not a licensed psychologist or psychiatrist so take this statement simply as advice from a guy who has been through it: the best thing you can do for your loved one is to encourage him or her to talk about deployment without any interjections; just hugs, love, and acceptance. Encourage him or her to cry if needed and don't try to solve the problem. Talking about it and hurting alone is usually exactly what helps me the most. The next most important step is to encourage him or her to seek professional counseling. In a summer 2014 survey of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans conducted by the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), seventy-seven percent of respondents said they sought professional counseling after being urged by family and friends. Your encouragement can make the difference, and if the anxiety truly is unbearable, a licensed therapist may be able to recommend appropriate treatment and possibly even medication if necessary.

For many combat veterans, it's hard to find this comfortable atmosphere. I think many of us fear over-burdening our loved ones or being viewed as weak or too emotional. It would have taken a lot of encouragement from my wife for me to share all of my thoughts and emotions with her. And if at any time that comfort was broken (and I don't mean my trust of the woman I loved, just my own personal comfort), I likely would have stopped talking and buried the emotions again. Once again, this is not about criticizing a woman that loved me dearly and raised three beautiful children for our family, this is about PTSD being a

condition that none of us were really prepared to handle as soldiers or as family members.

Chapter 20

For many veterans, the brotherhood is one of our safe havens. There's nothing more soothing than talking to other combat veterans, especially if they are ones I served beside in Iraq or Afghanistan. There is an instant bond, an unspoken understanding. It's why so many soldiers come home depressed and hating combat, but are quick to volunteer or want to return. Because when we are deployed, the anxiety is mostly gone, the sadness is gone. We're among our brothers and sisters in arms, our senses are alert, our minds are occupied. Don't get me wrong, we all complain most of the day and talk about how much it sucks. That's because in reality, none of us actually want to be there, we just want to be with our brotherhood.

The brotherhood is why organizations like IAVA, American Legion, and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) are so vital to combat veterans when they return to civilization. IAVA offered me a chance to unite with other veterans at various events at times when I needed it the most. At almost every IAVA event I've ever attended, I've been full of smiles and legitimately happy. I believe the American Legion and

VFW were vital organizations for our nation's World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War veterans as well.

To the veterans that fought before us, PTSD was not well known and the military and public were not encouraging veterans to let it out. I know so many veterans of our past wars that never discuss their experiences and live contently in our nations rural areas, just happy to be with family. They are suffering from the same trauma as me, whether or not they were directly involved in combat arms activities. We are still learning how best to deal with PTSD among our military, but the time is now.

Combat veterans are committing suicide at an alarming rate. With high unemployment, less public concern for the military, and public discontent with the Department of Defense and government spending, it's easy to forget that these veterans are Americans who are suffering because they answered the call to defend and protect our nation. We can't rely on veterans' organizations and government funding; we need the help of every person who knows, loves, or cares for a combat veteran. If you witness any of the signs in your combat veteran friend, lover, or family member that I've demonstrated in this book, please encourage him or her to talk about the deployment in a safe environment.

Anxiety is a powerful thing. I've heard so many people talk about anxiety, but I never understood it. I never knew that I myself was suffering from it. It wasn't until I suffered two broken hearts in one year that my anxiety spiraled out of control and I had no choice but to deal with it. I don't think I've ever been suicidal. I've had times where I didn't care if I lived or died, but never suicidal. However, when my anxiety had gripped me to my core, I couldn't function as a normal human being. I had to leave work, I couldn't take care of my children properly, and I wanted nothing in the world more than to make the feeling disappear. It was at that moment when I knew why people

had the courage to take their own life, but I was fortunate to know I had three perfect reasons to live sitting next to me playing Minecraft. (My son, when hearing I was writing a book, asked me to write about Minecraft.) It's very possible my children are the reason I'm alive and why I could never consider suicide as an option.

War is hell; we all know this. But the soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen who fight in them are loving, caring people that just want to be content with life again. We want to go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning without horrible dreams. I don't know if therapy will ever eliminate my dreams of war. One of my worst nightmares involves me hugging my children goodbye to board a plane sending me back to Iraq. I'm always in my uniform in those dreams, and I always wake up heart pounding, sweating, and almost feeling like I'm there again. Will therapy make that dream go away? I hope so.

When I publicly announced I thought I had PTSD and was going to do something about it, I received no less than fifty messages or phone calls from other veterans. Many wrote to encourage me and tell me they themselves had been going to therapy and also suffered from anxiety. Others wrote to tell me they had the same problems as me and, in many cases, we agreed to seek help together. The brotherhood... we always have each other’s backs. But we are not always right there when needed.

Loved ones, family members, spouses, children... you are the ones that will always be there. Don't be misled by Hollywood, which makes every veteran returning from war look like a danger to society. PTSD isn't necessarily choke slamming a kid that wakes a soldier up in the morning. PTSD isn't always getting drunk every night and starting fights. PTSD is likely more subtle. PTSD may be more frequent drinking, experimental drug use, and more agitated

personality, but I think more often than not, it's just indifference and discontent with life.

Nobody knows us more than our loved ones; if you see any of this happening, don't wait any longer to offer an encouraging ear. Don't ask if he or she wants to talk about it, because we don't. Get comfortable and ask pointed questions about deployment. Break the ice by asking about the camp, the chow hall, the work hours, and the weather. Then ask harder questions about friends, and the stress. Let him or her talk. Then ask about the attacks and if he or she was scared. Then encourage him or her to hurt if necessary and let them know you're always there. I can’t repeat this enough: never belittle the experience or seem disinterested.

Chapter 21

I am full of grief at how I've lived my life since 2007. I think of how much I've affected my own happiness as well as the happiness of my wife and my children because I could not admit war had changed me. For seven years, I tried to fix all the symptoms of a deeper-seated mental condition, without acknowledging that the source of the symptoms was locked tight under a lid concealing my true emotions. I've shoved the lid off and now I'm feeling everything.

I see my soon-to-be ex-wife and feel the horrible combination of love, regret, and shame. I remember how I felt when we met, how I felt as our children were born, and how I felt as we shared intimate moments. I remember how I felt after war, when it seems like she was always nagging me or rolling her eyes at me. I remember how I felt each time I tried to mention war, how I was met with an uncomfortable response. I remember knowing I was not doing my part and needing to fix things, but having too much pride to just tell her, to just break down and tell her.

I see my beautiful children. They'll likely never remember a time I didn't smile for them, hold them, and be there for them. But will they remember all of the times they

asked me to read to them and I said “maybe later”? Will they remember all of the times they asked me to play with them in the yard and I said “not right now”? I can assure you there was nothing I was doing that was more important during those moments. My wife knew it and would sometimes just force me to go do it, knowing full well that I would enjoy it and thank her for it afterwards. I shouldn't need somebody to tell me to enjoy my time with my children.

I've been writing this book whenever I can find free time. Right now I'm at a playground watching my children play. At times they come to talk to me, ask me to push them on the swing, or watch them on the monkey bars. I've closed the lid of my laptop and done those things. I no longer need someone to tell me to open my eyes and enjoy the gifts I've been given. So now I will always work hard to ensure I never lose that again.

I've started to play music again. Music has always been a passion of mine. When I was in first grade, my Korean mom enrolled my sister and me in personal piano lessons. I laugh about it now and how we were destined to learn piano because of our Korean heritage. I was a natural, often memorizing the songs the same day I learned them, and then spending hours at the piano imitating jingles or songs I'd hear on the television. I remember how happy I was as a seven year old knocking out “Hail to the Redskins” for the first time. But I was a lazy kid and much preferred to play around on the piano than practice my directed notes and sheet music, so my parents stopped the lessons. But the memory of that time, and the early introduction to music stuck with me.

In elementary school, I would play the sting bass and earn first chair in fifth grade. The next year, I played the saxophone and earned first chair, quitting only because my parents didn't have the money (or didn’t want to spend it) to

purchase an actual saxophone for me as I entered middle school. I was an athlete, but I often found myself standing outside the band and choir rooms in middle school and high school listening and wanting to play all of the instruments.

In high school and college, I left my comfort zone and tried singing. I had no clue how my voice was, so I stuck to fun tunes. I stood on stage in front of my entire high school and sang songs like “Peaches” and Adam Sandler's “Turkey Song” at our annual variety shows. Then I got to college and tried out for a musical. I auditioned with a version of the country song “Pickup Man” by Joe Diffee. I tried to stop after the first chorus and the show director requested that I please continue until the end with a big smile on her face. That role came with voice lessons and three songs in a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's “As You Like It.”

In college, I also started playing guitar and drums. My girlfriend at the time taught me my first few chords and then in her competitive spirit sneered at me as I surpassed her within months. I was obsessed, playing guitar sometimes up to three or four hours a day. Then I took a history of rock and roll class, and we had to perform a song. I had the guitar in hand, but our drummer couldn't hold a beat. In an attempt to demonstrate to him how to do it, I sat down at a drum set for the first time in my entire life and knocked out a perfect set of the song we were trying to perform. He picked up the bass instead and my love of drums was born. I joined a band on campus and played drums with them for two years. I also took classical guitar lessons and percussion lessons to improve.

It was music that could reach my soul. I spent almost all of my extra money—and also contributed plenty in interest to MasterCard and Visa—to attend as many live shows as possible in college. Being in Minneapolis, I got to experience thrilling, intimate shows at First Ave like the Cardigans, Violent Femmes, and Bjork. I saw big name

shows at the Target Center like Van Halen, Aerosmith, Danzig, Smashing Pumpkins, The Wallflowers, Crash Test Dummies, Oasis, and The Bloodhound Gang. Having gone to high school in northern Wisconsin, I listened to my fair share of country music too and saw Tim McGraw and Faith Hill play together in Duluth, Minnesota, pre-marriage.

It was music that was a large part of becoming a Christian at twenty years old. Having Christian parents, you'd think I would have made that decision earlier in life, but by the time I had reached college, I had no interest in religion and knew nothing about the Bible. It was in that ignorance that I picked a Christian college and through various friends I met and a required religious studies curriculum, I began to study the Bible and learn about Christianity. I had all of the academic knowledge necessary and knew what the Bible said about how to become a Christian, but I was just not a spiritual person. That was until I found myself on a weekend retreat, lured by the promise of meeting cute girls. It was the first time I was surrounded by that many passionate people, all emotionally singing praise and worship songs. The music was so powerful and the feeling so raw, that spirituality became a possibility.

But after Iraq, I couldn't tell you the name of a song and artist together anymore. I stopped playing guitar, maybe even a little after my very first short tour to Iraq. I played drums for about two weeks at my church just after Iraq, but it was short lived and I have barely played since, maybe only once or twice.

It took a girl to make my emotions work again, and music would again be a part of the process. I had long since questioned my own beliefs in Christianity by this time, but music still had the power to make me feel. She was passionate about music and as she shared a personally handpicked playlist of around fifty songs to me, and I fell in

love with music again. I restrung my guitar, replacing strings I had put on in college. I even took a trip to a Guitar Center in Virginia and spent about two hours playing on their electronic drum sets. It was reinvigorating and I'm now back to spending more than a few hours a week learning new songs, playing, and even starting to sing again.

Chapter 22

I took quite a spiritual beating in Iraq. I returned questioning my beliefs and wondering if I could even call myself a Christian anymore. Recognizing I felt kind of empty inside, I worked hard to try and believe again. I went to church, prayed, talked to my Christian friends often, but inside my heart, I just didn't feel anything that I felt in my early twenties.

It was probably my first trip to Afghanistan when I finally admitted to myself that I didn't have faith anymore. I still love and respect Christians and Christianity, but my logical, scientific mind and my spiritual mind have been in steady conflict for years. I readily admit that God could be real, that Jesus was God in man form and died on the cross for my sins, but to say I am positive of this fact and believe that God is playing a part in my life today, I cannot say with as much confidence.

In the Army, we often say, "There's no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole." Well I happen to know that this statement is not true because I've shared a foxhole with an atheist. I actually find it harder to believe that soldiers can

endure combat and still remain faithful to a loving God. I envy them.

But to me, I often asked myself how a real God could just abandon my spiritual self when I was praying to him daily? How could a real and just God leave me an emotionless shell of a human when I was doing my best to be a Godly man, praying often, and trying to follow all that I had learned from the Bible? And why, when I wanted nothing more than for the suffering to stop, did I feel nothing at all? I have a long ways to go on my own spiritual journey. I refuse to sit here and say I'm an atheist, but I also think it would be a betrayal to call myself a Christian right now.

As I've opened the lid to my emotions again, my heart is seeking something. So many people have written to say they were praying for me. So many have asked me to come to their church. So many have told me that God can fill the void in my life. I've witnessed faith in God, or possibly God himself, do amazing things in people, and so I'm not closed off to the possibly I'm just lost in the woods. I just know that right now, when it comes to spirituality, I don't have much. I think my spiritual health will improve so I don’t count myself out of Heaven just yet.

I haven't quite figured out how spirituality will play into my PTSD recovery. Many have recommended yoga to help ease the anxiety; others have gone as far as to tell me it will offer spiritual healing. As I'm still recovering from a fourth, and hopefully final, joint surgery from my old Army injuries, so I've yet to explore a yoga routine. As I’ve mentioned before, I’m still on the road to recovery.

Chapter 23

My first mental health visit with the VA went very smoothly. I was anxious and nervous, my hands were shaking, and as I described what I was thinking and feeling, tears were flowing. He allowed me to talk, used encouraging words and actions to get me to keep talking, and encouraged me to cry. And in the end, he confirmed what I had already figured out: I had a textbook case of PTSD. However, because I had already begun the process of talking about it and not holding all of the negative emotions in, I had already crossed over the threshold of recovery.

There's something to be said about going to seek professional help. The most helpful advice I got before that appointment was from a dear friend from high school. She is actually a crisis response counselor for abused women and deals with PTSD on a very regular basis. While her exposure to combat-related PTSD is not the same, the advice she gave me was instrumental in starting my recovery. Very simply she told me that my denial of emotions was a very effective defense mechanism. I needed it to survive a trying time, but because I allowed that denial to continue, it denied me every other good emotion as well. The most important way to get

it back was to stop denying the pain, remember the emotions, let the pain and hurt run its course, and then I could heal.

I took her advice to heart and spent the next forty-eight hours remembering, hurting, crying, and recovering. I thought of soldiers being killed, many of whom I never knew and whose name I cannot tell you right now. I thought of how I didn't care if I lived or died. I thought of how I was willing to be maimed to get out of that place. I thought of my very first convoy in Mosul when I was terrified at my surrounding and then just as quickly as it came, I gave up control of my destiny and said there's no way to prevent life or death in this situation, so just stop thinking about it. I remembered the events in that fifteen-story Baghdad hospital, and as I replayed the visions in my mind, I allowed the emotions I should have felt to run its course. I cried for hours about that damn hospital.

But now, just a few short weeks later, I can recount almost all of those stories without tears. I can talk about the horrible things I witnessed, knowing that I took the time to feel the appropriate emotions, that I didn't just shove them back into a pit to avoid feeling sad or angry.

My recovery I believe was accelerated because I was willing to continue remembering and to continue hurting. It made my life much more emotional for a while, and without a doubt, I was at my most emotionally vulnerable crossroads of my entire life.

The VA continues to make new strides in PTSD therapy. VA therapists use various types of cognitive therapy to help veterans understand and change how they think about traumatic memories. My therapist helped me to identify the sources of my own anxiety and then presented ways to cope with the guilt, stress, and fear. By continually recounting my most traumatic memories, my therapist used exposure therapy to help me get over my fears of being in

those situations again. By repeatedly recounting my most traumatic memories aloud, I became a bit more desensitized to the emotions causing me trouble.

The VA also uses eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). I have not had this type of therapy yet, but a friend recommended it to me and one of my Army friends has gone through multiple EMDR therapy sessions. The goal is to redirect our emotions when recounting traumatic events to lessen the impact on our endocrine systems. I don't believe my case of PTSD was very severe, so there didn't seem to be a need to elevate to this level.

In more severe cases, VA therapists can offer medication to counteract anxiety and depression. It's not a bad thing for some people; the traumatic events we witnessed affected all of us differently. For some, it causes chemical imbalances no amount of self-determination can counter. That is why it is so important that veterans experiencing PTSD seek help. We need to reduce veteran suicide rates and after my own bout with soul-crushing anxiety, I'll never again think a veteran who commits suicide was a coward. They were just like me, possibly without the three little treasures that keep me happy enough to live, possibly without the loved ones knowledgeable about PTSD to convince him or her to seek help and make sure they were doing ok.

Out of many of the PTSD treatment protocols I've been researching lately, I believe the therapy sessions have relieved a majority of my issues. I no longer wake up at three in the morning anymore. I no longer feel emotionally empty.

Chapter 24

My number one purpose for writing this book was to express that the effects of PTSD can sometimes be very subtle. Many times, PTSD can creep in despite the lack of severely traumatic events. It doesn't require hundreds of combat actions, multiple near-death situations, or even firing a weapon in self-defense to initiate PTSD. I wanted to express to my fellow combat veterans of any conflict: if you believe you are different since combat, that you are having trouble feeling content, enjoying old passions, or being around people, you may have PTSD. If you are the loved one or friend of somebody and you notice he or she has changed after deployment, you may be the missing link that helps him or her get the help needed.

None of us want to be sad, hurtful, or discontent. When asked if we're ok, we'll likely almost always say we're doing fine. We are headstrong, emotionally hardened warriors living in a non-combative world. And most of the times, we know we are misunderstood except to our brotherhood. And when we are together, especially when beers are involved, you can learn a lot about our wartime experiences. But you probably won't hear about how they

made us feel. We can recount those horrible stories with laughter to each other because we all know that all of us remember what it actually felt like. But to share them with somebody else, like a loved one or close friend, that may be a little more difficult. If they are like me, they may not think you could ever understand.

So my advice is to let him or her know that you definitely will not understand, but also that you know dealing with it is important and you want to be a nonjudgmental, listening ear. You won't be able to tell us how to handle these memories or what we are supposed to feel, but by being someone that will listen without trying to tell us how to feel, you might provide a comfortable environment that may help us to open up a little.

I can only imagine how tough it must be to be a lover or spouse to one of us, wanting nothing more to know what's going through our head or what we want out of life. Many of us don't know; maybe we just want you. We are humans after all and I think most of us feel safe knowing we are loved. But it's probably not enough for you, and so many veterans are finding their loving spouses or boy or girlfriends leaving because he or she can't handle the emotional distance. If you're in that situation, know that your veteran probably does love you. That your veteran probably loves his or her kids more than you could ever imagine. That distance is because we haven't dealt with our emotions. We need help.

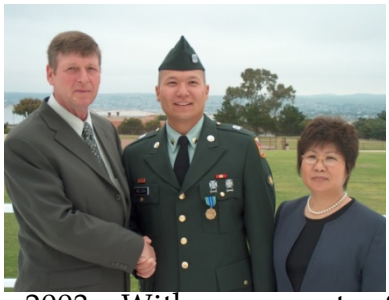
My life has changed drastically. The mother of my children and I are no longer together. I no longer wear the uniform of a United States soldier. But each day I am moving closer and closer to the man I want to be. The experiences I shared throughout this book will not be the same as you or your loved ones. But my hope is that you will see it’s often subtle things that change after war that

demonstrate the true effects of post-traumatic stress disorder on returning veterans.

The stories I used in this book—about my marriage, my passions, and my own spirituality—were to demonstrate that my entire identity changed after a year of combat. Everything I was passionate about became meaningless, and almost everything I loved in this world took on a very different meaning.

I cannot say how life has changed for other veterans. But I'd imagine it includes nightmares, discontent, anxiety, and loss of passion. These are all things that are not likely to go away by themselves. Help is available, for combat veterans it is likely available free of charge through the VA. If that is not available, check with employers about employee assistance programs or talk to a medical care provider or health insurance provider about PTSD counseling. It could change your life.

I'm authoring this final paragraph on Veterans Day, November 11, 2014. It's been only four months since I realized PTSD was likely responsible for nearly eight years of unhappiness in my life. The past two months have been amazing. With therapy, writing down my experiences, and enjoying things I am passionate about, I feel capable of handling my emotions and being fully present in this world again. I haven't had an anxiety attack since August and there probably hasn't been a time in my life where I've enjoyed playing with my kids this much. I also rarely feel the need to drink alcohol, though I do still love Virginia red wines! I hope that my experience can be repeated by thousands of military veterans.



June 2003 – With my parents after graduating from the Korean language course at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California

December 2003 – The sign inside of a dining facility at the Mosul Airport in Iraq

January 2004 – Guarding our convoy during a brief halt near Tikrit, Iraq.

February 2004 – Homecoming ceremony at Fort Campbell, Kentucky

May 2006 – a large crowd gathered outside of our Humvee after a raid on a weapons cache in eastern Baghdad

August 2006 – Smiling while boarding a C-17 at Doha, Qatar, bound for Iraq, after a four-day R&R.

September 2006 – A 4th Infantry Division tanker measuring the crater of an IED that nearly struck my truck.

October 2006 – Awaiting completion of tactical questioning at an abandoned nuclear facility in Baghdad.

October 2006 – A large crowd gathers, blocking our exit from a compound by burning tires, throwing rocks, and firing at us from undisclosed locations.

November 2006 – Final picture from Baghdad, taken just days before departing the country.

November 2006 - First week home after a nearly 12-month tour to Baghdad, Iraq.

Acknowledgements

The stories in this book are not easy for me to share. I couldn't have gotten to this point without help from my family, fellow soldiers, the Department of Veterans Affairs, or my amazing friends. I especially want to acknowledge my beautiful children Benjamin, Arianna, and Gwendolyn Rose for being my motivation in life. I acknowledge Holly for having to put up with me during my most trying years. I want to thank my former platoon for expressing your understanding and acknowledgement of the struggle we all faced when we got home. I want to specifically thank Amanda and Jody, both for our long friendships spanning back to high school and college, but specifically for being an amazing voice of reason when I was at my lowest. Others I want to thank by name: Nick, Gene, Jeremy, and Kayla for providing good feedback and proofreading of the draft and Kevin for letting me use the picture of him I snapped in 2006 in Baghdad (back cover).

About the Author

Lewis Nelson grew up in Manassas, Virginia, and Hayward, Wisconsin, and is a 2000 graduate of Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with a B.A. in history. After America was attacked on September 11, 2001, he enlisted in the US Army and served seven years active duty as a Korean cryptologic linguist. Lewis deployed to Iraq in 2003-2004 with the 311th Military Intelligence Battalion, 101st Airborne Division and again from 2005 to 2006 with the 506th Regimental Combat Team (Currahee), 101st Airborne Division.

Lewis spent the following eight years as a defense contractor and Department of Defense civilian employee before leaving government service in early 2016 to pursue a Masters of Business Administration at the University of Virginia Darden School of Business. Lewis lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, and values spending his time with his three children, family, and friends.

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Mission

To promote social change surrounding veterans issues through written awareness.

Vision

The War Writers' Campaign aims to maintain a long-term and historic platform that facilitates the consolidated efforts of service members and veterans to promote mental therapy through the literary word. Its continued purpose of affecting advocacy and assistance will shape and direct the programs of best in class veterans organizations for years to come.

The War Writers' Campaign, Inc. helps veterans in the following ways:

Assist veterans in telling their own story

Engage them where they are in the power of therapy through communication

Empower the next greatest generation of veterans through written publications that generate royalties, create awareness for change, and provide a platform for altruistic giving in the veteran space

Cultivate impact for tangible advocacy – 100% of proceeds from published works go directly back to best in class veterans programs

The War Writers' Campaign is proud to partner with Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA).

Through our partnership, The Campaign is not only able to support the historical platform for veteran story; we are supporting best-in-class programs that improve the lives of veterans, their families, and our community. The War Writers' Campaign is able to bring together the voices of our Nation's heroes and leverage them for advocacy in the veteran space.

100% of all proceeds support the combined partnership programs of The Campaign and IAVA.

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) is the first and largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization for new veterans, with over 200,000 Member Veterans and supporters nationwide. IAVA is a 21st Century veterans' organization dedicated to standing with the 2.4 million veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan from their first day home through the rest of their lives.

Founded in 2004 by an Iraq veteran, their mission is to improve the lives of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families. IAVA strives to build an empowered generation of veterans who provide sustainable leadership for our country and their local communities. They work toward this vision through programs in four key impact areas: supporting new veterans in Health, Education, Employment and building a lasting Community for vets and their families (HEEC).

IAVA creates impact in these critical areas through assistance to vets and their families, raising awareness about issues facing our community and advocating for supportive policy from the federal to the local level.

Learn more about IAVA by visiting their website: IAVA.org

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