

The Invisible Wounds of War

By
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War is a battle for survival: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It has a way of pushing and pulling your psyche in all different directions. I have to tell this story for many reasons as it haunts my days and nights to the point of madness. Some events in life you never forget and the memory is suspended in time. I try to push it away, compensate adversely, and attempt to dismiss it. However, the tragedy is now part of my being--entwined in my essence and creating a moral void. My country, the military, and my commanders are not to blame. It is those whom are devoted to pure evil: terrorists.

"Silence can increase suffering", according to Sheryl Sandberg, in her book **Option B**¹. She also states, "There's powerful evidence that opening up about traumatic events can improve mental and physical health." I tell this story as I cope with PTSD, but also to educate others about the realities of war. I forewarn you of graphic and detailed accounts that are like a thumbprint in my memory bank. As you read each of my words, the pain has not diminished with time. I have respectfully chosen to leave out the names of the two warriors that gave their lives, so that I can protect the innocent.

September 10th

My radio erupts with a report of Troops in Contact and the Quick Reaction Force is deployed from our Forward Operating Base (FOB). As a non-commissioned officer (NCO), at the FOB's Troop Medical Clinic (TMC), this is my alert to get to my duty station. As I standby, the report comes in of two Killed in Action (KIA). I go outside to look in the direction of nearby villages. The evening is warm as the musty smell of goat dung being burned by our Iraqi neighbors, fills the air. (The local population uses goat, and other animal dung bricks, as a fuel source.) As I inhale the stagnant air, I observe the starburst of a flare in the distance. Minutes after that, I hear the signature sound of air being chopped by the blades of two Black Hawk helicopters. I am satisfied when I see

those angels on the battlefield take off with the wounded, and without incident. The next phase I am not prepared for.

My major informs me that two deceased will be brought to us and wants me to select a few medics that "can handle it." I select another NCO and two junior medics for a duty that is not included in our training. The wait is ominous as a multitude of questions bombards my brain: Will I know them? What are their injuries? How will I react? I cannot allow anyone else see my worries or fears. I can view theirs, but I must mask my own.

The Marines roll up to the TMC in their humvees. They get out and are silent, dirty, drained looks on their faces, but yet carry the Human Remains Pouches (HRP) with a purpose--as warriors. (The military no longer uses the term body bag due to the battle injuries we now face.) Looking back, even in the worst of times on that deployment, the professionalism of the Marines never faltered. Semper Fi.

I observed three HRP's brought in and laid on litters in the emergency room. I wondered how they miscounted the KIA's or did someone die on the way in? The long, black, HRP's were wet and muddy. I clenched my jaw as I slowly unzipped the first one. As I inhaled, the smell of fuel attacked my senses. (When an Improvised Explosive Device-IED- detonates a vehicle, fuel is dispersed onto everything.) As I exposed his face, I see his blue eyes pleading for me to help him. As a combat medic, I have chosen to guard the door between life and death: between this world and the next. In this situation, I am powerless.

I know this LCpL and the emotional bayonets begin to pierce my soul. This is when I learn emotional detachment-- a survival skill in a war zone. I pull the zipper further and the torso is intact but when I get below the waist, what is left are shards of flesh and tendons suspended from his thighs. My only concern is if he suffered. We remove his body from the HRP with care. I wipe down his body and then straighten his uniform blouse. We transfer him to a new HRP and I attach a casualty card to both his body, and the HRP.

We move onto the next litter and begin the same process. As this HRP was unzipped, I observed a huge gash in his left cheek. His eyelids are half-open and subconsciously I hear moans coming from his mouth. I also know this CPL. Again;

I smell the fuel that absorbed into his uniform. A blood/fuel mixture smell sticks to your nostrils like caramel on your teeth. A sickening smell that clogs the senses and permeates the skin so that it is still there after a dozen showers. As the HRP is further unzipped, the left arm is intact but the other three limbs have been ripped from their sockets. I repeat the same sequence as the LCpL: clean, straighten, repackage, and tag.

The third HRP is much lighter, and less full, as if it may contain their gear. I unzip and to my horror is a mixture of flesh, twisted muscle, and bone fragments. The ache I feel is undecipherable. I am afraid to place body pieces with the wrong person. I decide to tag the third HRP with both Marines names and let mortuary affairs sort this out.

These are early deaths, a cruel reversal in the natural order of life. They are my friends lying before me. I swell with sadness, nausea, emptiness, and then-blood rage. Someone needs to pay for this.

The Marine first sergeant, who observed our handling of the remains, called in the platoon of men who had been waiting outside the TMC. A large circle formed around the deceased and a prayer was delivered. During our moment of silence, the quiet was broken by sobs of love. A love that binds warriors on the battlefield. A brotherhood stronger than if born of the same mother. The Marines assist us in carrying the litters to our ambulance. On an outlying FOB, the only place for refrigeration is the connex boxes behind the dining facility. If someone found this offensive, they could eat MRE's the rest of their deployment. A routine medevac was called for the retrieval of their remains. (Routine flights are prioritized as within 24 hours.)

The next morning, we receive notice of the estimated time of arrival for the Hero's Flight. A couple of Marines assists us in recovering the bodies and we proceed to the Landing Zone (LZ). We were met with twenty plus Marines. Silence prevailed as we watched the Black Hawk's approach. Once on the ground, the side door opens, a flight medic got out while tethered to the helicopter by his headset, then came to attention and rendered a crisp salute as the HRP's were loaded for his safekeeping. A Marine embarked the medevac to escort his brothers home. We

formed a line and saluted as the Black Hawk's took off. The invisible wounds of war are being created.

48 Hours Prior

One of the few activities I enjoyed on our FOB was sand volleyball. We had two regulation size courts and an abundance of a sand-dirt mixture. You check out a volleyball from the Moral, Welfare, and Recreation building and the teams form quickly. The games would normally start around 10:00pm as the temperature drop becomes noticeable. We would normally play: Army vs. Marines, U.S. vs. Bulgarian Army, or just a motley bunch of everyone. Even the Third Country Nationals (TCN's), from India, Pakistan, or Sri Lanka, would join in. The TCN's were smaller in stature, didn't really know the rules, but played with heart. It was international competition and fun for all.

When we played Army vs. Marines, I could play on either team. Since I wore the Army uniform, I blended in better on the soldier side but I was allowed to play on the Marine side due to my prior service in the Navy, and being a medic. Nevertheless, when I played on the Army side, the Marines heckled me much worse than vice versa. The LCpL, who died, was tall and made it a point to stuff me when were both played the net. The CPL, who was killed, was a big guy that was boisterous and full of life. He would sit on the sidelines, supporting his Marines while verbally blasting me for being a traitor. Just good old fashion trash talk that formed our bonds.

September 12

Those not on duty could attend the memorial service on the FOB. I entered the building at 8:55am, the chairs were full, and standing room only. Two Fallen Soldier's Cross was located at the front of the structure next to a podium. Their photos, in uniform, were next to their memorials. Many men broke down into tears as we reflected upon the lives, and service, of the two Marines. There is something about the camaraderie of mental suffering that levels the playing field amongst rank, race, gender, and religion. With all of the anger and fear that consumed me daily in the combat zone, this felt like the only safe time to shed a tear. I tried to hold back, but the emotional levy broke. Liquid pain trickled from my eyes and

onto my uniform. As TAPS played at 10:30am, Survivor's Guilt starts to appear. The thoughts of: Why not me? One Marine was not even legally old enough to buy alcohol. I am 35, three children, I have lived--they have not. It is not fair. Now it is back to duty, on guard, situational awareness, and full battle rattle. This is the grieving process in the combat zone. No burial, funeral procession, gravesite, or 21 gun salute. They are gone, the bad people still want to kill you, shut it down, and get combat ready-complacency kills. How do you care, but not care, at the same time? The traumatic vacuum begins as closure is suppressed.

That afternoon, my major calls me to his office. He informs me of a foul odor reported from the motor pool and we need to investigate. The motor pool is where the wreckage of the destroyed humvee is kept. On our walk over, I prayed that it is one of the many critters on our FOB: feral cats, mice, rats, snakes, or a hedgehog. Upon entering, I observe the ominous pieces of humvee and am amazed that anyone survived. I get a whiff of a spoiled meat type of smell. We pinpoint the location of the odor and have a mechanic pry open a twisted metal void. We find a U.S. military issued desert style boot and it has weight to it. I place the remains into a red, plastic, biohazard bag, tie a knot in it, and walk back to the TMC. I must have been in a trance due to the fact I could not remember how I got back to my duty station. The major informs the Marines Tactical Operations Center, a routine medevac is called, and I place my friends boot into our small freezer where we kept water bottles and ice packs. On the outside, I am stern, abrasive, aggressive posture, and angry. On the inside, I am sick to my stomach. I am not going to process this and the emotions become internalized. But, my friends remains will be right next to me all night until the Black Hawks come to take him home. I feel a sense of duty to guard the foot: so that no further harm can occur and to protect others from accidentally discovering it. I want to limit the exposure of psychological harm to the other medics.

A Marine comes over to join me per standard operating procedure. He tells me that they did not need this right after the memorial service. It should have been "done and over with." Find replacements and continue mission. It is unnatural to send your friends remains home in the first place, let alone over a several days in pieces. It drains your emotions as your thoughts and visions of normalcy slide

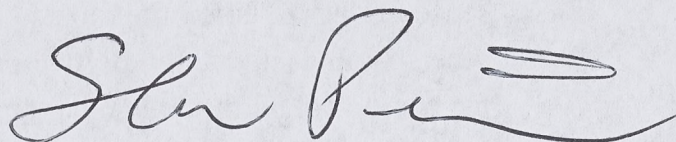
away. The next morning, another Hero's Flight, same routine, with the only difference being a lone Marine carrying a red plastic bag: with a purpose.

For some of us, when we return home from war, and step off the plane, that is when our personal battles start to show. What became normal in a war zone is foreign in a safe and civilized society. I had no clue, no voice, on how to describe the things that I witnessed and how it felt. Society was moving too fast and everywhere I went was on sensory overload without my weapon and protective equipment: a feeling of vulnerability.

I was given the opportunity, from **Military Magazine**, to do a book review on, **The Mirror Test**², by J. Kael Weston. Kael worked for the State Department and bounced between the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While in Iraq, he ordered a Chinook helicopter to proceed on a flight despite adverse conditions. Thirty-one U.S. military personnel died when it crashed. Kael felt responsible for their deaths and struggled with guilt as he continued to serve our nation. According to his book, he found a path to start healing: visit all thirty-one gravesites. That ignited an idea of what I must do: visit my friends graves. I need to tell them I miss them, I am sorry, and good-bye. I need to develop a new memory of my last exchange with them, start finding closure, and let them rest.

You may ask what am I sorry for? Why do I need to tell them that? I lived through the deployment and came home to my family. I then messed up greatly and am writing this from a prison cell in Missouri. I did not live my "life worthy of their sacrifices."³ But it is not too late to start.

END



Reference:

1. Option B, © 2017, Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operations Officer of Facebook
2. The Mirror Test-America at War in Iraq and Afghanistan, ©2015 J. Kael Weston
3. Quote written to Shon Pernice from Gold Star Mom Debbie Lee.