

OZARKS TECHNICAL
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

VETERAN VOICES

A LITERARY MAGAZINE FOR THE VETERAN COLLEGE COMMUNITY

FALL 2019, ISSUE 1

FROM TRAGEDY: HUMOR

Finding comedic relief in unexpected places

JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

Dive into the experiences of one Marine

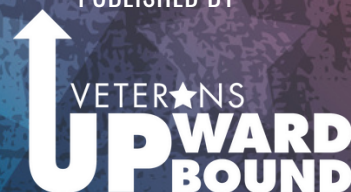
CONFRONTING THE WAR AT HOME

A poem about the transition back

ANYONE CAN SMOKE MEAT

One veteran's love of smoking meat

PUBLISHED BY



& OTC VETERAN SERVICES

LETTER FROM THE TEAM

Welcome to OTC's Inaugural Veterans Literary Magazine!

This magazine is full of many topics and stages of life, from childhood memories, to enlistment days, to battle stories, to transition stories – a whole new kind of battle. It includes interests, hobbies, passions, and some of the things that inspire our veterans every day.

Veteran Voices requires many thanks to many people. First and above all, we would like to thank the veterans who submitted photos, artwork, poetry, songs, and stories. This magazine has become something tangible only because of these individuals who were brave enough to share their voices. The breadth and depth of these pieces is incredible, and we hope that you as a reader, take the time to spend with each one.

Aside from the content, this magazine in its final version is only here because of the individuals who gave so much time and care to ensure that stories were not lost. Veteran Voices recognizes Michelle Ciesielski with Veterans Upward Bound and Melissa Trader with Veterans Services who gave their time from the beginning, helping to coordinate the application and execution of the mini-grant and make it possible for veteran voices to have a place on our campuses. Additional Veterans Upward Bound staff deserve to be recognized, particularly Alex Simpson and Ethan Sykes. Alex coordinated the editing of the magazine and made sure that every submission was presented professionally and authors' voices are always present. Ethan provided design skills that engage readers, drawing people into the worlds which our veterans live. Veteran Voices recognizes Hope Brooks-Loven who designed the cover of this beautiful magazine. The OTC grants office gave this project an opportunity to come to life, selecting this project for funding and assisting with communication about the magazine to the Veteran community. Finally, Veterans Voices would like to thank all the faculty and staff who encouraged veterans to submit their work to this project. Larry Rottman, an instructor for the Veterans English Composition class, collected many of these pieces for publishing. We appreciate him and his veteran students sharing their work with us.

We hope that this magazine is a strong platform for our veterans' voices to be heard.

Content in this document depicts positive and negative experiences, including PTSD, suicidal ideation, or problems with transitions. If you need any resources please refer to the local resources section at the end of the magazine.



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MEMORIES

“ I took this photo at one of my last trainings, preparing for a deployment with my unit. Being with the same unit for eight years, they were my second family. Still to this day, I miss the life and the uniform. ”



KACIE LUNDSFORD

Kacie Lundsford is an Army Veteran who wrote this to reflect on her time in the service

OF SERVICE

Tomorrow

When fangs glisten white, under the bright moon
and the spirits of blood gleam strongly in my eyes
then, you shall become the prey.
No hiding place will be safe.

An eerie howl separate from the maker,
and a chill that tightens the skin, seeks all warm bodies.
I have no conscience. I leave none untouched.
Unwary and naked you stand.

In an instant I am upon you.
The impact of my furious body,
drives you down to the dust.
Without constraint, I find your neck.

Like a steel trap, a vise of teeth snaps around your throat.
Moans of ignorance squelch out but,
I demand screams.
In a multitude of pain, the feverish moment ends.

As I depart, blood drips from my teeth,
and the jackal wind encircles you.
Steam rises from the heap,
joining you to the cold.

The once uncomtemplating
tongue hangs from the mouth.
Indifferent eyes gaze blank at the now hazy moon,
and tomorrow the sun will rise?



JEFF O'FLYNN

Jeff, an Army veteran, wrote this poem after his third deployment to Iraq

BEING DEPLOYED

Alex Simpson
Army Veteran

Dearest Wife,

The last kiss goodbye.

It was so hard - too hard - to let go of you. I know you must have cried yourself to sleep that night. I would have done the same but there is no room for weakness here, on the mission. I must remain focused on task before me.

Twenty-seven hours went by before we landed. Every second felt like a lifetime. Every man was humbled by what lay ahead of him and what they left behind. We landed in another world... another world on the same planet. Immediately my heart began to wander.

Hours passed before we reached our destination, a place we would call "home," for a year of our lives. A terrain as harsh and unforgiving as they come. A place set in the heart of enemy territory. The disconnection set in almost immediately.

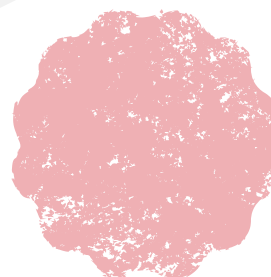
I longed to hear you, to see you, to smell you, to touch you. Neither I, nor any man, can adequately tell you what it's like to be here, a world apart. Like an astronaut landing on the moon, you just have to be there.

Some are stronger than others, but everyone has the feeling. Yet, we have each other, brothers and sisters united together under circumstance to keep each other's spirits high. We laugh and tell stories of love and life, what we've done and what we want to do.

But all this is mediocre compared to what really saves us. A letter from home, a care package from a family member, a phone call with a loved one. These things are more rejuvenating than any remedy known to mankind. It is the soup for our soul.

So I pray that my words will not go unheeded. Let your soldier know that you care. It can make all the difference.

Sincerely,
A Soldier



My Best/Strangest Day at Work

Mark Pugh
Navy Veteran

Adventure at Sea

It was mid-April in Beaufort, South Carolina, and the weekend was in full swing. It was also one of the nicest days we've had in a long while, which was no wonder that so many people were taking advantage of the weather. At the time, I was a search and rescue swimmer in the Navy stationed at Marine Corp Air Station, (M.C.A.S.) Beaufort. I had been on board for two years by this time, and had grown accustomed to the slow, day-to-day routine. You see, Beaufort was a sleepy little fishing town with not much need for us, rescue swimmers, very often.

On this day, my morning duty shift started like any other. We took muster (assembly roll-call) and ran over the duty assignments, then we were off to the ready room for a long day of TV and maybe a nap. It was three hours before the first sign of life came from the radio scanner. Our pulses started to pump, as we thought something might be up. The letdown came just as fast and hard, as we soon discovered that the local police force was calling in a speeding stop on the wrong channel. It happens more often than you would think. In fact, I've done it myself a time or two. So, we turned back to our movie, and the day went on.

Then, at around three o'clock that afternoon, the scanner came back to life. The Coast Guard received a call from a yacht on a weekend outing, 150 miles off shore. A young lady on board the yacht was pregnant and was experiencing contractions. After a few minutes of deliberation, the Coast Guard felt that my unit was better equipped to handle this. It actually wasn't that, we were just closer than they were. As the crew went to the helicopter, our control room contacted the ship and found out that she was still two weeks away from the expected due date. No problem. We would just pick her up and drop her off at the hospital. If only it had been that easy.

When we arrived, we found that the crew of the yacht had placed her in a life raft as we had instructed. I exited the helicopter and swam to the "very upset lady" in the raft. Not long after, the basket was winched down to pull her up.

Within five minutes, I was back aboard the chopper and heading to land. Then, I contacted the hospital in Beaufort to inform them that we were on our way, and requested further instruction. This is where everything went downhill.

The doctor asked me to check her "dilation measurements." This was NOT in my scope of training. So, I told the lady what I needed to do and that I would "owe her dinner at a later date." She agreed and, ready or not, I went in. Not sure how to take the measurement, I prayed that a good guess would do. But what I found was not what I had been expecting. Yep, that's right, the baby was coming, and I didn't know how to stop it, or even deliver it for that fact. With the doctor walking me through each of the steps, out came a little baby girl. It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. I clipped the cord and passed the child to her mother, before reporting to the control tower that we now had six souls on board. It was then I heard a snicker over my headset, and I asked the doctor what was up. He only responded by saying, "Look down." And that's when all hell broke loose. Some sort of big, bloody mass I didn't recognize had fallen out of this woman. I completely lost it. My hoist operator began to vomit uncontrollably, while I tried to kick whatever it was away from me and my two patients. After it was finally knocked into the ocean, I tried to regain control of myself and that's when I heard a loud gut wrenching laughter over my headset. The doctor had put us on speaker so that the whole ER staff could hear our introduction to the "after birth."

The remainder of the flight was uneventful. We had arrived at the hospital and were met by the staff to take control of the patients. Before heading inside, the young lady took one more opportunity to say thank you. A nurse rolled her eyes and said, "Not bad, rookie." Without replying, I hopped aboard the chopper and went back to base for a well needed shower.

Looking back at that day, I still get a smile on my face. I might have been the butt of one doctor's joke, but it was all in good fun. If the shoe was on the other foot, I might have done the same. All joking aside, that was a specific day which brought meaning to my whole job. From that point on, I would stay on my toes and never assume that something would be routine ever again.

My Friend Glory

BORN IN THE DAYS OF THE TORY
WAS MY FRIEND NAMED 'OLD GLORY'
HER JOURNEY HAS BEEN LONG
FOR E'ER **SHE'S BEEN STRONG**

TODAY SHE IS FOUND THE WORLD AROUND
FLYING HIGH WAY ABOVE THE GROUND
RARELY GIVEN A CHANCE
BARELY GIVEN A GLANCE

I PRAY WHEN YOU SEE HER NEXT
YOU WILL REMEMBER THIS TEXT
AND THE LONG, AND CHERISHED STORY
OF OUR GREAT OLD FRIEND 'OLD GLORY'

Denise Chambers
Army Veteran, SFC

A Different Side of the Army

Levi Kittrell
Army Veteran

Joining the Military Changes You

When most people think of the Army or military in general, they think of wars, weapons, explosives, missile launching machines, and K-9 dogs. There is nothing wrong with that, because they are right - all of those things are part of the military. However, there is a side most people hardly see or hear about. It's called Human Resources, also known in the Army as a 42A - Human Resource Specialist/Sergeant. As a 42A it is our job to process any and all of the paperwork the unit we are assigned to may have. Though that sounds pretty simple, it's not. Included in the papers we have to handle and the things we have to know are: Service Group Life Insurance information, how much everyone is getting paid, who is receiving housing allowance or food allowance, who is approaching their reenlistment window, how many promotion points someone has, and the promotions themselves.

42As are the worker bees of the Army. We are usually the first ones there and the last to leave. On top of having to deal with our own work, we also have set hours when soldiers can come and receive help with certain things like pay inquiry, a status on how much longer it's going to take for their housing allowance to start, or why they have less leave days than they are supposed to, etc.

As part of our job processing so much information, we have to be proficient with computers and computer programs.

I will say I learned a lot working as a 42A and wouldn't trade any of it for the world. I enjoyed serving my country and traveling around the globe knowing I was defending freedom. Now, I have the opportunity to briefly write about my experiences in essays or talk about them in class sometimes. I often think of how I told myself I wasn't going to make it through basic training and they would probably kick me out of the military right before I shipped out. Well, I made it and that accomplishment let me know that I can truly do anything I set my mind to.

My piece of advice for anyone wanting to join the military, no matter what branch, is to know it will change you forever. It will change your outlook on life, it will give you a new perspective, and it will help you make the strongest bonds with people from all walks of life. It's more than a job and more than a means to get a paycheck, car, or house. It's a way of life and your duty. You will represent your country and that is the truly greatest honor anyone could have. If I had to do it all over again, I would do it in a heartbeat!

A Surprise Trip

Doug Carrell
Army Veteran

Remembering the Trip

While deployed to Afghanistan in 2004, I was fortunate enough to get an all-expenses paid trip to a large resort town on the Persian Gulf. I was provided this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity after problems arose while planning a trip home for leave, which ultimately led to the unique decision. On the trip, I spent a couple days, far from the dangers that occupied my daily life at Bagram, relaxing in the sun and enjoying luxuries not afforded to us back on base, such as running water and flushable toilets. It was a much welcome break from the ever vigilant lifestyle I lived back at camp.

The uniqueness of this trip was due to the fact that my unit was the last rotation of soldiers sent on six month tours, so considerations for leave and R&R were never made. This changed when a month before we were scheduled to come home, the Army extended our tour an additional three months, which opened up an opportunity for a handful of soldiers in my unit to take leave. Everyone's name was placed in a hat and our commander chose eight names. Mine was the seventh name drawn. Due to the nature of traveling around the world, my date to leave kept getting pushed back and pushed back until finally, the last soldier on the list lost his opportunity to go home. To complicate things, a few weeks prior to my leave date, I became aware of some troubling problems at home.

My girlfriend had moved out without notice and no one could find her. A few days later, my commander approached me wanting to talk about the soldier who had lost his chance to take leave. The soldier wasn't married, but his girlfriend was pregnant and was nearing the end of her pregnancy. My commander asked me to give up my seat to go home and let him have it, which given his newly discovered problems at home, I didn't mind doing. He needed to go home far more than I did. No more than a few more days passed since I gave up my seat, when I was called in to meet with my commanders. They were sympathetic with what I was dealing with at home and felt I deserved something, so they arranged for me to go on R&R, which was a much shorter trip, making them able to work it into our schedule. By the end of the afternoon, myself and two other guys in my unit were packed up and seated on a C-130 bound for the Middle East. After a noisy five and a half hour flight, we landed in the richest city on Earth: Doha, Qatar.

My girlfriend had moved out without notice and no one could find her

We landed a little after midnight, local time, in Doha. I had just enough time to find my bunk, drop my gear, and make my way to the beer tent, where I was allowed to drink alcohol for the first time in six months.



The next morning was filled with familiarization with the barracks and signing up for excursions. These barracks had walls, running water, showers, and flushable toilets which was something we didn't have at Bagram. The choices of off-post excursions were limited, but I quickly chose a water sport excursion for day one and a deep sea fishing excursion for day two. After all, I love the water and when would I ever get a chance to fish in the Persian Gulf again?

When would I ever get a chance to fish in the Persian Gulf again?

The first excursion went pretty much as I imagined it. We took an hour long bus ride through downtown Doha to a marina on the coast, where we boarded a yacht and went out to sea. After a long boat ride, we arrived at Al Safliya Island and anchored about a half mile off shore. We spent the better part of the day swimming, riding jet-skis, and relaxing in the sun. I caught and photographed a loon that was swimming by our boat and safely released it back into the water. After things began to wind down, we took up anchor and headed back to port. After another long bus ride, we were back at the barracks just in time to eat chow, drink beer, and rest up for day two.

Day two didn't go much like I wanted. Someone came to me first thing in the morning to inform me that, because I was the only person who signed up for the deep sea fishing excursion, it had been cancelled. Instead, I was offered the chance to choose another excursion, but from the same list I had chosen from previously. Nothing much interested me aside from what I had already chosen, so I opted to spend another day on the yacht doing water sports and relaxing in the sun. This time would be different, however, as I chose to pay a small fee and go parasailing. Instead of boarding the yacht at port, I boarded a small five-man boat and took turns parasailing until we reached the island. The day in the sun ended with another evening in the beer tent holding a cold Foster's in my hand.

After a quick pack up the next morning, I was ready for another noisy flight back to Afghanistan. I was so awed by the overall experience, that I don't really remember the flight back. Yet, the experience didn't hinder me. I quickly slipped back into my routine and went back to being a soldier for another few months. I feel lucky to have been given the opportunity to experience the culture of Qatar, as only a few of us got to go and experience the thrill. Two solid days of fun in the sun, far from harms reach, and being able to experience the richest culture in existence gave me a greater respect for the vast cultural differences that exist on Earth and graced me with an experience that few are ever fortunate enough to have.

Plucking the Daisy



Denise Chambers
Army Veteran, SFC

I AM A SOLDIER
YOU LOVE ME

I AM TRANSGENDER
YOU LOVE ME NOT

I GO TO COMBAT
YOU LOVE ME

I GO TO PRIDE
YOU LOVE ME NOT

I PUT ON MY UNIFORM
YOU LOVE ME

I PUT ON MY DRESS
YOU LOVE ME NOT

I DO MY CAMO
YOU LOVE ME

I DO MY MAKEUP
YOU LOVE ME NOT

I STAND FOR THE FLAG
YOU LOVE ME

I STAND FOR MYSELF
YOU LOVE ME NOT

I CARE FOR THE WOUNDED
YOU LOVE ME

I CARE FOR ME
YOU LOVE ME NOT

I BURY THE PAIN
YOU LOVE ME

I RELEASE THE HURT
YOU LOVE ME NOT

I PRETEND JUST TO PLEASE YOU
I LOVE ME NOT

I STOP HIDING AND ACCEPT MYSELF
I LOVE ME

The Sand Sea

SAND SEA AS FAR AS I CAN SEE
IT COVERS LAND AND SWALLOWS EARTH
IT COVERS ALL, INCLUDING TINY ME.

SAND SEA AS FAR AS YOU CAN SEE
SUN AND HEAT GIVE IT ALL ITS BIRTH
DUST AND PARTICLES IS WHAT IT BE.

SAND SEA AS FAR AS WE CAN SEE
IT MAKES YOU PROVE YOUR INNER WORTH
AND SHOWS YOU WHO YOU NEED TO BE.

SAND SEA AS FAR AS EYES CAN SEE.

Alex Simpson
Army Veteran

From Tragedy: Humor

Harold Cook
Marine Corps Veteran

The Situation

Comedy, or humor in general, is often linked to real life events being viewed with the benefit of uncensored lenses. It allows us to see many different perspectives about a single event. As time passes, events become fuzzy, except for the most important of details. A Marine in a combat zone may only have a handful of memories involving patrols, convoys, or sorties, but he may also have a hundred memories of good times, good friends, and humor in the face of terror. There are many clichés about war and most of them are wrong. War is a short film about life. It has love and hate, joy and sorrow, fear and courage, but it also has a very surprising element to those who have never experienced it first hand: humor. Humor in war can take form in the most unpleasant of circumstances. Circumstances in which the old adage “a life or death situation” is the headline, but perhaps the best stories can be found in the comics section.

My father once told me a story from World War II where he was a machine gunner with the Army’s 5th Division. Being a machine gunner meant he had to carry a heavy a cumbersome weapon around. He was a fan of its ability to lay down a barrage of lead that would keep even the most aggressive German soldier in the prone position. One day, while on patrol with his platoon, he was assigned to guard the rear of the marching troop column. In his mind this was especially advantageous, since he could run forward and deploy his weapon at any point on the column ahead. It also provided a sense of security. After all, if the rest of the platoon made it through, the way must be clear. As the platoon moved forward, my father learned firsthand about the stories, stories he had heard about radio operators and machine gunners. The loss of either of these two soldiers could easily stall an offensive. On this ill-fated day, everything seemed to be routine. There were no enemy engagements and it was relatively quiet for a change, but that would quickly change.

As the column moved forward, a shot suddenly rang out. In what must have felt like an eternity, my father realized a sniper had taken perfect aim and shot him square in the helmet. There are a handful of clichés to describe this situation, but simply put my father was very, very lucky. His helmet that was shot had been unfastened at the strap which allowed it to absorb the impact of the bullet, spin a bit, and then sail through the air with the would-be assassin’s bullet still lodged in its surface. This was enough for my father to scramble for the safety of the column and, as he ran past his platoon sergeant, he heard, “Conrad! Where the hell is your helmet?” My father simply replied, “It’s back there, Sarge!” As my father paused to catch his breath, he offered no explanation. “Get back there and get your helmet,” came the sergeant’s command, to which came the reply, “Sarge, there’s a German sniper back there somewhere. If you want that helmet so bad, you go get it!”

Needless to say, the patrol carried on and my father continued helmetless until they returned to camp. Had they been on a training mission stateside, my father would have surely been brought up on insubordination charges for addressing his platoon sergeant in that manner. When my father told me this story, I could hear the seriousness in his voice as he described what it was like to be shot and come so close to being killed. As his voice cracked, I could see the desperation in his eyes as he relived the moment with me. Then something unexpected happened. His voice quickly changed to the familiar ease and playfulness I had heard before. I realized in those brief moments of terror, he and his fellow soldiers were able to find a bit of comedy and humor. He knew he had barely survived, but what seemed more important to him was the ability for himself and his fellow soldiers, especially the sarge, to find any humor in that harrowing moment. Humor that helped him cope with the situation for many years.

A generation later, his son is serving the same nation in another far away land. As a Marine, leading numerous convoys in Iraq, I have experienced incidents involving Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's) and sporadic gunfire from single aggressors. Most of these consisted of a fire and run scenario, as the aggressors knew they could not withstand the response from a heavily armed Marine convoy.



The lone exception came on a clear November night in a town called Baiji. As the convoy travelled north on main road through town, shrouded in darkness, an IED was detonated as the signal to initiate a well-planned ambush. The lights of two nearby buildings suddenly came on and, just for a moment, it was as though the gates of hell had opened and I could see the fire inside, hot and blinding with fingers reaching out to grab us.

As the convoy commander, I immediately grab the radio and announced “contact left” as insurgents opened fire with small arms and rocket propelled grenades (RPG's). The command, “contact left,” is one given for vehicle commanders to engage targets as they identify them, in this case to the left. I must say, I have never served with a finer group of young men. The vehicle commanders averaged about 21 years of age with the average rank of E-4. The gunner in my vehicle was a young Marine (for the purposes of this story, let's call him PFC Smith). He was a mere 19 years old with the mouth of a Marine. He had boyish, yet handsome looks by any measure, and a dedication to duty that was so indicative of those magnificent young “fire pissers” that protected our convoys every night.

Smith calls out “Target up!” indicating he has a visual on a target, and I give the word to engage. As the convoy commander, it is up to me to make the decision to engage the enemy or clear the area. For this reason, if anything goes wrong, it is my responsibility. This leaves the Marines in my command to simply follow orders and ensure that their target is hostile. Smith then engages the enemy. He is scared, but also very mad. His anger increases his focus, and he turns loose the M240G machine gun mounted atop of our vehicle. Smith is so focused on his enemy that he neglects to take his finger off the trigger, laying down a steady stream of bullets, instead of the short six to eight round bursts, which is preferred for accuracy and weapon life. I quickly yell up to Smith, “Bursts! Bursts! Control your rate of fire!”

There is nothing like chaos to allow you to experience just how amazing the human brain is. It seems that in the short span of the ambush, I found myself sighting targets, checking our flank, calling for enemy numbers, instructing my radio operator to contact supporting units, giving coordinates, taking notes, and worrying about the barrel melting down on Smith's machine gun.

Suddenly Smith yells down to me, “RELOAD!” (a single code word requesting a fresh can of ammunition be handed up into his turret position) as he continues to fire and cuss at his enemy. I sometimes wonder if any of the enemy combatants heard him and if they did, did they know what he was saying despite the language barrier.

At this point, I should've passed up another can of ammunition, instead I continue yelling at him to take his finger off the trigger, yet to no avail. Being a dedicated leader, I knew I needed to get him to release the trigger. In the end, it was a solid shot to his thigh that got him to release his grip on the trigger. A massive “Charlie Horse” later and Smith was exercising his God-given talent of firing in short bursts instead of the barrel melting continuous spray of bullets. It wasn't until days later, when we were back at base camp, that Smith and I realized we had performed a comedy skit worthy of Saturday Night Live. The event was and is tragic, about a dozen insurgents were killed, viciously. No Marines were killed, but a few days later we started hearing the individual details that took shape in the face of this terror. In every case, humor has developed where terror once ruled. Marines were coping and relying on each other for support in what was perhaps the most unusual way imaginable, comedy.

There is an old cliché “War is Hell.” This is wrong, war is not hell. War is temporary or at least as temporary as mankind will allow. Hell is permanent. Yet, irony is everywhere in war. War is the best and worst of mankind. It is love and hate, compassion and cruelty, joy and sadness, courage and fear. It is times best forgotten and times best cherished. Even with all of the horror and tragedy that is war, with time, war also gives way to humor and the lighter side of life in a combat zone. Like many veterans, it is this truth that helps me persevere and cope with the horrors that I have experienced along the way. We do not do so to make light of the incidents we were involved in, as the event will always be tragic. Yet, the details will read like a newspaper, with headlines containing stories of heroes, obituaries about the fallen, and comics about the details that we will remember for years to come.



The Juxtaposition

Doug Carrell
Army Veteran

The Sadest Thing

The saddest thing I've ever seen would have to be a father carrying his wounded son to me, hoping he could receive medical care. This took place while deployed to Afghanistan, just as I was about to come off a shift on gate duty. An explosion put everyone on alert, and pretty soon casualties started pouring in. By the time it was over, only a short time had passed, but the memories of that day remain firmly planted in my mind.

The first and only casualty I dealt with that day was a young boy. His father got out of a taxi at the gate, holding him in his arms. The boy couldn't have been more than five or six years old, and was covered in blood from the waist down. When his father approached me, I could see the terror on his face, unsure if his son would live. The child had many deep wounds on both legs, and lost a lot of blood. The man quickly handed his son to me. I could tell he was weak and scared.

After about 30 minutes, the dust settled and things were, for the most part, back to normal. I got a ride back to my tent, and I went to sleep. Something still bothers me though. I was never able to follow up with medical about the boy and I never saw his father again. I went on about my deployment without any closure in regards to the boy's fate. Sometimes, I wonder about him and his father both, and the sadness that occurred that day.

The Happiest Thing

The happiest I've ever been might just be a moment from elementary school. This is when I won a competition against some older students for the privilege of meeting Governor Mel Carnahan. It all started when the state chose 75 schools to send a student representative. The contest was open to students in fifth, sixth, and seventh grade.

My school was one that was chosen and a process to select student candidates began. As the student with the highest standardized test scores, I was an automatic entry, and in fact, the only entry from 5th grade. The entire process was administered like a job interview. We were asked about world problems and quizzed on our basic intelligence. I interviewed in my Boy Scout uniform and scored the highest on all the questions. Ultimately, I won, and I was able to go to Jefferson City and meet the governor. I remember being very proud that day.

I spent a few days in Missouri's capital, Jefferson City, exploring and seeing a lot of the historic sights. The trip was cold and wasn't really that interesting for a child. I spent most of the time just being bored or cold. Yet, I enjoyed it overall, because I've always recognized the value of an experience. Additionally, Mel Carnahan was killed in a plane crash years later, so I feel privileged to have met him.

Career in the Air Force

Carl Schimek

Air Force Veteran

April 1970: I experienced a striking cultural difference when I arrived in Turkey. I served as a guard on the flight line hanger, guarding a weapons storage/dump. I served a short time in Law Enforcement. While there, a fellow airman showed me his marijuana joint that was as thick as his thumb. Drugs were easy to obtain.

November 1971: Returning to the United States from Vietnam, I was assigned to Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri in Missile Security. I handed out maintenance codes to the missile maintenance crews. I married my hometown sweetheart on March 1973 and lived in Sedalia.

July 1974: I reenlisted in the Air Force and trained at Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul, IL. Our first child, a daughter, was born in Champaign, IL that September.

February 1978: I was stationed in Albuquerque, New Mexico at the Kirtland Air Force Base, working as Chapel Management. I worked closely with other Air Force chaplains.

July 1970: Stationed for seven months at a remote site, Tanagra, Greece where I served at a NATO base 60 miles outside of Athens where the aircrafts belonged to Greece and the bombs belonged to the US and NATO. I worked as Security Police. I was able to visit/see the many tourist sites in Athens.

May 1971: I volunteered to see what the war was about. I was in Vietnam for 11 months 28 days. I served as a perimeter guard at Phu Cat Airforce Base in Viet Nam. I had to find a place to sleep where it was quiet, without parties because I worked nights.

December 1971: When Phu Cat was given to the Vietnamese, I went to Da Nang. I missed the Bob Hope Show by one day. I served as with my best friend, Joe Nacamijo from LA. I became a "Champion Rocket Dodger" when a North Vietnamese rocket landed just a few yards from me.

October 1974: My next assignment was at Richards-Gebaur Air Force Base south of Kansas City. I worked briefly as a mechanic on C140 aircraft, later performed administrative duties for the Chief of Maintenance.

June 1981: Stationed at Alconbury, UK. My family and I arrived in time to see the wedding of Charles & Diana. We lived 13 miles from the base in a village, half American and half British. While stationed here, I served a 3 month deployment to Denmark for a NATO Exercise.



Non-Traditional Traditions

Gary Buzbee

Air Force Veteran

Some Things Never Change

I am currently a non-traditional student, enjoying the benefits of the VIP program at OTC. Over 50 years ago, I was a non-traditional high school student. I opted to take a cooperative occupational education class my senior year and only go to school half a day and work the other half. I followed tradition through four years of college and almost four years of dental school.

A new tradition began my sophomore year of dental school when I joined the United States Air Force, along with about sixty dental students in my class who also chose various branches of the military. We had heard too many stories of dentists graduating from dental school, setting up, establishing a practice, only to be drafted a few months or years later. Wise planning said to meet the military obligation first, then begin private practice. Easier said than done.

To say that the 11 recent graduates assigned with me to Edwards Air Force Base in California, who were now Captains in the United States Air Force, were traditional, would be a stretch. We were prepared to be dentists. Officer's Training in Wichita Falls, Texas was to prepare us for the rest. We were prepared for the haircuts and had our "longish" hair trimmed to not touch the collar of our shirt. All of this occurred in two weeks and then we were sent to the base. Ready or not, here we came.

In retrospect, my two years in the military "flew" by. Pun intended. Even though I knew I was destined to be a two-year wonder and a career in the military was not my path, it was great for me. I saw and experienced opportunities that would have eluded me without my stint in the Air Force. I was proud to support the mission, one dental filling at a time.

**As trite as it may sound,
you are never too old to learn**

Fast forward to January 2019. After a 45 year break, I went back to school, not because I had to, but because I wanted to. I wanted to take classes I never had time to take before. Still working full time, obligated me to classes that worked around my work schedule. The VIP program at OTC allows anyone over sixty to attend, tuition free, one class a semester with only a student services fee. Can you say bargain? So far I have honed my writing skills with Ms. Daugherty in English composition, finally learned computer programs with Mr. Middaugh, and am currently getting introduced to agriculture with Ms. Bumgarner. My experiences with this program have been stellar and I am very impressed with the quality of education afforded me.

As trite as it may sound, you are never too old to learn. Encourage qualifying friends and family to look into this wonderful program, it may change, or at least brighten their lives.

Consumed in a Crucible

I SIT BEHIND A WALL
THAT SEEMS IMPENETRABLE.
THOSE WHO CARE
PACE UP AND DOWN OUTSIDE
THINKING OF WAYS TO SCALE
OR TO TEAR DOWN THE WALL.
ALL FEELINGS ARE PROTECTED
OR HIDDEN BEHIND IT.
ONLY ONE OUTLET FOR EMOTION
A LITTLE BLACK NOTEBOOK
THAT I WRITE MY POEMS IN.
THESE ARE SOMETIMES LEAKED
TO THE WORLD OUTSIDE MY
PSYCHOLOGICAL ENCLOSURE
FOR FRIENDS AND LOVERS TO READ.
I HEAR THEM YELL AND CALL,
EMOTIONS CONSUMED IN A CRUCIBLE,
AS I SIT AND STARE AND TRY TO HIDE
IN MY SELF INDUCED JAIL.
INTO MY CORNER I CRAWL
FEELING BLANK AS SUSPECTED.
WITHIN THIS CORNER I SIT
WITHOUT ANY MOTION.
MY ONLY ROOMMATE A RAT
WHO FLEES WHEN THE MEN
IN THE WHITE JACKETS ENTER MY BLACK CELL
TO OPEN MY EYES AND MAKE ME STIR
TO MAKE SURE I'M ASLEEP,
NOT DEAD.

Jeff O'Flynn
Army Veteran

Reflections

Mitch Jensen

Active Army National Guard

Exceeding Expectations

I am a senior non-commissioned officer for the Army National Guard with 17 years of military service. At the end of my last rating period, I received a Noncommissioned Officer's Evaluation Report (NCOER) from an accomplished Captain. Under the "Knowledge" portion he selected "Met Standards." There were a lot of implications I gathered from that single check in the box. Yes, I was meeting the standards that the Army had set for me to be capable of accomplishing the mission, but on the other hand, he didn't annotate that I "Exceeded Standards," meaning I could do more. I was left thinking, *What could I have possibly done differently to have exceeded the standard in the knowledge department?*

After a short period of self-reflection, I evaluated my knowledge as a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer and a soldier. My first impressions were that I could send 130 soldiers overseas, completely outfitted and combat-ready, and coordinate all their transportation. I could ship 50 trucks, nine shipping containers, and hundreds of weapons 8,000 miles away without breaking a sweat. I could repel out of a Black Hawk helicopter on to snow-covered mountains, while working effectively with foreign soldiers utilizing an interpreter, and not have a single issue. How much more knowledge did I need?

After further reflection, I thought to myself. Can I spell anything other than four-letter words? No, not really. Can I put together a sentence? I knew the answer and the answer was no. Can I do any level of college algebra? Nope, I sure can't. I asked myself, *How am I, an uneducated hillbilly from the middle of nowhere Missouri, going to mentor young officers and junior enlisted soldiers to become better than me when I have no idea how or where to use a comma?* I want to leave this military with soldiers better than myself. I don't want them to have to learn what I did the hard way. That could be difficult to do when I'm hardly capable of communicating my thoughts coherently. After talking to my mentors, a Chief Warrant Officer and the Captain mentioned above. We decided that at the age of 36, it was time for me to go to college.

One thing I've learned throughout my military career is you should always have mentors in everything you do. It doesn't have to be a Senior NCO, Field Grade Officer, or a Chief Warrant. It's best to have people all around you, seniors, peers and subordinates, that are confident enough to tell you what you need to improve on and where to sustain. The same can be said for the college experience, regardless of the position. It may be either fellow students, coaches, or professors; everyone needs people in their life to guide them.

With the help of new and old mentors, I decided to go to college. Within five business days, I applied to Ozarks Technical Community College, set up my federal tuition assistance, attended OTC's STAR program, and enrolled in classes. A couple of months later, I was sitting in the barracks at a Senior Leader's Course in New Hampshire and writing my first essay for English Composition, when I received an email from the Veterans Upward Bound requesting articles and artwork submissions from veterans. I'm a decent artist, so I thought, *Perhaps I'll send them a small piece of art.* Then I thought to myself, *I didn't take on this adventure to do that which I am already capable. I'm here to better myself, and when have I ever turned down a challenge? It's time to write an article.*

I was once told, "You'll never make it through basic training." I did make it, and I'm now the same rank as my Senior Drill Sergeant was. I was also told I couldn't run a marathon. I did that as well and placed second. I've always had challenges and obstacles put in front of me, but the military has given me the discipline and character to take them head-on. Yet, that doesn't mean that I've done everything on my own. It's quite the opposite.

I urge veterans thinking about attending college to do so. No matter how ill-prepared you believe you are or how dumb you think you are, you can be successful in college. You may need some assistance as you go, but you can help others along the way. I'm not sure where this collegiate road will lead me, but I do know that if I can do it, anyone can. I will never quit. I will never accept defeat. Welcome home.

ALONE

IN A ROOM WITHOUT DOORS
I WAIT OUTSIDE MYSELF.
ALONE IN A CROWD
I AM HERE BY MYSELF
AND LOST OUTSIDE MYSELF.

MY PROBLEM IS THE EMPTINESS
THAT I'VE KEPT BOTTLED WITHIN
AND DRANK FROM FOR SO LONG
HAS STARTED TO ESCAPE
AND I'M DROWNING IN IT.

HOW AM I TO GET BACK?
INSIDE AND OUTSIDE AT THE SAME TIME?
TO ESCAPE FROM THE LONELINESS
THAT WEIGHS ME.
I TIRE OF CONTEMPLATION
BECAUSE I SEEM TO HAVE NO CHOICE.

I HATE THIS EMPTY LIFE
AND SCREAM FOR IT TO END
IT ECHOES BACK TO ME.

I AM ALONE.

Jeff O'Flynn
Army Veteran

*This was written in August
2008, after Jeff's unit lost
two leaders in Ramadi, Iraq*

LIFE AFTER

Into the Abyss

We stand at the edge of the abyss
Our hands extended in
Reaching, reaching, reaching
Patiently waiting for the answer from within

Patiently we pause and wait
Sometimes it never comes
Patiently we wait
Our hands still held in?

Patiently we wait with humility and grace
To help those who won't help themselves
Again, again, and again

Patiently we wait
With oh so little time
Our own lives on hold
With our hand still held in

So put in your hand for a veteran in need
We don't ask for much just a little comfort, not ease
So please help us up, for we have given so much

The price we have paid is high and unseen
So put in your hand and just say
A few simple words that may mean the world to us
Welcome home soldier, thank you, and God bless



SCOTT COOLEY (USMC)

This poem, written in 2011 is about the pain and suffering that Scott felt when trying to help a young Marine lost in a black hole of despair, confusion, and great personal loss returning to a new and unfamiliar world after many combat missions. This Marine, like many others, refused to let anyone help due to pride.

SERVICE



Journey of a Thankful Soul

She came home	Her wife takes action
Empty of joy and merriment	Nourishing with passion
She's angry with a quick temperament	She's loved
She smiles, she laughs	Inspired, supported
Forced and fake	Consoled, comforted
A pretender for all's sake	Both determined
In denial	Working through the years
Lion's pride,	Loving through the tears
Emotions hide	She's normalizing
She's "tough"	Feeling strong and joyful
Convinced she's alright	Ventures out, still careful
Her fists always tight	She's visualizing goals
She's anxious and getting worse	Tackling ambitiously
Anger is out of control	Succeeding expeditiously
She's lost with a saddened soul	She's fruitful, grateful
Fading....	Due to her wife, so beautiful
	Persistent and dutiful
	She's blessed
	Through God's Grace
	No longer out of place
	She is home
	Loving life whole
	Resilient peaceful soul

LANORA SAMANIEGO

Lanora wrote this poem to reflect her transition when she came home from the Marine Corps

Veterans Crisis Line

Christopher North

Army Veteran

Seek Help When You Need It

The Veterans Crisis Line is an invaluable asset, available to all veterans who may need a little help with whatever situation they are currently facing. A lot of veterans think it is strictly a suicide prevention line or that to use such a tool would imply weakness. I was in that mindset for a very long time. I enlisted in the Army in 2004 and served until 2012. In 2008, I deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and, like many others, I came back a totally different person. While I have no regrets about going to war, I, like many soldiers, did and saw things that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

I came home in 2009 with obvious symptoms attributed to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However, I was part of the all too common way of thinking that getting help somehow showed a level of weakness and shame in which I did not want to endure. Seven years after leaving Iraq, PTSD reared its ugly head in the form of my first terrifying flashback. I do not know what triggered it, but I do know during that experience I was back in Mosul. I tried self-medication, like many soldiers do, and found it did more harm than good.

I finally decided enough was enough and made a very misguided decision to end my life. But by some miracle, I happened upon a bracelet that had the Veterans Crisis Line number on it and decided to make the call instead.

After a couple hours on the phone, the person I was talking to had numerous resources lined up, many of which I did not even know existed. I found addiction treatment options, mental health providers, and, most importantly, someone who cared enough to make all these options a reality.

The Veterans Crisis Line is the reason I am here today. I have found that getting help does not imply weakness at all, and that, in fact, the opposite is true. It takes courage and strength to meet things head on and toe-to-toe, the same way we met the enemy. There is nothing weak about that. By no means should you have to suffer as long as I did before getting help. The folks at the Crisis Line are more than willing to talk to you at any time. You don't have to be suicidal or at risk of harming someone to use this service. I have called them at 0300 hours when I couldn't sleep or had a nightmare. They have always been there for me, even in my darkest hour.

The call is yours to make, and the help is there. The suicide rate among veterans is truly unacceptable. Check on your brothers and sisters often - they very well could be struggling silently. We have all proven we have strength and courage on the battlefield. Let's prove the same to ourselves now at home.



Conflict

THEY TOLD ME IT WAS COMPLICATIONS FROM COPD
CHRONIC

THEY TOLD ME THERE WAS NOTHING I COULD'VE DONE
BLAME

THEY TOLD ME HE WENT PEACEFULLY
TORTURE

THEY TOLD ME HE'S IN A BETTER PLACE
ESCAPE

THEY TOLD ME TIME HEALS ALL
DESPAIR

HE TOLD ME HE'S DEPRESSED
TRUTH

HE TOLD ME HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO
FEAR

HE TOLD ME HE FEELS DISTURBED
CONFLICT

HE TOLD ME HE WANTS TO BE LIKE HE ONCE WAS
IMPRISONED

HE TOLD ME HIS TIME IS UP
DEFEAT

I TOLD THEM IT WAS DEPRESSION
FRUSTRATION

I TOLD THEM I DIDN'T GET TO SAY GOODBYE
REGRET

I TOLD THEM HE WAS DISTRESSED
AGONY

I TOLD THEM HE DIDN'T STAND A CHANCE
ANGUISH

I TOLD THEM HE NEEDED THEIR TIME BEFORE HE PERISHED
ADVOCATE

Goings Anonymous



The Story of How Goliath Helped David

Joseph Kramek
Army Veteran

How 10 Million Might Change the Brain as We Know it

Rolla, MO (Sept. 6, 2019) - In this ever-polarizing world of class and social warfare, a dim, yet hopeful light emerges from the shadows. It is the light of truth, the bearer of knowledge, and the equality between three giants of our modern-day society. It is a point that is rarely arrived at, but so desperately needed.

The intersection to which this story takes place could best be characterized as the alignment of the cross hairs between academia, the military, and private industry/healthcare. It is not all that rare to see one monolithic giant conversing with another with the intent of reaching some grandiose scheme predestined by the "gods" of both sides. However, it is rare when three giants sit down and help David. And that, my fellow readers, is the story we have here.

It is rare, when three giants sit down and help David

The Army Research Lab (ARL) through the Leonard Wood Institute (LWI) has partnered with some of the greatest minds of the modern-day era in what one might call a "Modern Day Reformation." The noble quest that these behemoths have taken on is the very plight of literally millions of people around the world: Traumatic Brain Injuries. It is estimated that Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI's) affect 1.5 million people each year in the U.S. alone, according to the Center for Disease Control, but where this story takes hold is right here in our own backyards. Service members are coming home after war, and in some cases before ever completing training, with brain injuries that will last a lifetime. The ripple effects are tearing apart families, making orphans out of children, and viciously attacking the very livelihood of the men and women that stood tall when their country asked them to.

Service members all over the country are experiencing TBI and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at alarming rates. Having been medically retired, due in part to PTSD and TBI, I found the groundbreaking research work being done here in Missouri as monumental. I'm thankful that Senator Blunt and Fort Leonard were standing tall and taking some real preventive measures.



*Photo of Staff Sergeant Kramek
Kabul, Afghanistan 2009.*

In 2017, a private health organization, Phelps Health out of Rolla, Missouri, saw the need to step in, deciding to stick with its long tradition of Community Service and grassroots efforts by answering the call of the TBI crisis. Phelps Health and LWI formed a consortium based on a need to study mild Traumatic Brain Injuries (mTBI). Because the need was so tremendous, an immediate course of action was needed, and as such, the two monolithic giants resolved to roll up their sleeves and start work without any guaranteed funds for their cause. To this very day, Acute Effects of Neurotrauma Consortium (AENC) continues to stand tall without guaranteed funding. The founding members of AENC, which include Missouri S&T, the University of Missouri School of Health Professionals, UMKC, and Washington University, truly are today's Civic Heroes.

After meeting with Dr. Jie Huang, and his team members, I knew the Army and Senator Blunt picked the right team for the job. Having directly been involved in the training of over 100,000 Marines at the School of Infantry East, and hearkening back to my career in Marine Corps Intelligence, I feel confident in the abilities of the fusion team assembled at Missouri S&T and look forward to championing their cause.



*Dr. Huang Explaining the Fundamentals of the
SmartHelmet. Picture Courtesy of Missouri S&T*

Academia Lends a Hand

In an era that sees colleges and universities as the oppressors of free speech, free thought, and the tool by which millions of young adults enslave themselves to debt, it truly was a Goliath helping David moment when Missouri S&T stepped into the ring. Missouri S&T is also located in Rolla and was the perfect petri dish for the much needed TBI research. Missouri S&T is staffed with some of the brightest minds in the fields of Fiber Optics, Material Science, Bio-Analytical Chemistry, and Electrical/Computer Engineering, which made it feel like they were perfectly poised to take on this civic duty.



Testing a new era of smart helmet technology. Picture courtesy of Missouri S&T

In order to create a full sight picture of what happens to the brain within ‘the golden hour,’ greater amounts of data collection and time are needed. The TBI dilemma is not going to be solved by any one discipline, and that’s what makes Dr. Huang’s team so unique. He is forming one of the best collaborative teams across multiple disciplines and ushering in a new era of problem-solving techniques that realize the value of three Goliaths joining together. Much work still needs to be done, but I can’t wait to see how this team continues to help David.

Dr. Jie Huang, and his team of sought-after professionals, are at the forefront of TBI research. Armed with a 2.3 million dollar grant from the Leonard Wood Institute, Dr. Huang is developing a “Smart Helmet” with optical fiber sensors embedded in Kevlar helmets, as well as football styled helmets, that are used during hand-to-hand combat training scenarios.

These optical fiber sensors can measure varying degrees of impacts to the helmet and then that data is remotely transmitted to a software program that records and analyzes the impact. Through repetition and employment of state-of-the-art Machine Learning Models, these repeated impacts help to form a picture of what is happening to the brain.

Thanks to people like Dr. Don James, Dr. Jie Huang, and Dr. Faith Dogan, the “Model T” era of technology and understanding is soon coming to a close. I, for one, am looking forward to the Corvette and Mustang Era of TBI research.

To the Future

While the future looks bright for TBI, there is still so much that must be learned. Like all research projects, funding must continue to pour in for advancements to be made. Will the Army Research Lab continue to fund this project? Do the people of America give credence to this cause? With veteran suicide rates on the rise, and TBI being one of the major factors that drive these suicides, one can only hope that the ‘gods’ have predestined this cause for greatness and will rally around David, their “Champion of Freedom.”

Staff Sergeant Kramek was medically retired from the Marine Corps and is currently pursuing his undergrad in Business Management. He is also building a non-profit organization for Veterans called VetReBuild. For further information about VetReBuild please contact the author.

Acknowledgments: A special thanks to Dr. Rex Gerald for always being the consummate professional. Your brilliant insight, rigorous teaching methods, and desire for better precision and efficiency have led the way for this project. To Dr. Jie Huang, your noble pursuit to effect change in the TBI community reflects great credit upon yourself and is inspirational to all. I hope that your leadership in this field of study will one day prove to be historical and monumental. To my friend Dr. Qingbo Yang, your passion, enthusiasm, and knowledge are second-to-none. Thank you for introducing me to your lab, and for providing sound feedback, insight, and attention to detail. Last, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Robert Griffith, from Ozark Technical Community College, for his never-ending support, leadership, and inspiration. Men like Dr. Griffith make the collegiate experience worthwhile, and he champions an atmosphere of growth wherever he goes. This project was supported by the Leonard Wood Institute through a Cooperative Agreement with the United States Army Research Laboratory (W911NF-07-2-0062). The authors express their gratitude for the Acute Effects of Neurotrauma Consortium in assisting and coordinating the conduct of the project at Fort Leonard Wood.

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After War Effect

Artemio Rosario
Marine Corps Veteran

Transitioning Back

I spent a total of 28 months in a combat zone. In that time, my three oldest children grew up and I had a set of twins; everything felt right and as it should be, at least to me. About halfway into my second deployment, I was injured and pulled out of the fight. I never felt so useless and distant from everyone. It took a few months and several waivers to get back to my unit. It felt good to see everyone return home safely and that's when I realized who my friends and family were.



Sure, there were a few people who were excited I recovered so well, but for the most part, I no longer felt that connection I once had with the people I fought side by side with. I had not fully recovered yet and was constantly criticized about my limitations. I grew angry as the months passed by. At first, I blamed myself because I felt I had failed to be the soldier I once was. It felt as if everyone was disappointed with me. I was so consumed with satisfying their expectations that I neglected my own family.

In 28 months I almost lost everything. My children no longer knew who I was and neither did my wife. Everyone loves to hear a good war story with blood and guts, but those people will never know the true toll war has on an individual. Besides the physical combat that takes place, there is an inner battle that all service members fight. Yet, there are no record keepers documenting who wins and who loses that fight.

There are no record keepers documenting who wins and who loses that fight

In a way, I am still fighting a war, or as my wife says, "I never left the one I was in." The struggle my family has endured in the past seven years can never fully be rectified and amended. My family understands I will never be the man I once was, yet they still choose to accept me. For this reason, now I am completely devoted to them. When someone hears of my service, they feel obligated to shake my hand and say thank you. My reply is always the same, "If you want to thank a real hero, please thank my wife."





U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

VeteransCrisisLine.net/SpreadTheWord

**Let Veterans know
they're not alone. Share
to show your support.**



••• **Confidential chat at VeteransCrisisLine.net or text to **838255**** •••



Journey of a Lifetime

Jesse Scott
Marine Corps Veteran

Where it Started

My late teens and early 20's were controlled by a lack of discipline to control myself. After eight years of living the party lifestyle, I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. On April, 11th 2011, I stepped off a government bus and into a living hell. My journey began with a pair of painted yellow footprints and four drill instructors, all of whom readily accepted the hard-headed type of person I was. It was then that the mental shock of what I had gotten myself into was beginning to set in and my only thoughts were, *What the hell am I doing here? Screw these guys!*

On black Friday, I remember running into our squad bay and my Senior Drill Instructor (SDI) stopped me and asked some blunt questions, "Who the hell are you? How old are you? How many pull-ups can you do?" Scared to death, I responded loudly, "Recruit Scott, 26 years old, and 25 pull-ups, sir!" Ten minutes later, the SDI emerged from the duty hut and yelled, "Scott! You're the guide." "Yes, sir!" I responded as I thought to myself, *What the hell is the guide?*

I quickly found out what it meant and discovered what my duties were through intense training (IT) sessions on the quarterdeck. I had the distinct pleasure of making sure the other 50 recruits handled their business and learned what they were supposed to do. Even if I didn't know what they were supposed to do, I was punished with them on that beloved quarterdeck. I was the oldest recruit in my platoon and one of the smallest. As the guide, I was also the last one who got to eat at chow. One day I went to check in my platoon at the chow hall and Drill Instructor Staff Sergeant (SSgt) Medina was pissed off that I beat his guide to check in. He stopped me and told me I wasn't going to check in first and I responded by saying, "This recruit is just doing what he was told to do, sir." Wrong thing to say! I watched him gather his spit and he got in my face and let it fly, while letting me know he didn't care what I was told to do!

In the Marine Corps, there are three phases of recruit training. The first and most of the third phase take place at Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) in San Diego, California. During the first phase every recruit got sick, but if you were smart you kept it to yourself. If you missed too many training days, you got recycled and prolonged your stay on the Depot. I remember going to buy uniform items at the Postal Exchange (PX) one day along with some cough drops. I figured this was a better idea than going to medical, but I was wrong! After we came out of the PX and stood in formation, Drill Instructor Sergeant (Sgt) Vega asked if anyone bought cough drops. I hesitated to raise my hand, but I did so anyway. For the next 15 minutes, four other recruits and I had sand and dirt kicked in our faces while we did push ups. Lesson learned.

In the first phase it seemed like all we did was drill maneuvers, classroom periods of instruction, and memorized Marine Corps history by reading it aloud, time after time after time. I still wonder seven years later how many hours we practiced drill. I understand the purpose of it now, but not so much back then. We spent days practicing for the initial drill competition in which my platoon, 2167, lost by a landslide. I let the stress of the drill master standing right next to me get to my head. I made mistakes and those mistakes resulted in me getting destroyed on the quarterdeck and fired from the guide spot.

In second phase, I was comfortably making my place in general population. I sat back and watched three other recruits get "hired" as the guide and all were quickly fired. One night while doing our health and comfort inspection, Drill Instructor Sgt Vega called me up to the quarterdeck and asked why nobody in the platoon respected the current guide, recruit Miller. I replied, "Nobody likes him or respects him because the power went to his head, but he is also a weak leader." It isn't often that a drill instructor will crack a smile, but Sgt Vega did. He asked me if I wanted the guide spot back and I quickly replied, "NO SIR!" I was tired of getting punished for everyone's mistakes. Sgt Vega knew exactly why I said no, but I think he wanted to see if I had the balls to say it. I did. Miller stayed on as the guide, but the morale of the platoon suffered.



About one week into third phase, and back on MCRD, our platoon was practicing drill one afternoon. Out of nowhere, I hear my SDI yell my name and I knew it wasn't going to be good. As I ran to the front of the platoon, SDI Sgt Bribiesca tossed the guide-on to me. As I caught it, he said, "You're the guide again, because nobody else can handle it." I accepted it with a 50-50, optimistic-pessimistic attitude. We were only a few weeks from graduation, but I knew it would be filled with a lot of stress and a lot of IT sessions. Oh, how I was right!

After my platoon, Hotel Company (H Company), completed our three-day ruck event of intense field training called "The Crucible," and a few days before our graduation, a formation was held for promotions. The guide and four squad leaders from each platoon were meritoriously promoted to the rank of Private First Class. I very vividly remember Drill Instructor SSgt Bodette staring at me like he wanted to kill me while I was getting my chevrons pinned on. A few days later, on July, 8th 2011, H Company held their graduation ceremony. The guides and I were presented with plaques by our Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Hairston to congratulate us and commend our efforts.

After recruit training, we were given a ten day leave period before we had report back to the School of Infantry on Camp Pendleton in California. I checked into Charlie Company (C Company), Infantry Training Battalion (ITB), in late July and began my Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) training. After the receiving paperwork and the welcome brief, we headed to the supply depot to get our issued gear. The walk back to our squad bay was a huge eye-opening experience as to how badly the next eight weeks would suck. I once again found myself asking the question, *What the hell did I get myself into?*



The next week we ventured off into the field to begin learning the basics of the infantry trade. We walked miles to ranges in the early morning hours and soaked our blouses with sweat. Once we got to our destination, we would take our flaks off and freeze. Southern California has warm weather during the day, but the morning and evening hours can get quite chilly. We generally worked 16-hour days, making your time for sleep valuable. I remember the very first night we stayed in the field, we all noticed our combat instructors throwing rocks at something over by the target shed. A few minutes later, Sgt Hancock emerged holding a six-foot Western Diamond Back Rattlesnake and said, "You guys can hit the rack now." We were all so tired, we just got in our bags and passed out.

In the following weeks, we had the opportunities to train with various weapons such as the M249 Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW) and the M240 Bravo machine gun. These two weapon systems were extremely fun to shoot, but cleaning up all the brass and links was not so much. Sometimes we would spend hours sweeping an already clean range because the combat instructors would find a singular expended shell casing that didn't even belong to a weapon type we were shooting.

During the two months I spent in ITB, I encountered two main problems. My first problem was my commanding officer stood about 6'3" tall and I was a mere 5'8." I had to take three steps to his one to keep up on the hikes. The second problem was that I started urinating blood. I told my CI the problem I was having and he laughed and said, "You got an STD in Oceanside didn't you?" I knew that wasn't it, but he sent me to the Battalion Aid Station (BAS) to get checked out. The corpsman that checked me out laughed and said the same thing. It actually turned out that I had 25 kidney stones, which didn't come from any female in Oceanside. After ITB, I checked into reconnaissance school and was promptly dropped when I mentioned my upcoming kidney stone surgery. In October 2011, I had my stones removed and resided in Student Administration Company (SAC) for 45 days. Those were some of the longest days of my life.



In late November that year, I was released and received orders to 2nd Battalion 1st Marines (2/1), Golf Company (G Company). I was placed into the Maritime Raid Force (MRF) platoon, which only stood up for the battalion's upcoming deployments. The MRF platoon had the opportunities to do specialized training that no other line platoons got to do. We had to pass shooting aggregates and other tests that were prescribed by Special Operations Training Group (SOTG), along with multiple fast roping and other tactical insertions. We were hated by the other platoons because they had to repeat the same, redundant training over and over, while we got to do the cool stuff.

In February 2012, 2/1 opted to conduct their cold weather training in South Korea instead of Bridgeport, California. I had heard horror stories about the training in Bridgeport, so I wasn't the least bit upset that we weren't going. I was excited at the opportunity to travel and train abroad with the Republic of Korea Marines. I remember asking one of my seniors how long of a plane ride it was and I vividly remember his response. "You really think the Marine Corps is going to pay for us to fly?" At that moment, I figured out how cheap the Marine Corps really was! A few weeks later, we arrived at the Naval Base in San Diego and boarded the USS Bonhomme Richard. I knew it was going to be a long ride, but I enjoyed the experience.

Along the way, the Navy stopped in Pearl Harbor to resupply and refuel. We were afforded a few hours of liberty in Waikiki. We also stopped in Guam and broke down in Okinawa.


**You really think the
Marine Corps is going
to pay for us to fly?**

I recall the feeling the feeling of being drunk while trying to adapt to my sea legs. That acclimation didn't take me long, but getting used to the food on ship took quite a bit longer. There were two sides of the galley, one for the Navy and one for the Marines. It didn't take us Marines long to figure out the squids (the Navy) were getting served better food, and it also didn't take long to figure out that we better not step foot in their line!

On the ship, it was easy to lose track of time, especially the day of the week and the date of the month. To help with this, my buds and I made frequent trips to the flight deck to get some sun and fresh air. When I say fresh air, I mean having a smoke on the flight deck and watching the helicopters and Harrier jets. In the early morning hours, we could do our physical training on the flight deck before air ops started for the day. One day we were up on the flight deck, smoking and joking, when out of nowhere the weather changed drastically. It was like we traveled through some invisible climate line and the further we went, the lower the temps got. We knew it was only a slight taste of what was coming.

After a few weeks at sea, the ship ported in South Korea and we took buses to Rodriguez Live Fire Range located in Dongducheon-Si. Camp Rod, as we called it, was only 14 miles south of the 38th parallel, if you could take a straight-line path. The Army base was nestled in a valley surrounded by mountains and a small community of farmers. The farmers were very creative people. They had one long trailer everyone rode on, pulled by a tiller that had the tines swapped out with wheels. It wasn't fast by any means, but it beat hauling your tools and product on your shoulders. When we arrived at Camp Rod, it was unseasonably warm, being 65 degrees. As the Battalion Commander (BC) was giving the welcome brief, he let us know the weather was about to take a turn for the worst. The next day, the high topped out at 29 degrees.

Over the next month, we completed various training exercises, but only were two worth remembering and reflecting on. G Company had the opportunity to do a training assault that integrated the infantry with Abrams tanks.



The non-commissioned officers (NCO's) from the tank battalion told us, before training began, that we were not to advance any further than the midway point of the turret. All the fire team leaders looked at each other with puzzled expressions. Before anyone could ask, we heard one of the tankers say, "The pressure from the Howitzer will make your brain become mashed potatoes." When it came time for my team to advance, I made damn sure we never advanced past the back of the turret. We didn't use any ear protection either because we had to communicate with other fire teams while advancing. My ears haven't stopped ringing to this day!

The other training exercise we did was the company size attack. Each platoon of marines had their own "piece of the puzzle" and each one had to work in succession with the others to ensure the plan was carried out properly. Five minutes before my platoon hit the road to walk to the ammo supply point (ASP), Mother Nature decided to pour rain down on us. Even though it was cold, the Battalion Commander said we weren't allowed to wear any warming layers. It was only a matter of minutes before we were soaked. Halfway to the ASP, the rain turned to snow and I remember not being able to see ten feet in front of myself.

Once we got to the ASP, I remember some of the Corpsman taking guys' temperatures and them reading well below 98.6 degrees. We stood there freezing for about 20 minutes before someone showed up and handed out the ammo. Most of us could usually jam a 30-round magazine in no time, but this day it took 15 minutes to do so. It hurt my fingers so bad to push one round down, so I took a nice "hand warming" break between each one to get some feeling back. As we finished jamming our mags, our platoon sergeant, SSgt Shotts, came to us and said, "Bad news gents. Mortars can't see their aiming stakes, so we have to wait here until the snow lets up." This was the kind of experience that can build one's character, or break it. When the snow finally let up, we began the attack and, with all the running that was involved, we warmed up quickly.

In my squad, we had two 0351's (assault men) who were outfitted with their shoulder mounted anti-armor weapon (SMAW) and a Bangalore.

The first obstacle we came across was several strands of Concertina Wire (C-wire), blocking every option to advance. A few guys went with the 51's to provide cover fire while they set up their breach point using explosives. The rest of us stayed behind a huge chunk of limestone. I remember looking down when the charge went off, and noticing the leaves coming a few inches up off the ground. The breach was made and we advanced up to a berm where we encountered a pillbox, or dug-in guard post. My fire team was responsible for providing cover fire while the 51's set up their SMAW shot. The SMAW is one of the loudest weapons in the infantry and I was right next to it when it was shot. Target destroyed, hearing also!

In the infantry we had something to prove at all times and I never really figured out what it was

A few months after Korea, 2/1 deployed again to Okinawa, Japan for our rotation on the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). This time we flew out of March Air Force Base on a commercial two story jet that was really nice! We had a layover in Anchorage, Alaska where it was an incredible sight to see sunlight at 12:30 am. After fueling, we got back onto the plane and flew all night before arriving at Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa. I remember noticing the smell of humidity as soon as I stepped off the plane. Imagine, if you will, the humidity of Florida magnified by ten. That was Okinawa.

We unloaded and promptly received our welcome briefing, followed by a customs and courtesy class. We began training the following week and did so against the rules of the black flag. In Oki, the base personnel operate according to the color of the flag flying that day. Black flag meant it was "too hot," but, in the infantry, we had something to prove at all times and I never really figured out what it was. Every time we moved and everywhere we walked, we stayed soaked and were targets for the mosquitoes, which were the size of small birds.



One month into the deployment, my platoon flew on C-130's to Camp Fuji on mainland Japan. I had been selected to compete in an induction that allowed me to work directly with the 3rd Force Reconnaissance Marines. What an honor and a privilege it was to work with those guys. There were nine of us, 0311s (riflemen), that worked with them and received training most regular grunts never receive. We did fast rope insertions on building tops, C4 door breach training, and high value target (HVT) location and extraction training. It was a great learning experience from smart, motivated guys who loved their job.

We spent the Fourth of July holiday in 2012 at Camp Fuji. Being the men we were, we had to follow the rules handed down to us. No drinking, no barbequing, and no going off base to hike up Mount Fuji. After weeks on the mainland, we flew back down south to Okinawa and began prepping to board the ship again. However, there wasn't much prepping that took place because we found ourselves in the middle of typhoon season. I remember having to wear a flak vest and Kevlar to go eat at the chow hall, which wasn't even worth the walk. After the first typhoon passed, another quickly followed, but this time we were prepared for the days of being holed up in the barracks. We stocked our college boy refrigerators with the essentials: energy drinks, beer, and Subway sandwiches. Those were the perfect ingredients to have while we watched the wind blow cars across the parking lot outside the barracks.

In early August, 2/1 boarded three Navy ships: the USS Bonhomme Richard, the USS Denver, and the USS Tortuga. G Company was lucky enough to be on the Bonhomme Richard again. It was bigger and more recently renovated, which meant we weren't cramped for space and didn't have to wait as long to make it through the chow lines. We departed Okinawa and set sail in the Asia Pacific to flex our muscles to the world. Our first stop was at Tumon Bay in Guam. My buds and I went snorkeling, ate real food, and drank like there was no tomorrow. It was like a cruise, but with stupid rules and curfews like we were 16.

After a few days in Guam, we sailed over to Subic Bay in the Philippines. Once ported, we were picked up by buses and taken to Crow Valley to participate in a joint training exercise with the Philippine Marines.

Aside from the humidity and 100-degree weather, we taught each other the tactics we used in combat and they taught us theirs. I was afforded the opportunity to participate in a jungle survival training that was led by the Philippine Recon Marines. These guys didn't have ready-to-eat meals (MRE's) like we did. They were given a bag of rice and fended for themselves. They taught us what they used to survive such as setting snare traps to catch animals for meat, using bamboo to cook rice and make drinking cups, and helping us skin a snake and fry it. The snake was delicious, but it had a lot of bones you had to navigate around to get a bite of meat.

Next, we sailed over to Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia. We spent the next few days sampling the local cuisine, buying knock off clothing and accessories, and drinking the local booze. One evening, my buddy Louis and I decided to head back to the ship early and get a "leg day" workout in. Afterwards, we sat around and laughed at all the drunk idiots stumbling around, while we drank our protein shakes. I had drank a million of these shakes before, but this time something was wrong. This one sat on my stomach and I could feel it sloshing around uncomfortably. I showered and hit the rack thinking it would pass, but I awoke a few hours later to take an emergency numero dos. It was like a water hose being turned on and as soon as I was done, I stood up and immediately started puking. For 24 hours, I was the sickest I have ever been in my life and I made the mistake of trusting a fart not once, but twice. I was so weak that I couldn't even get out of my rack to go clean myself up.

The following morning, my buddy Shawn, who outranked me, came to my rack and said, "Get up and around or I'll pull you out of this rack and make you get around." I rolled out of bed, took a shower, and headed to the galley for breakfast, which I tread to very lightly. After breakfast, Shawn, Sisney, Hart, and I walked down to the harbor and met up with someone they had talked to the day before. Those three had met this man at the seafood market, which was a sight to see with an unforgettable smell. They had arranged a fishing trip. When we got out to where we would make our first casts, the gentleman pulled out one fishing pole and three water bottles with string wrapped round them. Sisney looked at the guy and said, "What the f--- am I supposed to do with this?"



We caught several strange and colorful fish you would never see in the United States. Some had rows of teeth that would surely bite your finger off if you tried to retrieve a hook from its lip. The gentleman who took us out brought his little boy with him as well, and neither of them spoke English. I noticed on more than one occasion that the little boy was eating the raw squid that we were using for bait. He looked malnourished, but had a never-ending smile on his face. After a few hours of fishing and snorkeling, the father-son duo took us through a small shanty town out on the water, a favela on bamboo stilts, like one you'd expect to see in a National Geographic magazine. While cruising through, the people of the community came running out of their homes to wave at us, each one of them with a big smile on their face. It made me wonder if they had ever seen an American before, but we all smiled and waved back. After returning to the shore, I gave that little boy my fake pair of Ray Bans and his little eyes lit up with joy. He was so grateful. We gave the gentleman all the fish we caught and roughly 50 American dollars as a tip. I'll never forget them and that experience.

Next, we ported in Hong Kong, sort of. The port was very busy and, maybe for other safety reasons, the ship dropped anchor out in the middle of the harbor. I don't know where it came from, but there was a floating steel platform. Ferry boats would pull up to it by the dozens to transport us to and from the land. Hong Kong was an interesting place where the people didn't seem friendly to us or each other. Everyone walked with their heads down, never looking up to say hello. First order of business was to find some real food. A few pals and myself located a Ruth's Chris Steakhouse. My tab for a few beers, a sirloin steak, and some mashed potatoes was \$70 American dollars. Yet, after eating ship food for the last couple of months, it was worth every penny!


My friends and I walked around the city for a few days, went to the shopping mall, sampled local cuisine, and of course, drank to our hearts content. In Hong Kong, the demographic has a very distinct line where one is either very wealthy or very poor.

There was an abundance of Mercedes, Porsches, Bentleys, and even a few Bugatti's. There was also an abundance of bottom of the line model automobiles with nothing in between. At the mall, I went into a store and saw a polo style shirt I really liked. I immediately put it back when I saw the price tag: \$120. A few days later it was Halloween and I was surprised to see how big the celebration was over there. They had city blocks closed off for all the people dressed up, partying. To sum Hong Kong up in one word, I would say that "expensive" is the only one that comes to mind.

We left Hong Kong in early November of 2012 and headed back to Okinawa. The deployment was quickly coming to an end, but, right before we got back, I was tasked with staying on the ship and sailing back out to Cambodia and Thailand. "What for?" I inquired. President Obama had just gotten re-elected and those two countries were where he headed next. Along with 30 other Marines, I was part of quick reaction force (QRF), that was loaded to the teeth in case anything happened. The day President Obama was traveling around, the QRF wasn't allowed to leave the flight deck of the ship. I was a SAW gunner and had 800 rounds in my backpack and my A-gunner had another 800 in his, with my spare barrel. They wouldn't let us leave to eat, use the head, listen to music, or even sleep. Nothing ended up happening, and whether you liked President Obama or not, that was a good thing.

They wouldn't let us leave to eat, listen to music, or even sleep

The QRF got back to Okinawa in early December of 2012 and we only had a week to turn in all our issued gear and weapons. You'd think that would be plenty of time, but the Marine Corps likes to make mountains out of mole hills. We got back to the states late one evening and our sleep schedule was so off that we spent all night and into the next morning drinking. The parking lot was empty and so were our brains. Shawn, Andy, and I had a competition to see who could throw an empty beer bottle the farthest in the empty lot. I feel sorry for the boots who had to clean up all the glass the next day.



A few months after being back at Camp Pendleton, I was “voluntold” that I had to be the guide-on bearer for G Company during the Battalion Commander’s change of command ceremony. I was pissed off about it at first, but I spent a lot of time talking with my company commander, Captain Zaal, and my company 1st sergeant, 1st Sgt Muller. Men in those positions don’t have much time to have conversations with a lance corporal, but they did anyway. A few days after we had the ceremony, my squad leader Sgt Enloe came to my room and said, “There was a lot of good talk about you in the company office today.” A few weeks later, I was meritoriously promoted to corporal. I attained a rank that most guys don’t see in their first enlistment in 2 years.

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I spent all of 2013 in the states wondering what our next deployment would be. I had changed positions from trigger puller to traffic director when I became a corporal, and that was honestly one of the hardest things I had done during my time in Marines. What made it harder, was trying to lead a group of guys that weren’t in the same peer group that I was. I was 27 years old at this point and most of them weren’t even 21 yet. Every time one of them got in trouble, I got in trouble. It was getting real old, real fast. I was losing motivation by the day and I developed an attitude of not wanting to do anything or help anyone. Why should I? Just when I thought I had hit my breaking point, my Platoon Sgt, SSgt McCue, called me down to the company office one day. As soon as I walked in he said, “Yo, Scott! You wanna go to Afghanistan?”

Hold up! Me? He said, “You want to go or not?” Without hesitation I said, “Hell yes SSgt!” He sent me upstairs to talk to the battalion sergeant major who asked the same question and I gave the same answer. A few months later, I received orders to report to 1st Marine Special Operations Battalion to start the deployment work-up.

My orders were personal security detail (PSD) for Lt. Col Lynch, the commanding officer for the Raider Battalion. When I checked in, I was shocked at how differently they treat you, no matter what your rank is. I got issued the same gear as the critical skills operators (CSO’s). The few infantry guys began to help conduct the live fire ranges that were required for all deploying units. Better treatment, better gear, better food, and better gym. My motivation was making a comeback.

In November 2013, our unit, Special Operation Task Force (SOTF) 81.3, traveled to 29 Palms to conduct a two-week training exercise to prepare us for the forward deployed life. It was there that I met Gunnery Sgt Bryan Smith. Gunny Smith was a former drill instructor and he was the epitome of what a Marine should be. This guy worked circles around everyone and never complained. Fast forward to January 2014. I called my family and a few friends one last time while we waited at Miramar Airfield in San Diego. It was time to roll out and do exactly what I had enlisted in the military to do. We boarded an Air Force C-17, buckled up, and took off. Some hours later, we landed in Dover, Delaware to fuel up and let the working dogs do their thing, before we were off again. We flew through the night, and when sunlight broke the night, we were over Germany and about to land at Spangdahlem. We spent 24 hours there, and I was blown away at the amenities Air Force personnel had. The barracks these Airmen lived in made the Marine barracks back at Pendleton look like roach motels.

The next morning, we gathered again and boarded the plane to make the last leg of our journey. Later that evening, we arrived in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan where it was freezing cold. I had no idea that Afghanistan got that cold, but the next morning we awoke to a snow-covered desert. We met in groups at different times to get our incoming brief, receive our weapons, and get issued our ammo. “No porn! No steroids!” We all rolled our eyes, as we normally did during these briefings, then continued getting familiar with our “piece of the pie” and what our mission was for the next nine months.



The second night we were in country, I awoke to alarms going off in the middle of the night. “What the hell is that?” Boom! Boom! Boom! My roommate, who had done multiple combat deployments said, “Mortars, bro. They’re far away.” He immediately fell back to sleep. However, I was up the rest of the night, so I passed the time with episodes of Seinfeld. When we started work, some Army Rangers were there conducting the last of their business, so they could hand over the base before they departed for home. We did rotations with them, learning all the norms and all the anomalies for our surroundings. Once we took possession over the base, and the Rangers finally left, we started fixing everything that they severely neglected.

February 15th, 2014 was a day that changed the tempo of the deployment. Word came late that afternoon that MSgt Aaron Torian had been injured while out conducting operations. “What happened!?” I asked. Yet, we received no word until later that night, when we were told he stepped on a pressure plate which had detonated an improvised explosive device (IED). MSgt Torian was the definition of a warrior, but he had succumbed to the wounds he received that day. The sadness and anger resonated around Camp Kopp for weeks. We were pissed. There was simply no other way to describe it.

The next few months were typical of a deployment in a combat theater. We patrolled the Helmand Province, but operations became slower by the day. I think the Taliban figured out there was nothing they could do anymore without our intervention. They knew they took one of ours too, and they knew we were out for blood. Nothing but blood would satisfy our lust for revenge. Once operations had slowed down, my mission changed, and I started working with Gunny Smith. We continued to fix our base every day to ensure everything operated smoothly and all the other personnel we had coming in and out of Camp Kopp had every accommodation possible. Then Ramadan came, and so did peace and quiet.

One day, I was called into the Battalion Sergeant Major’s office. I knew I hadn’t done anything wrong, but I still thought hard about what it could be.

Turns out, it was nothing at all. He wanted me to start transporting all the linguists the Special Operations teams had been using back to their home provinces around the country. I had to take these guys on a private “puddle jumper” plane to places such as: Herat, Lashkar Gah, Bagram, Kandahar, Shindand, Kabul, and Marz-i-sharif. The sights and wonders my eyes saw while flying over that country are too many to recount here. It is such a beautiful country, one that has been ravaged by differing ideals, which have caused conflicts to arise all over.

In September of 2014, I returned to the United States just in time to celebrate my 30th birthday with good friends, that weren’t blood, but they were definitely family. I had been introduced to a woman through mutual friends while I was still in Afghanistan. We had conversed back and forth using Facebook and Skype for a few months, and I planned a visit before even heading back to the states. I took leave in October, after I had done all of my decompression nonsense. I stopped in La Quinta, California and picked up a few friends I grew up with in Missouri. Then, we headed East on one hell of a road trip. Our first stop was the Grand Canyon, where we met up with a few other friends from Missouri. We camped and hiked for two days before heading up to Colorado.

Once we arrived in Colorado, we stayed in Boulder for a few days, then Colorado Springs with some Marine brothers of mine. As we continued to head East, we stopped at the four corners, where we were subsequently ripped off by locals. The park was supposed to be free but somehow it ended up being \$20 that day. Whatever. I didn’t let it ruin my good time and hopefully that \$20 helped someone out in some way. From there, we drove the eight most boring hours a person could ever drive across Kansas on I-70. We hit Kansas City, MO and stayed with good friends for a night and drove back to Springfield. I had set up a surprise for my family who thought I was staying in Afghanistan until November. They gathered at Mexican Villa with an empty chair left on purpose, but nobody knew why until I walked around the corner and sat down like it was no big deal. It was a good surprise and it was always such a good feeling to be with your family after months away from them with little contact.



From Springfield, I started the trek down to Georgia where Chelsey, the woman I had been introduced to and had been communicating for some months, lived. I drove 16 hours straight, living off Monster energy drinks and disgusting fast food. I spent ten days with Chelsey and I knew that she would be the woman I married. A few months later, I took Christmas leave again and headed to Georgia where I planned another surprise. I called Chelsey's father and asked for his permission to marry his daughter. Once he said yes, I told him my plan and he was all about it. I called the manager of the mall in Jacksonville, Florida and told him my idea to have her and my little boy, Mason, visit Santa. Then, I would come around the corner and propose to her. He was also all about it.

A few days before Christmas, I flew to Jacksonville and my now father-in-law picked me up from my hotel. We drove to the mall and I snuck into a side door with the manager where I had to stay hidden until it was Chelsey and Mason's turn to see Santa. The manager wrapped her ring up and gave it to Santa prior to their time. First, Mason told Santa everything he wanted for Christmas. Then, Santa turned to Chelsey and told her he had something for her. She looked at him, puzzled, while he gave her the box. By now, word had spread all around the mall about what I was doing, so several people were recording the moment. She opened the box and immediately covered her mouth. I walked around the corner wearing my dress uniform, known as the Charlie Uniform. I got down on my knee and asked her to marry me. She ecstatically said yes! The gathering crowd erupted in applause and cheers! It was another good surprise!

When I returned back to Camp Pendleton, I started working at the 1st Marine Regimental Marksmanship Training Unit (MTU). I was tasked with assisting other Marines who needed help on the known distance range for their annual range qualification. I also taught the new Marines light and medium machine gun employment as well as the nomenclature for those weapons. I was one of the few guys working there that actually cared to help out younger Marines and worked tirelessly to improve their skills. This work resulted in expert rifle qualifications throughout the regiment.

I really enjoyed being on the teaching end of the spectrum and instilling my knowledge in the guys who are most likely corporals and sergeants by now. Having that opportunity led me to the path I am on now, as a student. I enjoyed teaching so much that I am currently on the pathway to become a special education teacher. I know it will be challenging, but I believe the rewards will be far greater!

During my last bit of time in the Marines, I started missing my wife and little boy so much, I decided the only way for me to be with them and financially secure, was to deny the opportunity to reenlist. Something I will never forget is getting my exit paperwork signed by my chief warrant officer. CW05 Beltran asked me before he signed, "Scott, have you done everything in the Marine Corps that you sought to do?" I looked him in the face and lied to him when I told him yes. While I wanted to be a drill instructor, I wanted to be with my family more. I still regret that decision, but I honestly think I would have been divorced before my time on the drill field came to an end. Those guys work 90+ hours per week training recruits. I know I could have done it and been successful, but my new bride did not deserve to be in a marriage where I was absent 95% of the time. Being a drill instructor might not have been in the cards for me, but I am thankful and proud I was able to serve my country.

Sometimes I step back and think about all the things that would not have happened if I did not joined the Marine Corps. I wouldn't have the brothers I have now; I am so thankful for those guys on a daily basis. I also wouldn't have had the opportunity to see the world. Those experiences made me even more thankful for being born in the United States and all the great opportunities we have as Americans. I don't, for one minute, think that it was all by chance, but rather God guiding my path to where I am today. However, I do know that if I was given the opportunity to do it all over again, I would do so without hesitation.

Semper Fidelis!

Confronting the War at Home

Out of uniform, the ground will no longer shake.
 Startled out of bed, where is my weapon, is the question.
 My family, puzzled and with wide eyes, watch.
 A different demeanor, in mind, and spirit there is a change.
 Where is Travis? In his bedroom where he feels he must hide.
 Replays in his mind of helping a city fall.
 Body parts flew and buildings dropped, for me, this began last fall.
 But I am home now, why must I continue to shake?
 Like a 2,000lb bomb ripping off someone's hide.
 Why are you so concerned about how you helped destroy the one's trying to kill you, you might question.

Am I stuck like this, could I ever change?
 Dr. Lee stated, he will never get off of his medication, not on my watch.
 The demons won't leave my mind, like a TV I can't turn off and must watch.
 I don't want to be insane, but my mind and body refuse to correlate, my sense of self, doing nothing but fall.
 In order to find a meaningful life, I must commit to change.
 My teacher once told me that attitude is everything, so maybe my pessimistic attitude I must shake.

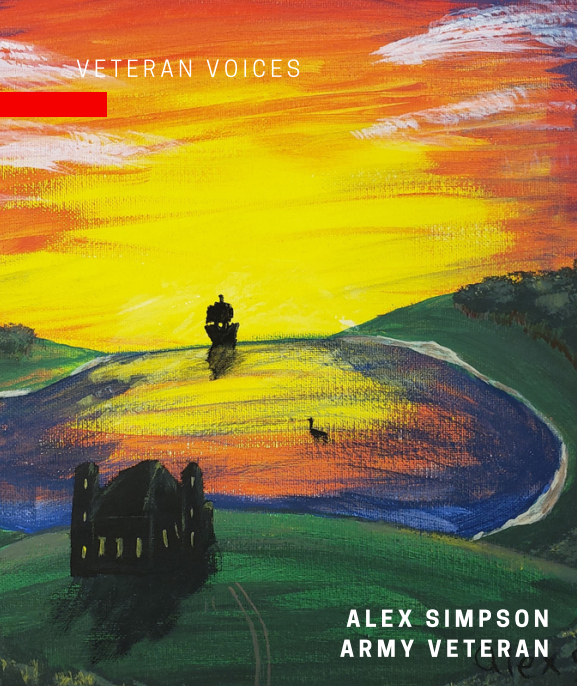
Who is a good role model, whose confidence no one dare question?
 In this world, your true colors are tough to hide.
 Today will be different, I refuse to hide!
 I will still be successful, and if you doubt me sit back and watch.
 Jordan Peterson, a psychologist whose credentials are impossible to question.
 He speaks about responsibility, a backpack you mustn't let fall.
 To be taken seriously, portray confidence, do not tremble nor shake.
 You want to see change in the world, so become the variable, the positive change.
 Do not stigmatize people for a mental illness or trip them to make them fall.
 If others doubt you, it may be their arrogance that not even an earthquake could shake.
 You are worthy of a future, a beautiful life story for others to watch.
 Life will hit you, beat your ass if you let it, but stand up straight friend for there is no need to hide.

My lack of life experience may leave you in question.
 But believe me you are not stuck in a never ending tunnel with no hope for change.
 Discover your own truth, follow your own heart for others may never change.
 Face everything and rise knowing the alternative being a brutal fall.
 Your journey may be blurry with your abilities turning into question.
 So put on your best suit or dress, as helpful hands you are surely to shake.
 Your light others will attempt to dim, but your vibrant personality only you have the power to hide.

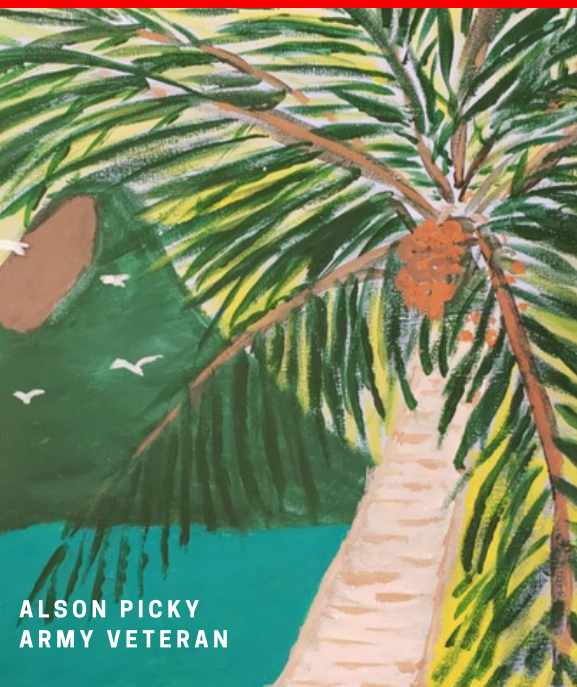
Learn from your predecessors, as your successors will need you to be the one they watch.
 Today you may question, are your faults something you can shake?
 Fall into the gift of life and roll with the punches like the seasons leaves change.
 Your illness not shameful nor necessary to hide, your legacy a guide like the hands on your watch.



Travis Brown
Marine Corps Veteran



ALEX SIMPSON
ARMY VETERAN



ALSON PICKY
ARMY VETERAN



JEREMY RICE
ARMY VETERAN

PASSIONS &

Figure it Out

Verse 1:

Like the irritating scratching in the back of
my throat when I'm sick
It still resides
Deep in the back of my mind
And I can say I'm just fine
But it's just another line
Get my shit together and make it better real quick
Lost in a sea of fantasies
Caught in between dreams and ecstasy
My intuition and my ambition
But I need to keep pushing forward on my inquisition
And livin'
Just for me
And my own dreams

(Listen)

Chorus:

I can't take anymore what if's
And what not's
Crazy thoughts
Figure out what it is and live happily
Until then I'm just doing me
(I'm just doing me)

INTERESTS

Verse 2:

I always find myself
 Stuck in the same situation every time
 The eternal struggle of my heart and my mind
 While my heart is counting stars and escaping the real
 My mind is always racing
 Denying what I feel, because
 There is no way, that the person I am today
 Even bears a resemblance to the one you left, they
 Try to keep me scheduled and frail
 But in the end
 I emerge from the flames and start over again.

Repeat Chorus

A few hearts must be broken
 For a change, it won't be mine
 No not this time
 Maybe I'm alone,
 It doesn't mean I'm lonely
 The difference is clear,
 Keep your distance my dear
 My life is only what I make it,
 So this time I know that my heart won't be taken
 It's only mine to keep
 It's just about time that I finally learned how to love me.

Repeat Chorus

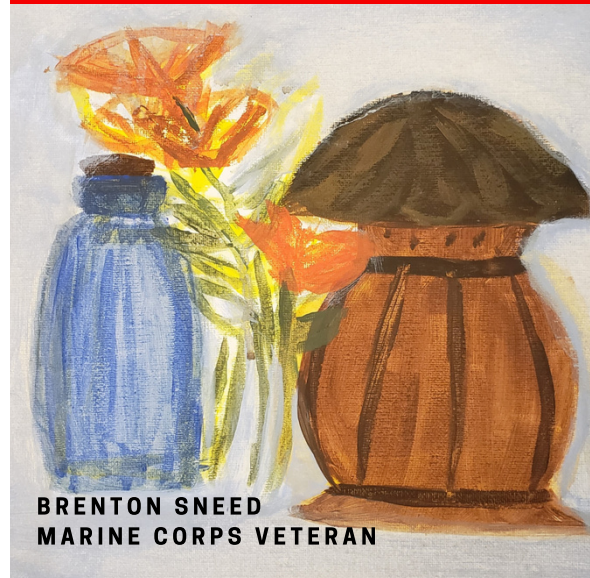
Ivy Burleson, Marine Corps Veteran
Co-Writer Shelby Heger



MICHELENA HALLEY
ARMY VETERAN



ALEX SIMPSON
ARMY VETERAN



BRENTON SNEED
MARINE CORPS VETERAN

Going Up

Alex Simpson
Army Veteran

Elevator Encounter

As the door opened, Jim was happy to see that elevator was empty. He stepped inside hesitantly. So slow in fact, that the doors began to close on his foot. However, as soon as they touched his resisting loafers, they immediately reopened. He took each step as though at any point the tile floor would break away and cause him to fall to his death. It was a cautiousness he had struggled with all his life.

As he reached the elevator's rear wall, the doors closed shut behind him, seemingly sealing his fate. He stuck his hands out on to the smooth surface of the wall and used it to brace himself as he turned slowly to face the closed doors. He slumped slightly, leaning on the handrail for support. His breathing was hard and congested as though he had just ran a dozen miles. The elevator was small and his lungs felt as though they had shrunk to match it. "It's okay, Jim. Get a grip."



His words sounded hollow and echoed slightly. Grabbing the handrail, he stood up straight and used it to push off in the direction of the button panel. He leaned forward as far as he could, his feet not leaving their position, yet he could not span the great distance of the small room. He sighed and then slowly began to slide along the wall to the corner and around as though he stood on a narrow ledge and the floor was a gaping chasm of death. His hands never left the handrail. With a shaky, outstretched hand his finger narrowly grazed the button marked "37."

It lit up and a moment later the sound of moving gears filled the room. Jim tensed up as the elevator started to rise. He didn't normally ride the elevator. Instead, he always insisted on the stairs. In fact, he had avoided taller buildings in order to assure that use of the stairs was practical. But it was not the case this time. There was no way he could climb the 37 floors within the short amount of time he had to reach his destination. He could not be late for a very important interview.

The elevator stopped suddenly and Jim eyes shot to the number. *Twelve*. His heart rate began to rise and a million "stuck in an elevator" scenarios began to fill his head. He began to pace back and forth excitedly, forgetting to hold onto the handrail. *Why did the elevator stop? Why were the doors not opening?*

Jim ran his hands through his hair, firmly grabbing hold and feeling to the point of ripping it out. *What the hell kind of a mad house is this?* He screamed inside his head, his face contorting to fit his anxiety. Then, the doors slowly opened, revealing a young woman in a black dress staring at him with a surprised look on her face.

Standing there, hands in his hair, face contorted with anguish, Jim could only attempt a small smile. He released his hair and back slowly towards the back wall. The young woman attempted a smile in return, but her face revealed her apprehension. She grabbed up a small briefcase at her feet and entered the elevator. She glanced only once more at Jim before turning her back to him and looking at the button panel.

She reached for her button but stopped suddenly. "Oh," she said softly, her finger hesitating to push the button. Jim suddenly realized her dilemma. She had reached for the 37 button, too.

Jim laughed to himself a second, until the doors closed and he tensed up again. However, it wasn't as bad as was before. He now had company. Suddenly, his eyes fell on the new passenger. Her black dress ended just below her thighs, showing off a pair of tan long legs, and the front was rather low cut for a businesswoman. She had long red hair that wrapped around her shoulders. She was quite attractive and it was a moment before Jim realized she knew he was staring at her. The reflection of her irritated eyes in the polished metal forced him to look away. It was then that he spotted a small globe mirror in the corner of the elevator, the type that usually hides a camera. Jim became brutally aware that someone had probably seen his whole behavior. Yet, that wasn't worst of it. On the mirrored globe he saw that his hair was sticking straight up from where he grabbed it like a pair of horns. He used the mirror to slick his hair back into place and sighed. There was a reason he hated elevators.

Linzi stood waiting for the elevator. The tonal beep meant the elevator had stopped at her floor, but it wasn't opening. The elevator in the building was so old that it always took forever to open its doors. However, she was in no mood for delays and tapped her foot on the floor impatiently. "Come on, come on." Finally, the doors opened.

Oh, thank God, she thought to herself as she was about to step in, but she stopped suddenly. Inside the elevator was a young man standing with his legs spread and his hands pulling his own hair. His face seemed to be contorted in pain. As soon as he noticed her, the young man released his hair and attempted a small smile.

Linzi could not believe her eyes. She hadn't expected this. For a moment she contemplated waiting for another elevator, or even using the stairs. However the latter was generally out of the question. Twenty-five flights of stairs in heels was not going to happen. Slowly, the young man backed towards the wall and gestured for her to enter. She smiled and reached for her briefcase on the floor beside her. She eyed the man suspiciously as she entered and then turned to face the button panel.

She eyed the man suspiciously as she entered and then turned to face the button panel

Just push the button and soon it will all be over, she thought as she reached for the button but stopped mid-reach. She let out a small gasp of confusion. "Oh."

It seemed the weird young man was heading in the same direction she was. She glanced at her unusual elevator companion. His hair was sticking up, split in two directions from where he had pulled on it. He wasn't necessarily bad looking, but the devil look didn't suit him. She turned back to the panel to pretend to read the instructions on it, anything to avoid talking to the stranger. She felt the ease of relief as the doors closed and the elevator began to move. Yet, it wasn't long before Linzi got a strange feeling, like something crawling over her skin and she turned to see the weird, devil horned man checking her out. Her stomach twisted and it took only a second for him to realize she was watching him. He turned away and so did she, back to the panel. From the reflection of the brass panel, she saw him straighten his hair and then slump against the back wall and sigh. Linzi let out one a sigh as well. It was going to be a long ride added to an already long day. Hopefully, the man she needed to interview for her company wouldn't be a creep.

Anyone Can Smoke Meat

Reza Gilman
Army Veteran

Finding a Passion

Over ten years ago on a holiday, I went to the grocery store and while shopping, I smelled a delicious aroma that caught my attention. As I approached, I was shocked to see how much the price tag was for the smoked meat: \$12.99 PER POUND! I left feeling defeated until I started doing research on how to make such delicious smelling meat. That's when I started my own journey down this road of smoking meat. While at first, my main reason for smoking meat was purely financial, it has now evolved into something more zen-like, as that is when I am at my most calm and at peace. This is mainly due to the process of smoking meat.

While at first, my main reason for smoking meat was purely financial, it has now evolved into something more zen-like

I built my own smoker from nothing more than several pieces of scrap steel using a welding machine. I developed my own taste over the years and entered several smoking competitions in the southwest region of Missouri. Having accomplished this, I have been asked several times to construct smokers like the one I built for myself. Being a meat smoker for just under a decade, there are some things I know well, but there are a lot of things that I still need to master. Ordinary people from different walks of life, with a basic understanding of tools, wood, and spices can learn to smoke meat safely and successfully.

The biggest hurdles in preparing smoked meat are having the confidence, knowledge, and time to successfully cook food in this manner. It does intimidate most folks because of the time commitment which can range from three hours to 12 hours of just smoking time, then figure another couple hours of prepping the meat, by trimming, making your own mixture of spices, and then drying, rubbing in the spice, and brining the meat.

Add in the effort of splitting the wood, tending the fire, monitoring the temp, and adjusting to keep the temp in those magic numbers needed for the process, it can be overwhelming. With the understanding of tools, wood and spices, anyone can smoke meat successfully.

One of the methods used to smoke meat is in a reverse air flow wood fueled smoker. This includes a small metal box where the fire is built and maintained, and a larger metal cylinder that the fire box is attached to on one end.

The smoke comes from the fire box slightly rising because the firebox is positioned lower than the smoke chamber or cylinder and smoke rises. The smoke travels across the bottom of the smoke chamber and is directed to the opposite side of the chamber by what's called tuning plates or metal plates that won't allow the smoke to travel up yet. Then, about six inches from the end of the smoke chamber, the tuning plates end and the smoke rises to the level of the meat and exhaust port.

The smoke finally exits the chamber on the other end of the smoke chamber, so the smoke eventually drifts across the meat and out the exhaust tube, having bathed the meat in the flavorful smoke trails before it exits.





There are basic tools that meat smokers should possess and understand how and when to use. The smoker itself is pretty evident, however, along with the smoker there will need to be a way to clean out the ashes. Use a small dust pan to clear the ashes out and keep the fire from being oxygen starved. A wire grill brush will help with cleaning the grates in the smoke chamber from any bits of burnt-on meat or just knocking most large particles off the rack(s); it is recommended after wire brushing them to use a couple paper towels wet with just a small teaspoon of vegetable oil on them to wipe down the racks. This will accomplish a couple things: it helps by allowing a thin layer of oil to clean wash the racks and it will moisten the racks so there will not be a lot of meat loss due to sticking. Also, you should have a set of large tongs, or “bear claws,” to help with removal of meat once finished cooking. The most important piece of hand-held equipment is an instant-read digital thermometer. It is essential to a person who is going to be smoking meat. Do not go cheap on this, since it is an item that you will depend heavily on. Thirty to forty dollars should ensure a quality thermometer.

There are opinions that specify a certain amount of time per pound; however, when using a digital grill thermometer to check if the meat is done, a person should check the thickest part of the meat, and use a USDA schedule of what temperature is the most ideal.

Wood is essential; even if you are operating an electric smoker you will still need wood for the smoke element

Wood is essential; even if you are operating an electric smoker you will still need wood for the smoke element. Oak, Walnut, Hickory, Mesquite, Apple, and Cherry are only a few of the hardwoods that when used can either produce a heavy, rich aromatic smoke for your meat, or a light, aromatic sweet smoke to accent your choice of meat.

The choice is completely up to the smoker because it’s their own personal taste that will decide. The cook has a personal choice of most hardwoods including “70% Cherry or Applewood and 30% Hickory with red meat. While Hickory offers that familiar flavor most people come to know and love from smoked foods, mixing in a good portion of fruit wood adds a sweet undertone. This same ratio is great for poultry as well”. The most important thing that can be said about wood is make sure it’s a hardwood. Mix and match the different woods; research different woods to find out what they are supposed to complement and experiment until you find your own personal choice. A smoker should not count all hardwoods as viable for use in a smoker; some, like locust, just burn too hot and their aroma is unpleasant.

Spices or rubs are another important factor that a smoker should tackle. For instance there are numerous store-bought dry rubs that will get the job done, or if the smoker wants, they can blend their own spices to make a rub that is pure. Then, then possess complete control as to the flavor and ingredients that they are putting on their meat. Here is the list of ingredients that are used in a dry rub that I am known for (although the exact proportions will not be discussed): smoked paprika, kosher salt, fresh ground black and white pepper, cayenne pepper, raw sugar, dark brown sugar, coriander and chili powder.

These ingredients, for most people, make a very basic recipe, but it’s the amounts that distinguish how it tastes: fiery, smoky heat, or sweet and tangy. Anything in-between is possible with just a slight modification.





According to Sifton, which is where I originally got the recipe that I currently use, “the recipe is a forgiving recipe; one might add granulated onion, or garlic powder to it or omit the coriander if there is none available. Be careful with the paprika, as there are many different varieties around. If it’s smoked paprika, you will need less of it. If it’s fiery, you may want to hold off on adding cayenne pepper. If you have no cayenne pepper, try red pepper flakes. Adjust the recipe to your own taste, mix well, and apply liberally on a freshly paper towel dried meat.”

This recipe is strictly suited to individual taste. There is no real wrong way to do it; just the way you prefer it, it’s a very personal choice. The history of smoking meats can be summarized and rolled into a couple simple statements. That primitive man discovered it by accident is probably the truest answer. The fact that it has developed into a delicacy is beyond rational thinking. But as Venema stated, “Historically, the smoking of meat dates back to when people first lived in caves. It was one of the first food preparation techniques.” Most folks can imagine primitive man huddled in a cave, several animal skins stretched across makeshift racks and in the back of the cave, a small fire and forward of that a few sticks being held up by some rope, or twine type material, and hanging from the twine a few pieces of meat, being bathed in smoke draped over the twine. Maybe that’s just how I envision it was back then.

But along with that, there is a psychological factor when speaking of smoked meat, either it is a primal encode in our DNA, or by outside influences that ingrain our disposition of salivating when we get a strong smell of cooking steak on a grill, or pork, or even salmon. It’s what is commonly referred to as selling the sizzle. Let me explain this strange reaction better. Most of the time, when you walk into a steakhouse it’s not the look of the meat, or spices they use, or even the waitress that sells you on buying a \$30, \$40, or even \$50 dollar steak, it’s the sizzle and smell.

Your auditory system is barraged by the enticing sounds of meat cooking and flames jumping in the air while bathing the meat in their fiery fingers creating a sizzle well known to most, and then there’s the olfactory system that gets slammed by those delicious smells and instantly transport you back to a happy moment in your life or a happy childhood barbecue around certain family members, with which you look back on great fondness. These attacks open our wallets for the possibility to recapture that one moment even if it is \$30, \$40, or \$50, and just for a moment.

Those delicious smells instantly transport you back to a happy moment in your life or a happy childhood barbecue...with which you look back on with great fondness.

It seems to me it’s not the steak that does this act, but the auditory, and olfactory, and visual overloads that hammer our senses. It can cause an entire city to adopt a certain smoked meat as a staple in their daily life and own that meat as theirs, claiming it like the city of Montreal did, according to Goldman-Poslums.

To wrap things up, you now are prepared with the basic knowledge to start smoking your own meat and never overpay. Use some confidence and a little creativity and you too can smoke some meat. Remember, meat selection is pretty much done for you, so just grab whatever you want from your local grocery store, prep it, and smoke it! Wood selection is another important factor, so do some research and find the one you like. Spices are pretty well covered in the spice aisle or you can blend your own. Tools are readily available and with the information given, it should give you a good idea where to start. Remember there is a deep rooted psychological connection that most people connect with smoked meats, and your neighbors are not typically immune to its charm, so cook enough for them... just in case they pop over.

Story of Friendship

Mark Vasquez
Marine Corps Veteran, SGT

Let me tell you about my friend. I am front left standing and Sergeant Jack Aiolos is 5th in from the right standing. Jack and I had no relation prior to enlisting in the United States Marine Corps.

Even though we are both from Chicago, we didn't meet until he was stationed at the Marine Corps detachment in Fort Leonard Wood, a little more than six months after I was stationed there.

Jack and I were not on good terms for a long time. It wasn't until one of our good friends, Sergeant Ly (not pictured), started to bring us together. Time went by and we really started to understand each other.

Once I got out and moved to Springfield, I was really surprised that he was the only one to reach out to me. Jack moved to the area once he got out of the Marines. Now, we both attend school together at OTC.

I am very thankful for his friendship and to the Marine Corps that brought us together.



Survivor

Alex Simpson
Army Veteran



Lucid Dreams

Every night, she has the same dream. She's alone in dark place, scared and feeling the most helpless she's ever been... then the zombies come. She awakens in pool of her own sweat, just as the first foul mouth sinks its rotting teeth into her neck.

The nightly dreams are never really a cause for concern for her. In the past, she had an accident that left her hospitalized and fighting for her life. "Some trauma should be expected," the doctor assured her, a nonchalant tone in his voice as he signed the release papers. It was highly recommended that she seek out special counseling for post-traumatic stress disorder. "Doctor's orders," as it were. But she couldn't bring herself to talk to a stranger about her feelings, let alone her bizarre, repeating dream. Instead, she spent every morning sitting on a local park bench, feeding the ducks that congregated on the small, self-contained pond. Feeding them calmed her nerves, better than any therapy she could bring herself to imagine.

Likewise, the ducks always seemed grateful for her company, since she fed them little bits of bread crumbs from a small plastic bag. She made sure not to overfeed them, of course, since too much bread could be hazardous to their health. She didn't want to see such innocent creatures suffer and die. Besides, there were so few ducks left anyways. It had become a crime to kill one. The few that hung around the park were all tame. There were never any new, wild ones. There hadn't been any, at least in recent years. Those few ducks that grew restless and tired of the park would fly away, never to return.

She wasn't absolutely certain why they never came back, in fact, you couldn't be, but she could think of a pretty good reason. They were protected in the park by the city environmental commission. When they left, they lost that protection. Their fate outside of the city was an unpleasant thought, which she never liked to think about for long. Instead, she calmly sat on the bench feeding the ducks as ordinary people, as the world at large, passed her by.

Periodically, she'd hear a stranger (or two's) conversation as they passed by, though she dared not look at them. She kept her eyes firmly planted on the ducks and ground in front of her. To even make eye contact would have been far too much for her to endure. But she could still hear their words. Those she couldn't completely tune out. "There she is," a passerby's voice was heard, "That's her." "She's the survivor?" was the typical response. "What's so special about her? She looks so...ordinary."

It was a typical exchange. She was just a point of conversation, nothing more. Her accident, and her ensuing "miraculous" recovery, had been the "talk of the town" at its beginning. At the time, there had been a zero percent chance of recovery, so, when she pulled through, she had then become the subject of multiple doctor examinations and, later, unique science experiments that tried to uncover the reason for her unusual recovery. However, in the end, the experiments and tests were ultimately deemed fruitless and both the doctors and scientists and classified her recovery as an anomaly, before moving on. The news stations, which had been fervently documenting her recovery, also eventually moved on. Most everyone moved on. Her story had moved on to become an urban legend, spoken now only in the hushed conversation of a few nosy passersby strolling through the park.



One passerby sat down on the bench next to her. She didn't look up, but knew immediately who it was. Only one person would dare sit on the bench with her. It was Doug, her roommate, if he could so be called. Doug had been the one who found her after the accident. He had been the one who had rushed her to the hospital when it became clear that she wasn't fatally wounded. He wasn't family, as she no longer had any family, but he had sat at her bedside during her long recovery. He had stayed even when the doctors, scientists, and news crews had all left. He had stayed when she began first showing signs of her unique PTSD. He had stayed when she began to show other signs of the adverse effects of her condition. He had stayed.

To be clear, Doug wasn't her lover She didn't feel anything like that for him

To be clear, Doug wasn't her lover. She didn't feel anything like that for him. In fact, she didn't feel like THAT about anyone. Sometimes, she wasn't even sure she felt anything at all. But his presence brought her some mental comfort and that was always welcome.

"Good morning," she said, already knowing his response.

"What do you mean?" he said in a gruff voice, not his own. "Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?"

"All of them at once, I suppose," was her automatic reply. There was a momentary pause before they both broke out in a small fit of laughter. They had done this same routine every morning since she had started coming to the park.

It was a line from one of her favorite books, *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. She really liked Tolkien's work, especially the part about innocent people who came into contact with life altering events that would ultimately end up changing the course of their lives forever. Recently, she had begun to identify heavily with a creature in Tolkien's work known as Gollum. Gollum had once been a different person, but his run-in with the One Ring, which he kept for hundreds of years, had changed him into an unrecognizable form. Yet, she saw Gollum as an easily misunderstood character. He was mistaken as evil for his actions, yet they were actions that he could not control, having been thoroughly corrupted by the One Ring.

The accident had corrupted her, too. It had fundamentally changed her into something she didn't really recognize anymore. Once, in what felt like a past life, she had been a social butterfly. Now she was recluse and a misunderstood spectacle of society. Doug seemed to understand her though and she was thankful for that.

"Fewer ducks today," Doug noted. "Soon there may not be any more."

She only nodded in acknowledgement, saying nothing in return. She wondered what she would do when they were all gone. Would she still sit on the bench? Would she toss bread crumbs to an empty park? Would she have to break the very routine that had kept her feeling safe and sane for so long?

"Are you hungry?" Doug asked.

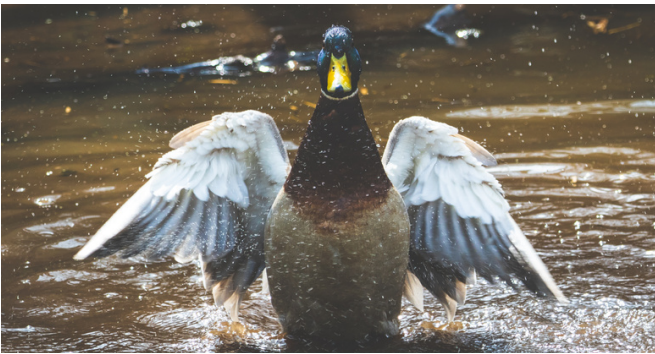
"You know I am," She replied. She was always hungry.

"Well, when you're ready, we'll head in for breakfast."

**There was a momentary pause
before they both broke out in
a small fit of laughter**



She nodded in acknowledgement and the two of them sat in silence as she continued to feed the ducks the rest of crumbs from her small plastic bag. She watched as the ducks interacted with each other, sometimes eating crumbs in peace, sometimes fighting over the tiny morsels. She noted that any duck that attempted to hog all of the crumbs for themselves was soon swarmed by the others and expelled to outside of the group. It seemed that even in their tiny brains, there was a cursory understanding of fairness and unabashed selfishness that would not be tolerated. The selfish duck became the outsider. An outsider like her.



When the bag was finally empty, Doug helped her to her feet. He wasn't doing it out of some innate sense of gentlemanly behavior. Instead, he knew that she was often weak when she hadn't eaten in a while, and it had been a while. Her condition required a very special diet and it often took Doug quite a while to acquire the food she needed. Worse yet, the food supply was dwindling, so the lengths between the times she could eat would inevitably get longer. As they began slowly walking along the path back to Doug's house, she felt his hand slip into hers and hold it tight. She didn't respond to it. She didn't squeeze his hand back. She knew that he loved her, but she felt nothing for him. He knew that of course, but it didn't bother him. She had come to the decision that if it didn't bother him, then it didn't bother her. Their's was a companionship built of necessity and friendship.

As they walked, the city's many sirens went off. Their fluctuating tones carried over the town like last cries a wailing ghost. It was an announcement that someone else had been taken.

Another hapless soul, or souls, had been lost to The Conflict, further dwindling the city's minimal population. Ever since The Conflict, as it had come to be called, began, the city had been a safe haven for those looking to make a final stand. Yet, it was a conflict that seemed to have no end in sight, and each passing day meant less and less resources and more and more losses. After a few, long minutes, the sirens finally ended. There was really no point to continuing them. They were not a warning, but simply a wailing farewell to those who had been lost.

The park path eventually ended and they turned onto a nearly empty street. They passed by several empty houses, the residents being no longer among the living. The houses themselves were not yet in full decay, as their vacancy was too recent, but their lawns were becoming aggressively overgrown. They looked like jungles, hiding the pristine temples of long lost civilizations. She could imagine an Indiana Jones like character skulking about the undergrowth, machete in hand, avoiding traps and looking for long lost relics.

Half-way down the lonely street they came to the house they stayed in. It stood out as the odd ball, as its lawn was always well kept. Doug was a bit of stickler about appearances, perhaps even having a touch of obsessive compulsive disorder. This caused him to spend a lot of his free time hunting down the last remaining vestiges of fuel to keep his mower going and once or twice a week he'd spend the day outside tending to the lawn and pushing his mower around while a few solemn onlookers gawked at his audacity. He always waved at them enthusiastically with friendly greetings, despite their demeanors. She guessed it was strange, considering the state of things. All she knew was that she liked the smell of the freshly cut grass. Doug knew it, too.

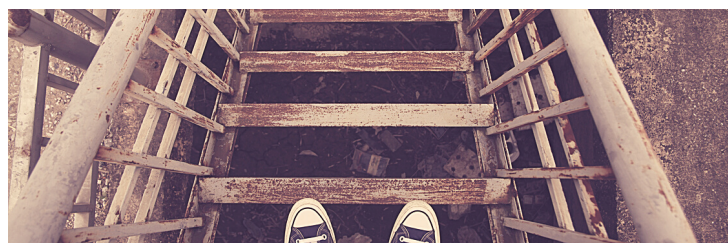


The house itself was a simple one-story bungalow with only a couple bedrooms. Doug had selected it after the previous owners had turned up missing, most likely lost to The Conflict. There was no real need for a property deed. The Conflict had abolished any petty desire of profit or property ownership. Who could worry about such things when humanity was struggling to survive? The only law concerning housing (if it could even be called a law) was that a house couldn't be occupied by another resident, and the reality of things was that there were too many empty houses to worry about squabbling over any single one. Furthermore, the one thing that drew most people to a house, and perhaps the only thing worth squabbling about, was if it contained a basement, or better yet, a bomb shelter. A basement or bomb shelter was a place to hide, should The Conflict ever fully spill over into the city. The house Doug had chosen did have a basement, though it was somewhat hidden and you wouldn't have easily guessed it had one, which is why Doug took such an interest in it.

As they entered the house, the smell of cooked meat wafted into her nostrils. As it did, she was gripped by hunger in a twinge of pain, making her knees give way a bit. Doug reached forward and caught her under the shoulder, lifting her back up to him. She looked at Doug as he did so and for moment she didn't see him at all, at least not the way she wanted to see him. She saw only a means to an end, the filling of a salient, primal need. She shook the thought from her mind and tried to maintain focus. She would feel better very soon and all would be well.

Doug helped her along the main hall of the house, passing by the meager living room and mostly unused dining area to the large, sturdy door near the back of the house. It was the basement door. Her breakfast was waiting down there for her. It was safer to eat breakfast in the basement, less chance of being seen.

She felt herself slightly renewed, as though the thought of eating was keeping her going. The door opened with a long creaking sound, like the type heard in a typical horror movie. The smell of cooked meat was much stronger below. With renewed strength, her body seemed to take over, pulling her down the stairs.



The wooden stair case descended into the dimly lit basement, hugging the wall and ending in a small L-shape at the bottom. As she stopped at the end of the stairs, her hunger peaked. It was all she could do to restrain herself, to regain her senses and prepare for her breakfast, like the somewhat civilized person she pretended to be. Like the civilized person she used to be.

Doug had followed her down and made his way over to the basement's small, secondary kitchen area. The basement's kitchen was another feature that had made him especially interested in house. It was also a secure basement with zero windows and solid, sound proof walls. It was the kind of place you could hide someone without anyone ever knowing they were there. Doug said that he thought it had once belonged to a "prepper," one of those often paranoid individuals who prepared for end of the world. They had apparently not prepared well enough for every scenario but had, fortunately for them, left a very secure basement. It was the kind of place that fit Doug's personality perfectly. Before The Conflict, a person like Doug might have had been labeled a sociopath or, more adequately, a psychopath. But now, such labels didn't matter. Or at least there was too much going on to investigate or care about such things. The Conflict was the perfect cover for society's oddballs to simply disappear, as long as they kept quiet about it.



On the stove, Doug took the cooked meat from a hot plate that he had been using to keep it warm and put it nicely on clean plate from one of the kitchen's cabinets, decorating it with a little piece of garnish. That was for him. In fact, the entire plate was for him. She didn't like cooked meat, though she did enjoy the smell. It reminded her of a past she'd all but forgotten. She made her way over to the sink where she began to wash her hands. Not that it really mattered. It was just something you did. The habit was mentally comforting. She hummed cheerfully to herself as she washed. Doug picked up on her tune almost immediately and started to say it out loud.

"Dun dun dun dun dudun dun dudun," he said cheerfully. It was the Imperial March from Star Wars. She often thought it was weird how little of her past she could remember from before the accident, but it seemed that pop culture references were in her brain to stay. Yet, her humming was interrupted by a soft moaning from the dining table, which sat in the near center of the basement. Doug reached over, calmly shut off the water, and handed her a towel to dry off. "You should eat your breakfast. I worked hard for this one. You wouldn't want it to get away?"

There was smile on his face and look of warmth that almost reminded her of loving father figure. She nodded and turned to head towards the table. "After breakfast," Doug continued, "I thought we could go to our lookout point and watch them fight off the new waves." "Sounds good," she replied.

She knew he was referring to an abandoned five story building that sat near the edge of the border wall. Ever since the zombie apocalypse had started, some people, like Doug, had found such places to watch the city's military fight off the daily swarms of zombie hordes as they tried to break through the border wall.

It was entertaining to people like Doug. His psychopathic nature was satiated by the carnage of watching bullets rip through the flesh of the undead as they tried desperately to tear through the hastily constructed bricks and concrete of the towns makeshift border wall. Of course, the wall naturally didn't always stop zombies from getting into the city, and Doug had watched a number of unlucky people get ripped apart by a few rogues that made it in. The broken walls would be patched up as soon as the hoard was diminished enough, but the damage was usually already done. It was from his favorite lookout point that Doug had witnessed her and her family being attacked by a group of rogue zombies. He never said it, but she knew he had watched with abated wonder, looking on through his favorite binoculars, perhaps even eating some fresh popcorn he'd made.

After the zombies had been engaged by the military, Doug snuck down to the site of the massacre. He hadn't planned on trying to save anyone. His curiosity about the carnage was his only real interest. He was there to see "the bloody mess," as he had put it. There wasn't much left of her family, but Doug noticed that she was still alive. He had taken her to the hospital where the military kept watch as doctors and scientists endlessly poked and prodded her. They were afraid she would take the turn at any second, but, to their astonishment, she never zombified. Everyone was amazed. What did it mean? Was it a possible cure? The news around town sensationalized her recovery. Yet, when nothing ever came of the tests, they labeled her an anomaly, a "lucky survivor," and moved on. But not Doug, he was enthralled by her. Maybe it was his psychopathic brain. Maybe it was just luck, but he had felt that there was something else at work. Like a dog sniffing out the scent of another dog, Doug seemed to know something the rest of them did not. She had changed, even if he wasn't sure how or in what way.

A few short days after she was released from the hospital, Doug's intuition paid off. Like a slow burning candle, the virus that caused the outbreak had finally started acting in her system. However, as long as she kept eating on regular basis, the deterioration of her mind and body was incrementally slow. Doug's psychopathic nature became the source of her salvation. He became the Yin to her Yang, and the two of them became nearly inseparable.



She sat down at the dining table. In front of her, laying on his back was the squirming mass of middle-aged man. His eyes were fluttering as he tried to stay awake, a symptom of the heavy sedation that Doug had injected into him. The man was wearing a military uniform and she looked up at Doug in surprise.

"I caught this one during one of the zombie raids," he said with a smile, taking a seat on the other side of the table. The semi-conscious man was spread out between them. "Poor little fella got separated from his pack." Doug folded his napkin in a gentlemanly manner and placed it into his lap. Then he shrugged and picked up his fork, eyeing his food hungrily. "As far as anyone knows, the horde got him."

Containing her hunger, she looked the man up and down. A makeshift tourniquet was wrapped around his thigh, right above the part of the leg that Doug had amputated for himself. That part was Doug's. Ever since The Conflict began he'd been able to try out the more taboo things that his mind thought up. He had recently begun to fancy himself a less gentlemanly Hannibal Lector.

As she continued to stare down at the drugged man in front of her, the hunger boiled to a point that she would soon not be able to control much longer. The sounds of outside world began to shift out of perspective. Her eyes were narrowing down to a tunnel-like vision, with only the man in view. Her mouth began to salivate. For a moment, she thought she understood what it was like to be one of the mindless ones, who lived by one rule and one rule alone, the most basic rule of life: "To feed the hunger." She knew that one day she would also follow this path, that one day she would not come back to her senses, no matter how much she fed. She wondered if Doug would still love her then. Would he keep her in the basement, perhaps chained to the wall? She wondered if she would attempt to feed on him, and if he would willingly let her. His morbid curiosity might just give in to such an outlandish idea. In his mind, he would then be one with her.

She wondered if she would attempt to feed on him, and if he would willingly let her

Doug's voice cut through her feral focus. "Oh, after we get back from the lookout, I thought we could watch some old movies I found in one of the nearby houses," he said enthusiastically, as he stuck a fork full of meat into his mouth and talking as he chewed. "I thinf.. fere was a superhero one."

"That would be nice..." She replied with a brief smile, before the conscious world disappeared and the hunger finally overtook her.

The Island

Ivy Burleson

Marine Corps Veteran


The Awakening

She awoke in a panic, but were her eyes open? Darkness consumes her entire body and for a moment she believes she has gone blind. A musky smell invades her nostrils and she gasps for air as her heart starts to pound harder and faster in her chest. She opens her mouth to scream, but the burning dryness in her throat holds her cries prisoner. *Where am I? Am I dead? No. Death couldn't be this painful, unless I'm in hell.* She outreaches her arms and starts to try to feel around. Her body is damp and there is a slight sound of splashing. *Water.* Frantically, she swings her arms across the ground hoping that her finger tips might find the precious liquid. The ground is rigid, like rock, scraping her arms as she slowly crawls across the ground. A small puddle answers her prayers. Her mouth meets the liquid, and her throat rejects it. *Salt water.* She rolls on her back, staring off into the nothing before her. *Is this how it ends? Is this how I die?* She caresses her throbbing head into her hands, her right palm is met with a gooey-like substance. Blood. She starts to sob. She turns her head to see a small crack of light, and zones off into her last memory.

"All aboard!" The Captain's voice resonated throughout the crowd. A seizure-like buzzing started going off in her pocket, she grabbed it and the screen revealed the name: Mom. Annoyed and reluctant she answered the call anyways. "Yes, mom. I'm on the ship and heading to my room now. I told you I'd be fine. Don't worry about me." Her mother took a long sigh and sounded as if she was fighting back tears, "Syrie, I love you. I know you're taking this trip to get away from everyone, but when you get back, I am here for you. I will keep my phone by me day and night, if you need to talk." It felt like her heart was in her throat, and she fought back the tears forming in her eyes.

"Mom, stop crying. I'm done crying and I'm going to go and have fun. On the bright side, what could have been a honeymoon cruise is now a vacation of a lifetime for someone single! I will be alright and I will get some sun. I've got to go. I love you." Quickly, she hung up the phone before her mother could say anymore, before the tears that were now swelling up in her eyes could begin to fall. Throwing her head back, and closing her eyes, Syrie took a deep breath. *You're going to be alright.* Something she had to constantly tell herself. Arriving at the door to her room, Syrie began to feel nauseated. Staring at the door handle, the butterflies in her stomach fluttered around painfully. *Just open the door.* She slowly turned the handle and pushed open the door to reveal a honeymoon suite. The lights were dimmed and gave an illusion of candlelight. Rose petals lay across the floor and the bed. A bucket of ice, champagne, and two glasses sat on the coffee table next to a set of chairs in the living room area with a note that read, "Congratulations to the Bride and Groom! Please enjoy a complimentary bottle of our finest champagne to start off your first adventure together as husband and wife. Thank you for choosing Faire Cruise for your vacation needs!" Syrie rolled her eyes and snatched up the bottle of champagne. "At least I didn't pay for this cruise," she exclaimed as she downed her first glass of champagne. She made a beeline for the mini fridge and discovered small bottles of liquor. A smile grew on her face. "Maybe this trip won't be so bad after all. Who needs a man when you have booze!"

An hour later she was dressed, ready for dinner in the ballroom, and slightly intoxicated. An elegant chandelier hung from the ceiling and candles were lit on every table. The stage held a small band serenading the crowd, and the dance floor was alive with couples gliding and swirling across it. Grabbing another glass of champagne from a waiter that passed, she found her seat and plopped down in it.



She took a bite out of a roll and spit it out, “Nope! Nope! More booze.” She drank as she watched couples dance and yearned to be one of them. “Waiter! Bring me a bottle, please.” The waiter at first was reluctant, but then saw the pain in her eyes. A woman as beautiful as she, should not appear so sad. He offered her a smile and said “Right away, miss.” The waiter returned with her bottle and offered another smile and a compliment on her dress. Syrie was still staring at the couples dancing. “What? Oh! Thank you, very much. Do you dance?” Stunned at the strange request, but also flattered, he looked around to make sure all the tables in his area were taken care of and then grabbed her hand. For the first time in the past few days, Syrie smiled and her eyes became alive again as they moved towards the dance floor and he spun her around.

For the first time in the past few days Syrie smiled and her eyes became alive again

“So, what’s your name, so I don’t have to keep calling you waiter?”

“You can call me Leon. What shall I call you, ma’am?” Their eyes met, his smile made her melt and she blushed slightly.

“You can call me Syrie.”

“Well, Syrie, I am sad to say that I must get back to work. I need to keep my guests happy.”

“Well, Leon, you are doing a fine job. You have possibly just made my night.”

“I really must go, but I hope to see you again.” He gave her a final spin and disappeared into the crowd. Maybe everything happens for a reason.

Her moment of happiness was abruptly ended in the blink of an eye. She spied him, Blake, across the room with another woman hanging on his arm. Furious, she returned to her table and had glass after glass of champagne until the bottle was gone. Her heart broke all over again, thinking about how much she had loved him, how she was going to spend the rest of her life with him, and how he had left her at the altar. *What nerve he has to show up on their cruise with another woman! He left me for another woman on our wedding day.*

Syrie watched as Blake excused himself from his crowd he was entertaining and stepped out on the deck. She followed, or rather stumbled out to confront him. I can’t just sit here, I have to say something to this jerk! She spotted him alone, puffing on his pipe. “Blake!” She yelled at him. He turned to see her walking towards him, and a flash of panic came over his face, and then anger.

That’s the last thing she remembered. Glass after glass of champagne, going to confront her ex-fiancé, and then waking up here. *Did he do this to me? Remember Syrie! Remember!*

She is trapped, alone, and broken hearted. It is completely dark aside from the small glimpse of light staring at her face. Now she is angry. Mustering up all of the strength she can bare she gets up and moves towards the light. She claws and punches at the rock and it gives way. Slight hope starts to fill her heart. She continues past the point of her fingernails and fists bleeding until the hole is big enough for her to climb out, and she is greeted by the sun. Her aching body crawls across the soft hot sand and she observes her surroundings. There is no sign of civilization anywhere. Stuck on a deserted island, with hardly a will to live, she must survive to get the revenge she seeks. This should be fun.

The Phone Call

Alex Simpson
Army Veteran

Waiting to Call

Specialist Daggerhart stood in line to use the phone. He was one of about 50 Army soldiers waiting in a small, cramped room containing a total of ten phones. However, only about eight of them were ever working at any given time. Additionally, each soldier had about ten minutes of call time allotted to them. This time constraint was regulated by the on duty sergeant whose only job was to guard and distribute “adequate” phone time.

Ten minutes weren’t a lot, but in a place so disconnected from the world that you might as well have been on another planet, ten minutes of talking to a family member or a loved one could be a godsend. This small connection with home was often a soldier’s saving grace when being deployed. However, Daggerhart knew he would need every second of his ten minutes and, in reality, much more. He held on to the hope that perhaps time would stop at the moment he was connected, suspending himself and the person he desperately wanted to talk to in a time loop, where he would then be allowed to talk forever.

Specialist Daggerhart shuffled his feet anxiously, like a small boy holding in his pee. His wait in line had already been well over an hour. Worse yet, the room he was in was currently without air conditioning, which made waiting even worse, as the daunting heat from the outside desert flooded into cheaply made plywood building, creating an unwanted sauna.

To make matters far worse, the room, though full of people, was “pin drop” silent. Everyone was keeping to themselves as they waited, mostly out of respect for those on the phones, but some of it had to do with the fact that they simply had nothing to say. Their minds were completely concentrated on their forthcoming telecommunications.

Not that any of this really mattered though, as the lucky few who were on the phones were talking so low that no one could hear them. Most were married men or guys with girlfriends using their “relationship talk,” which they didn’t want any one else to hear, out of a military ingrained, yet baseless, fear of seeming less manly or macho. The remaining few, who were just calling home to say hello to a family member or a friend, didn’t want to be the only ones whose conversations were being overheard, so they too talked in hushed tones. There wasn’t much privacy in the life of a soldier, so most had to create some.

Daggerhart stared blankly at the wall in front of him at a poster that supported soldier reenlistment, all the while turning the ring on his finger in small circles. His soul burned by the collision of worlds, and his thoughts became laser focused on the conversation to come. It would determine everything. His concentration was suddenly interrupted, as the rope weighted plywood door opened and the familiar wave of stinging heat and a small gust of wind blown sand filled the room. In the midst of it all, another soldier made his way inside. Seeing who had entered, Daggerhart tried to remain aloof and anonymous, but in a small room without chairs it was hopeless. Nowhere to hide. The soldier, taking in his surroundings, grinned as he recognized Daggerhart. He seemed to be able to smell the young soldier’s defeat and made his way over to where Daggerhart stood. The soldier on Daggerhart’s right immediately scooted over, making room for the new arrival without waiting to be asked, not that the new arrival ever “asked” for anything.

With a booming and annoying voice, his signature feature, the new soldier broke the silence. “Daggerhart! Here to call that old girl of yours, ay? I bet you’re going to cave in like a little girl when you hear her voice. Not like me, of course. See, if I had a problem with my wife I’d say, ‘Look here, lady, I take care of everything. Straighten up or you’re going out on your ass!’” When the soldier finished talking he looked around the room for approval. “Am I right boys?”



A few soldiers shuffled their feet, but nodded in approval, while others used grunts of approval with an occasional “Hoorah!” Yet, Daggerhart knew none of them meant it. “You’re the king of your own castle, aren’t you, Sergeant Lions?” one soldier replied, but it sounded more sarcastic than sincere.

Sergeant Lions seemed not to notice though, as he nodded and grinned. It was a fake grin, if truth be told. Daggerhart himself had had the “privilege” sitting at one of the phones next to him, and Sergeant Lions had been hunched over his phone talking in whispers and using phrases like “Yes, dear” and “Of course, dear. Whatever you want.” But calling out your sergeant wasn’t something you could do. Honestly, he felt more pity for his squad leader than anything. He knew that, in a way, it was all a coping mechanism, so Daggerhart took the taunting in stride.

Finally, after a few minutes of listening to the sergeant go on about his superiority with women, Daggerhart’s name was called from the waiting list and he jumped on the phone before the previous occupant had even fully released the receiver. He dialed the numbers he needed to make a connection faster than he had ever done before. His platoon had been out on several patrols for the past month. They were four days out, one day into rotation. During one of the patrols, he had heard some unpleasant rumors from his buddy. He had gotten them from his girlfriend, who just so happened to be good friends with Daggerhart’s wife.

Since then, he had tried to call home every time he had a chance but due to the unpredictability of the military, something had always come up. Furthermore, the only two chances he did have, there had been no one home. The phone rang... and rang... and rang again, yet no one answered. Daggerhart cursed quietly to himself. It was two in the morning back home, why wasn’t she picking up? He thought she could be staying at her parent’s house. He’d try that next. Then, the answering machine came on and Daggerhart quickly hung up the phone. It would not have made a difference if he had left a message, there was no way she could return his call. Instead, he instinctively redialed the number instead of calling her parents, since he still had time remaining. He hoped that his wife had just been in the shower or something... at two in the morning.

The answering machine again picked up and his heart dropped. Then, he heard the sound of someone shutting off the answering machine and picking up the phone. He snapped bolt upright and waited for the voice at the other end, his heart pounding wildly. Yet, a male voice answered, and he quickly hung up.

Daggerhart stared blankly at the wall for a full minute before he returned to reality, realizing that his time was rapidly fading away. He decided to try the number one more time, to confirm that he had not dialed incorrectly.

The phone rang again, but this time there was no answering machine, only a strange man’s sleepy voice.

“Hello?”

“Hello.” Daggerhart could barely squeeze out the words. “Is - is Stacy there?”

The delay from satellite beaming his words from one side of the world and to the other, and then receiving a response, felt like both the beginning and the end of time.

“She’s in bed. Who is this?”

Daggerhart didn’t answer. He just held the receiver in his hand and stared at the wall. He could hear further inquiries from unknown man and the muffled sounds of his wife in the background arguing with him, but it all sounded like he was really trying to hear someone from 10,000 miles away. Slowly, he laid the receiver down, not even bothering to hang it up. He rose from his seat at the phone with a calm demeanor and turned to walk to the door.

“Take care of business?” Sergeant Lions asked with the same demeaning grin as Daggerhart passed him by.

He didn’t bother with an acknowledgement. Instead, Daggerhart slid the ring off his finger and dropped it into his front pocket. Then, he took a minute to brace himself for the biting heat and dust encrusted wind, before opening the flimsy door to the shack and stepping out.



To Save a Pollinator

Emily Palmer

Marine Corps Veteran

Bees are Vital

Think about your favorite foods and how you feel when you take a bite of them. Do you ever wonder what it would be like if you could never again eat them? We typically think of honey bees as only pollinating our flowers and producing honey, but they also play an important role in crop production. The heart of our food ecosystem only beats because of the bees, which pollinate our crops. Without these specific pollinators, our food ecosystem would fail to thrive. Therefore, bees are essential to sustain human life because we depend on food that has been pollinated, which helps them reproduce and continue the cycle.

If we lost our pollinators, we would lose availability to many important food sources, such as, but not limited to, many fruits and vegetables. According to the National Science Foundation, "Pollination is an ecological service – a role an organism plays in its ecosystem that is essential to human life." This means that it is important to have and maintain biodiversity, not just in conservation efforts, but so that life itself is able to survive. We need to keep these all-important pollinators around to keep our agricultural life in order.

Furthermore, it would not only be devastating for humans if bees disappeared, it would also affect animals and insects that are dependent upon the bees. Bears, skunks, and water striders, just to name a few animals and insects, depend on these pollinators for their food, such as fruits, nuts, vegetables, and grains. Bees also support the growth of flowers, trees, and many more plants. This growth provides shelter for many animals and insects.

According to an article from Premier Tech Home and Garden, "Bees are known for their elaborate hives, but they also help build homes for millions of other insects and animals." It is likely that without these contributions, animals and insects would vanish, from complete lack of shelter, if not from starvation first!

It's no doubt that bees are the ultimate workforce! They assist with our crop growth and give us beautiful landscapes. In the meantime, we are able to harvest their honey for our own enjoyment. Furthermore, as Primer Tech states, "Bees are responsible for the production of many seeds, nuts, berries, and fruit, which serve as vital food sources for wild animals." Additionally, according to the National Science Foundation, "Bees pollinate a staggering 80% of all the flowering plants, including 75% of the fruits, nuts, and vegetable growth in the United States of America."

Without a doubt, devastation and chaos would spread around the world if suddenly fruits, nuts, and other agricultural plants disappeared. It would result in the loss of many beautiful wild animals and food sources, and it would be a very sad sight if our flora and fauna passed into oblivion. I can only visualize what our supermarkets and landscapes would look like if there were no bees! Forests would be barren. Farmers would lose their income. Greenhouses would not be in use, and it would be utterly useless to have flower bed, flower pots, and gardens. Can you imagine the shock our entire world would face? A plethora of trees, flowers, animals, and crops would simply be a mere memory.



I used to be so frustrated when I walked out to my garden and all I saw was millions of holes in the leaves of my vegetable plants and flowers. So, I would spray or dust all my plants. Then, I started to notice the decline in bees along with other insects around my home, so I did some research on pesticides. According to research from the University of Georgia, “Many pesticides are extremely toxic to honey bees and other beneficial insects.” Of course we want our food sources to prosper and be abundant, but we are infringing these bees’ and other insects’ territory. Using pesticides makes it extremely easy for us to continue to protect our crops and flowers from aphids, worms, beetles, and other insects. However, we are not only harming the insects that flourish within the crops we have planted, we are also harming all pollinators when we use pesticides. I finally concluded there is no need to use these harmful products, as everything needs to eat. Additionally, there are always other alternatives to pesticides, such as strategically placing trap plants to lure harmful insects away from the crops we harvest. Another alternative would be to use nontoxic, organic pesticides. A perfect crop or garden of any type can be achieved without the use of virulent pesticides and insecticides, and organic gardens and crops could make the difference.

Currently, we still have the great privilege to gather honey from beehives

Currently, we still have the great privilege to gather honey from beehives. Honey bees make honey as a food source to last them throughout the winter months and is vital for their survival.

As BuzzAboutBees.net makes clear, irresponsible beekeeping doesn’t aid in saving our pollinators. While responsible beekeepers leave enough honey and honeycomb for these beautiful and necessary creatures to survive during the winter months, there are irresponsible beekeepers who harvest all the honey from the hives and leave the bees with no natural food source. These irresponsible keepers will often leave a sugar water mixture as a substitute, but unfortunately this mixture doesn’t have the correct vitamins or mineral the bees need to survive on. There are many things we can do to protect the bees and it starts with understanding them and their position on earth, so we can continue to harvest honey, flowers, and many crops.



Like everything in this world, education is key! If you can change the mind of just one person about something you are passionate about, that is one person that didn’t previously support your cause. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), “is conducting research to improve the nutritional help of bees, and to understand the effects of pesticides on bee colonies”. But we can’t leave the responsibility solely on them. We must protect these pollinators, who are the heartbeat of our ecosystem. They are the ultimate workforce that our ecosystem leans on, allowing biodiversity to blossom and keep life thriving. With responsible beekeeping, little to no use of pesticides, and plenty of education we can save our bees! We shouldn’t have to brood about our wildlife or food dematerializing.

INSPIRATIONS

The Purity of Love

A man asks what is love and where can I find it.

A women asks when will I find love, and how can I tell when I found it.

A boy replies love is a friend, who is so kind and sure.

An old man croaks out love is grace, hope, and mercy so rich and pure.

A child bearing mother screams to her husband, love is one who cherishes,
who is a promoter of virtue, love is fraternal affection.

The man cries in pain, love is searching for distinction; love stands
but sits at the feet of humility, **LOVE IS WHAT LOVE IS**, Hun!



A high school student states, love is the uncut
matters of duty, love is the will of principle.
His girlfriend replies, love is a choice, love is the
chief of the heart and the commander of the mind,
love is never empty and always full.

A teacher asks his students one day
what is true love, sure love, pure love?
Then one kid answers, it is the unstained
heart, and the untainted mind.
The next kid states, purity is the inerrant control of emotions;
purity is the infallible notion of holiness.
The last student to speak he replies;
Purity is the incorruptible stance of faith

Purity cleanseth the soul but persecuteth the world.
The mother of the second kid comes into the room and
picks the kid up and tells the class;
Through studies we understand, through trials we learn,
through relationships we care, it's through God we love.
This is the true purity of love.

1 John 4: 7-8

OF HOPE

With or Without Kindness

Emotions, feelings, a state of mind,
 I must ask, "Why, oh, why should we be kind."
 Friendship, love, passion, all start from the simple essence of kindness,
 caring, understanding, self-demanding, and the desire to please, you search you find
 from the presence of darkness, you come, from the presence of blindness.
 The blindness of fear that keeps us down,
 the blindness of self preservation that has us bound.
 Bound us from seeing the foundation, foothold, basis,
 that stimulates and motivates the friendship, the love, the passion,
 that we all see but can't be found in any form or fashion.

This thing called kindness is in our heart,
 a place full of security, and surety,
 for it will not depart.
 This thing called kindness, we must share,
 for it alone maintains our friendships, loves, our passions so truly that we all must care.
 With or without kindness is a question in life,
 to be unhappy, unpleasant, or beaten down with strife.
 One thing is true, to be happy, pleasant, or full of pleasure,
 we all must show kindness to fill no measure.
 To have a spirit as if to lift the burden from our brother,
 This kindness is what will draw us closer to one another.
 With or with out kindness is a question of wonder,
 The choice is yours to accept or to plunder.

MATTHEW BENTON

Matt is a former U.S. Army Sergeant. He wrote both of these poems as an inspiration of love and kindness. Matt has been active in the Veteran Upward Bound program.



Finding Out

Michael Yohn
Army Veteran

Just a Normal Day

Everything started out just as a normal day. I went to work on June 15, 2017 and came home, only to have my girlfriend, Michele, tell me she was not feeling good. I looked at her and said, "Okay. Then, I need to take you to urgent care." She looked at me and replied, "We will do it tomorrow." I looked at her and simply replied, "That is fine," because she was the one that was sick.

The next morning, we headed to a little urgent care facility in Ozark that only cost \$75. Once we arrived and she filled out the paperwork, it took a minute before we were seen. The nurse on duty took us to the back into one of the rooms and recorded her vital signs. As soon as the nurse was done, the doctor came in and began to ask a few questions, "Are you pregnant?" My girlfriend responded, "No. My boyfriend is fixed." The doctor accepted the answer and ran a bunch of tests, even doing a pregnancy test, though he never looked at the results.

The only thing the doctor noticed was that Michele had an infection. He used his hands to push on her gallbladder and noticed it was swollen. After realizing her gall bladder was hard, he looked at the test results again and determined her gallbladder was bad. The doctor told us that if she did not get the gallbladder out, sooner rather than later, it could cause her to be hospitalized. The nurses gave us information and paperwork to fill out, as she prepared to have her gallbladder removed. She completed paperwork requesting assistance to pay for the \$30,000 surgery. As someone without medical benefits, the cost seemed to be way too much.

After the doctor visit, we picked up her prescriptions, hoping she would get better. Michele took the medicine for two weeks, at the end of which, she still wasn't feeling better. Her best friend took her back to the urgent care in Ozark. The medical staff were all amazed that she wasn't any better. They decided to give her another two weeks' worth of medicine. In the midst of all of this, I signed on the new house we bought and we were moving to Springfield. After only two days in our new house, I had to take her to the emergency room. Cox Hospital staff decided to do the same thing, running tests, but also never checking the pregnancy test results. I was shocked both places missed her pregnancy results, but then again, we did tell them I had been fixed since 2006. Well, after being at the emergency room for a few hours, we went back to the pharmacy to pick up her prescribed medicine again. Two days later, Michele received a phone call that she was approved for the surgery and only had to pay for a portion of the operation.

When arrived for her gallbladder surgery on June 25, 2017, strange news awaited us as we showed up at the hospital at 5 a.m. It was brutal, as Michele was being moody with everyone because of the pain she was in. Once we were in the prepping room for surgery and were all set up, the male nurse came in and had her pee in a cup for testing. They had to make sure she wasn't pregnant. It took about 30 minutes for the results to come back, at which time the nurse came back in our room and told us both that she was pregnant.



We both looked at him and said that there was no way, because I had a vasectomy when I was younger. He replied that she would need to take another urine test again.

Fifteen minutes later, the nurse came back to us know that the results were still positive. I was laughing my ass off and asked if there was another way to check. So, Michele had her blood drawn. This time it took about an hour to get the results back. In between all that waiting, the doctor shows up and is ready to transport her back to surgery. We both looked at each other, very puzzled with what was going on. So I say to the doctor, "We were told she was pregnant and they are doing blood work. The nurses are still waiting for the results to come back."

The doctor came back in and told us that she was 100% pregnant

The doctor asks us to hold on a minute and walks out to the nurse's station. We then overhear the doctor ask the nurses a few questions and they respond, "We are still waiting." Then, all of a sudden, we hear the doctor get pissed off! We overhear him yell, "I could have opened her up and caused so many problems! Is this funny to you?! I could lose my license for cutting into this woman and you guys are just sitting here like idiots!"

Shortly after that, the doctor came back in and told us that Michele was in fact 100% pregnant because her hormone count was at 800%. I looked at him and repeated I had a vasectomy when I was younger. The doctor just laughed at me. He informed me that it doesn't always hold. He told us about his best friend and how it had happened to him after having a vasectomy. The doctor, Stephen Lukasewycz, informed us that there are only three ways a vasectomy will not last. The first is that you have sex too soon after the surgery, which does not allow yourself time to heal. The second would be that your tubes heal and reconnect to each other. Third one would be a surgical error, where the doctor did not do the procedure right. These would be the only three ways that the vasectomy would not last and cause you to have such a big surprise.

The doctor that was going to perform the gallbladder surgery told us that I should have waited until I was forty years old, because it would be less likely that the tubes would have grown back. That night the doctor recommended that we go to Jordan Valley Medical Center to get help. We chose to go the next day and they made us an appointment for the following week.

It was at this appointment where we finally found out that she was 32 weeks pregnant, not a just couple a months along. We were both shocked and amazed by what we found out. That is when we realized we needed to start buying things for the baby. It was a shocker to me that I had another child. My future son became a blessing in disguise for me.

*For only those who can
imagine what they cannot see
have the chance to see what
others can only imagine.*

TRAVIS BROWN
UNITED STATES MARINES VETERAN





Greatness, Too Shall Come

Jessie McClanahan Evans
United States Military Veteran

I Will Succeed

I have always been a dreamer. Even though many of my dreams have changed, like the pages on the calendar, I still have a couple that have remained the same. I know many people dream, and that's a good thing. Myself, I'm not just going to dream. I am going to strive to make each one of my dreams come true! Someday, I am going to succeed in my efforts and dreams of greatness, which include winning the U.S. Open Bowfishing Tournament, raising a family with a beautiful wife, and owning a large farm.

You may not be aware of it, but bowfishing is an up-and-coming sport. To bowfish, you use a boat with a platform and rail on the front, which you stand on and shoot at fish that are swimming in the water. Although this explanation sounds easy, bowfishing is more difficult than most people think. I, too, thought it would be easy when I first started. My first time bowfishing was a few years ago and I have been addicted to it ever since. Bowfishing is not just a sport for me, but also a way to strengthen friendships, a way to prove myself, and a way to enjoy nature. For me, bowfishing is a big part of my lifestyle and a big part of where my paycheck goes. I have spent a lot of money and time in bowfishing to become the best that I can. During the past few years, I have competed in several competitions and landed some impressively big fish, a few of which were close to state records. The competitions have helped me gain experience for the next step of my bowfishing endeavors, which is the U.S. Open Bowfishing Tournament. The U.S. Open has only been active during the since 2012 and this year I will finally be competing. To compete in the event is a huge step for me, but to place, or even win the competition, would truly be amazing and show greatness to friends and family.

Having a beautiful wife and a family of my own is something else that I plan on accomplishing someday. I have always wanted to get a good job and find a nice country girl to settle down with; someone who will love me unconditionally and be there for me when I'm down, as I will be for her. After finding the right woman, I would like to have a few children and even grandchildren down the road. To me, a family would be a great accomplishment in life, because it would give me a sense of pride and responsibility that I will be grateful for. To provide for someone other than yourself brings great honor and dignity to a person and I will strive to provide for an amazing family someday.

I will strive to provide for an amazing family someday

Owning a farm has always been a dream of mine, because I was born and raised in a rural part of Missouri where people worked hard and got along with their neighbors. I want the same for my family as well. The plan is that, someday, I will own a large farm, so that my children will have a place to grow and learn how to work around the farm. I was raised on a farm, and I feel it helps with work ethic and creates respect and compassion for animals and other people. It is my belief, part of providing for a wonderful family is putting a roof over their head, preferably a log cabin roof. Furthermore, I love anything to do with being outdoors, so owning a farm would be great for me and my family.

As you can see, my dreams are still very much alive and I am going to keep chasing them until I achieve them and obtain the greatness I seek. First, greatness starts with the small goal of winning the U.S. Open Bowfishing Tournament, and then I will work on achieving my larger goal in life, which is to settle down on a farm with a beautiful family. This is just some of the greatness that I am striving to reach.

LOCAL VETERAN RESOURCES

Veterans Commission

Assistance with claims and VA process
1410 S. Kansas Expressway #115
Springfield, MO
417-895-6532

The Vet Center

Crisis counseling for veterans
3616 S Campbell Ave
Springfield, MO
417-881-4197

Missouri Job Center

Job search assistance
2900 E Sunshine St
Springfield, MO
417-887-4343

Veterans Upward Bound

Free educational assistance for veterans
1001 E. Chestnut Expy
Springfield, MO
417-447-7840

K-9's For Camo

Service dogs for veterans
4939 E. US Hwy 60
Rogersville, MO
417-895-8733

Vocational Rehabilitation

Job readiness for disabled veterans
Office based in Springfield, MO
314-253-4100 ext. 9068 or 9069

Home at Last

Veteran transitional housing program
1630 N Jefferson Ave
Springfield, MO
417-225-7410

Veterans Affairs Clinic

Physical health provider
1850 W Republic St
Springfield, MO
417-891-4800

Wellness for Warriors

Network of support for veterans
3545 S. National Ave., Conference Room A
Springfield, MO
417-269-3282





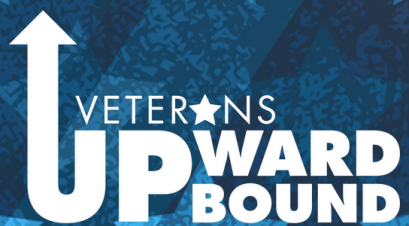
417-447-7840 | vub@otc.edu

Veterans Upward Bound is 100% federally funded by the Department of Education at \$287,510 annually.

OTC VETERAN SERVICES

417-447-6968 | Gibill@otc.edu





& OTC VETERAN SERVICES