

WALKING WOUNDED SOLDIERS IN TRANSITION

JONATHAN SAVAGE

Introduction

No history is as compelling as that told by the people who experienced it. This is the lesson I learned in the course of gathering oral testimony from soldiers transitioning from combat to civilian life. Their experiences — always raw, often brutal, sometimes gut-wrenching — leaped from their heart into mine. Oral history is palpable.

Every soldier I spoke with had a story to tell, indeed had a story he very much wanted to tell, and every soldier seemed flattered to have a listening ear. Each interlocutor spoke with the hope that his words might be useful, might somehow make the world better. Most of these veterans were hit hard by the challenges of re-entering American society, especially after undergoing the unthinkable atrocities of war. Yet, in nearly every case, the soldiers remained optimistic about [eventually] making a successful transition.

Perhaps the most striking discovery was that the soldiers viewed their re-entry not entirely as a gain, but in many ways as a loss: a loss of the surprisingly valuable entailments which war had pounded into their psyches. The esprit de corps, the clarity of purpose, the comradeship, the corporate endeavor, the sort of experiences that invest life with meaning — these were not easily recovered and sustained in life as a civilian.

The following accounts are excerpts from my work in oral history. Together they form an unforgettable, disturbing, and yet, in other ways, exhilarating exposé of the challenges of coming home.

Stoney Portis
Captain, U.S. Army



Born into a patriotic family, Stoney was raised on a ranch in south Texas. At twelve he set his sights on serving as an officer in the U.S. Army. He graduated from West Point in 2004 and has completed combat tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Intelligent and well-spoken, Stoney possesses the qualities of a leader. Whether discussing academic subjects or joking with friends, he relates with ease to those he comes into contact with. Stoney currently resides in Hanover, New Hampshire and is pursuing a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies degree at Dartmouth College. West Point has already selected him to be an instructor in the Department of English and Philosophy once he graduates.

In war, you want soldiers who are badasses. You want tough, cigarette smokin', cussin', motorcycle ridin' guys next to you who aren't afraid of fighting. But at home we don't want our soldiers to be these mean sons of bitches; we want them to be behaved, well-mannered men who take care of their families and their jobs. When they re-enter society, the biggest concern is, "Oh my God, what are they going to do now?" These eighteen to twenty-two year old type-A male personalities have been living on the edge of a cliff with the daily suspense and adrenaline of combat, and what you realize very quickly is that there's a large gap that has to

be crossed from being a combat soldier on the front-line to being back in normal society. So when I was getting ready to come home after both deployments, my thoughts were much more on my soldiers than on me or my family.

I've seen a lot of carnage, a lot of people die. But people react differently, and for me, growing up on a ranch where animals died and dealing with the death of my mother at the age of sixteen, I had already worked out these things. I knew that wouldn't be the case for my soldiers. One of the time periods with the most suicides in the army, which has a very high suicide rate, is the week before re-entry. Soldiers are so scared about going home they choose to end their life. The unit that we replaced in Iraq had a soldier kill himself two days before he flew home because he couldn't deal with the stresses of going back. He made it through twelve months of terror and he's scared to go back home. Figure that out.

A lot of soldiers come home and seek new ways to replicate the adrenaline rush of combat. They get a really fast motorcycle, go skydiving, and buy guns and go shooting. These are all very dangerous things to do, especially if you combine them together. I can't tell you how many times after we made it through a deployment that a soldier would drink, get on his motorcycle, crash, and die. I look for excitement in pushing myself with physical rigor. I have a routine which helps because there's a left and right limit to how far something can affect my life. If you have structure, it's different than uncontrolled speed and rage. You just have to be smart. You can learn to live without adrenaline . . . it's okay (laughs).

For a lot of my soldiers, financial and relational problems were the top stresses of going home. Some make so little money they qualify to be on food stamps. They're also married and have three kids; they're barely making ends meet. Finances become an issue because they realize they're going back to making a minimum of \$12,000 less because they're losing the combat pay.

There is also an obscene amount of soldiers whose wives cheated on them while they were deployed. They left their home base with a home, a car,

a wife, and two kids. They came back and the home was sold, the car was gone, the wife was living with a boyfriend, and the kids were with the grandparents. It would take more than two hands to count the number of times where something like that happened. While deployed they had the luxury of not having to deal with it, but coming home they had to face the facts. I even had a professor at West Point who returned from Iraq and his wife and two daughters were living in a crack house. It knows no boundaries.

When I came back home, my wife had her own way of running the household. It's neither right nor wrong, but when I got back I just did things differently. My wife and I have a great marriage, but that's just an example of the little things you come home to and have to deal with.

Every day for the last two months in Afghanistan, we got shot at. Every single day. I'm talking bullets whizzing by your head. You just get tired of it. There's this psyche that develops during deployment where you go from being proactive about not getting hit to accepting that everybody's going to have their day someday. It gets really bad the last week because everyone's on edge. You think, "I've made it this far, I don't want to die or lose an arm today." Then all of a sudden there's this window that opens up: you're going home! You can see the light.

I was excited to get home so I could drive down the street without getting blown up. Sure I was ready to leave, hell yeah! I was ready to go eat good food. You get tired of eating Army food. A lot of our resupply helicopters kept getting shot down and we didn't have room for luxury items like mail, extra food, or even water. You had to prioritize. We drank water that we purified out of the river, and that was fine. But when I got home I was ready to turn on the tap and drink a glass of water out of the sink. I relished turning on the tap and drinking a glass of water. How crazy is that? Even today I'll turn on the sink and be like, "Ahh, it's water!"

Before I came home, I was really nervous and excited about finally getting to be with my wife. I got married in July of 2006 and deployed in October. I was coming home having spent five times more time in combat than I had as a married man at home. The irony there is that as soon as we hit ground

they said, “You’re going back in a year.” You kind of have this clock ticking in the background.

The army gives you a month off as soon as you complete three weeks of mandatory reintegration training with classes, counselors, psychologists, financial planners, you name it. It’s a pretty good process but everything depends on how the program is presented. If it’s planned to cover your ass and check the box, then that’s how it will appear to the soldiers. But if it’s planned as a legitimate opportunity to sit down with the guys and come away with a product like a financial plan, then it’s very effective. At first I thought, This is a waste of my time. I just want to go home and drink tap-water. But at the end of the day you see that it’s value added.

The fact that I’d been trained in the military to act a certain way became a big problem in terms of going back to a normal lifestyle. There are little things in everyday life that you or I normally wouldn’t think anything of, but because I’ve been preconditioned to react in certain ways, it presents a challenge coming home. To this day I have a habit of scanning both sides of a road before I go under a bridge because they would always hit you with IED’s (improvised explosive devices) from above. I sometimes don’t even notice because it’s so second nature to me.

In Afghanistan we drove our Humvees down really treacherous trails with 200 foot sheer drop offs to our left and 100 foot cliff-faces up to our right. If we veered left we’re going down into the gorge, but if we went too slow Taliban fighters would ambush us from the high ground. So when I redeployed back to my home base in Colorado at the tip of the Rocky Mountains, I would freak out when driving around a mountainside (laughs).

In Iraq, it’s very, very dangerous to have a lot of people close to you because they would detonate suicide vests on us. Whenever I was in a crowd of people, my initial reaction was to take out my 9mm sidearm and push them all back. It was no big deal. I never thought it was a problem until I came home. The first time I went grocery shopping with my wife, there was a crowd of people all around when we walked into the store. My heart started racing and I instinctively grabbed for my sidearm. But

I'm not in uniform, so it's not there. At that point I realized, "Holy crap, I have to turn all these things off." It truly is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Everybody's got their own type of PTSD, mine just happens to be to the flavor of driving in the mountains.

The biggest adjustment that I've had to make is overcoming the loss of a soldier. I was in command in Afghanistan. I was making decisions; the buck stopped here. In one battle we were almost overrun by a force of 350 Taliban fighters. We lost eight guys. I can tell any family member, "Hey, eighty dudes against 350, we lost eight they lost 150, we did pretty damn well." But that never makes a good excuse. It's hard to quantify, and even harder to rationalize, loss of life. I stopped counting dead bodies that day after I reached one-hundred. Here I am today still thinking back to the guys who were under my command . . . their moms and dads trusted me with their sons and they didn't come home. Every day I think, Fuck. My friend lost his leg and it's because of a mission that I planned. That's tough to swallow. There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about one of those guys or that I'm not sorrowful for the loss of the Afghans either. The kids we killed were the same ages as us; their fathers were subsistence farmers like mine. But at the time there's a choice: I'm going to bring my guys back or I will not. The latter was never an option.

These feelings get pushed aside when you're in combat because it becomes a simple dance of life or death very, very quickly. To be able to consider these thoughts wasn't an option while I was in Afghanistan. They keep piling up and you have to go through that pile one day. PTSD in a lot of cases is going back through all those things, the unpacking and organizing of that pile. There are emotions that I have that don't affect my daily life, but that still exist and surface. That's something that I hadn't planned for when I was getting ready to come home. I think about drinking tap-water not about unpacking the memory that my friends lost their lives. There are three people who I can really unpack that bag with: my wife and two men who shared those experiences with me. I have the luxury of having people who are outlets for me and who help me cope with it. But think about the soldier who lost his wife during the deployment . . . who is he going to talk to?

Daniel Harris
Sergeant, U.S. Army



Daniel was born in 1975 and grew up in the small Massachusetts town of Ware. Working in a foundry until his early twenties, he joined the Army National Guard in search of a brighter future. His unit was activated after 9/11, and in March 2002 he participated in the first wave of the invasion of Iraq. His deployment was extended to a long fifteen months. Daniel went back for another combat tour in 2004. His matter-of-fact style of conversation leaves no doubt that the experiences he relates are the blunt, uncolored truths. Having suffered so much during and after his time in combat, he continues to search for something meaningful in life.

I didn't want to come home. I would've rather stayed there longer to see some kind of improvement. I went to Iraq twice and still didn't see anything but instability. When we were getting ready to leave, I had separation anxiety. Back home, I was homesick from not being in Iraq. I felt no sense of worth. I didn't have a mission anymore. I missed the camaraderie, that tight, tight bond. You always had somebody to look out for or to look out for you. Everybody was there for each other. Three people in my unit committed suicide when we came back because they lost

that sense of unity. I felt a loss of something and I still do . . . there's not a day that goes by that I don't wish I could've stayed there longer.

I had major depression when I came home. Relationships went down the tubes. My wife and I got a divorce. I signed the kids over and don't talk to any of them. I have no relationship with anybody in my family. No girlfriend. I have no friends. It's just me alone. I'm always waiting . . . you know, wishin' I was still there. There's a sense of nothing to do but you're always seeking for something to do. When I couldn't find that something I turned to alcohol and just stayed drunk. I found myself homeless, no money. I hit rock-bottom.

One day I found myself in somebody's barn, drunk. I left in the afternoon and when I came back the cops were waiting. I told the owner, "I'm a homeless veteran, I have nowhere to go. I have no family, no friends, no nothin'." My biggest problem was that I was running from everything. I knew I had PTSD, and I was self-medicating with alcohol and experimenting with drugs. I'd been hiding from these problems for so long, all the losses in my life, and my biggest fear was getting sober and letting this shit catch up with me. Now it's caught up to me, and my world is turned upside down. The VA ended up coming to get me, and I went through this program called ASAP (Alcohol Substance and Abuse Program). I've been sober for about a year and I'm back to that heightened sense of wanting to do something all the time, but not knowing what it is. I haven't gotten a civilian job yet. I can't. I don't feel like I'm ready. It almost feels like I have no mission left in life.

I just went through a six week PTSD program. It didn't give us any exposure therapy; it taught us more of breathing techniques. It was like sitting around a hippie drum circle listening to them beat on bongo drums (laughs). Their programs aren't good for us younger veterans. I'm fresh out of combat, and I did six weeks of Vietnam therapy for people who have years of problems in their lives. Okay, fine. They did thirty-five years of things that fucked up their lives. I don't want thirty-five years of negative impact in my life. I want to learn how not to do those things. It was a waste of six weeks. A lot of money invested in nothing that really matters.

I have daily panic attacks. I have them in the day when I get up and at night when I lie down. I can't be in a store for more than ten minutes. I get what I need and get the hell out. I'm hyper-vigilant, concerned with everything going on around me. The lights, the sounds; it puts me back in certain places I don't want to be. It just triggers me for some reason. The flashbacks first come on physically. You're adrenaline just spikes so high to where your chest gets tight, your hands start sweating, your pupils dilate, you get shortness of breath. You go into survival mode: flight, fight, or freeze mode. I had to look up why my body does this on my own. Why I experience physical pain almost like I'm going to die. The emotions follow the physical aspect. The anger and rage soon set in. You can't control your emotions anymore. Before I was in the army, if I didn't like somebody, that would only last a day or two. Now I write every motherfucker off in my life including my family. I don't care about anybody. I'm emotionless.

If you're diagnosed with PTSD, you can't put a mild rating on that. You either have it or you don't. It's a crippling disease that will affect you for the rest of your life. It's like asking a woman who just got out of therapy for getting raped, "Are you better now?" Hell no, she's never going to be better. You can't erase watching your buddies go thirty-five feet up in the air in a Humvee, do four flips, and just be reduced to a puddle of mush. You can't erase watching a little kid get run over in front of you. Or the one coming to get his little sister out of the road, and you fucking run him over next. It's ingrained in your mind and will never be erased . . . never.

I still hate driving. Because I was a truck driver and gunner, it doesn't take much to trigger a flashback. When I see kids playing on the side of the road, I'll slow down to ten miles per hour. I also can't be around grills. I don't like the smell of burning meat. I've smelled burned flesh so much that it's stuck in my brain, my nose. The smell of hamburgers will trigger major nausea and panic attacks. I can't be around it. People say, "Why? It's just a burger." They don't understand.

People always want to know if I'm proud of having served. No, I'm not proud. I'm not proud that I've killed people. I'm not proud that my friends lost their lives. There's nothing for me to be proud about. The public

likes to put us up on a pedestal. Glorifying us as heroes isn't proper. War definitely isn't to be glamorized, you know? I can't speak for every soldier, but you can be proud of your country, but don't be proud of your soldiers, because we don't want to be proud of what we did. I'm happy that I lived through a lot of situations, but I have no pride whatsoever.

When we got off the plane from Iraq, the USO (United Service Organizations) people were there to meet us. They lined us up in a formation and marched us through the airport cheering and having everybody clap. I didn't want the limelight on me. I felt kind of disrespected. You can't forget about what you've just been through, sorry. They had no idea.

After I went through three years of combat, I went back to an active duty post, a garrisoned environment. These guys hadn't deployed yet, and they live by the book of army regulations. They don't know what it's like to see their friends lose their heads or arms and legs. They don't know what you've just been through emotionally and physically. They worry about wearing their uniforms in accordance with the regulations, shaving every day, shining their boots. That's what these guys worry about, and after you just went through all this shit you're faced with these guys enforcing all of these stupid little standards. Right back to the bump and grind. Not cutting you any break. Where's the debriefing? Where's the decompression time? Give me a little time off. Give me some therapy so I don't crack.

They want you to come back from combat and continue on with your normal job. They give you a couple of briefs by a chaplain and social workers. Just briefs: "Be aware of this, watch your buddy for this." They don't prepare you. After being in that much combat, veterans do not function well in the civilian population. On a scale of one to ten, your normal idle mentality is a six. When you react in combat, you go up to a ten. But when you react for so long, you stay in that combat mentality, even back home. How the fuck are you going to get along with anybody? How are you going to be comfortable in this environment? You're stuck.

You're up at four thirty in the morning pacing the floor. Walking the

hallways instead of sleeping, or lying there pumped ready for something to happen. How do you get back to normal? You can't. It's how we've been trained, and you just can't cope with shit. I've been on so many medications it's just ridiculous. Klonopin, Xanax, Citalopram, Prozac, Trazadone, you name it. What they do is just sedate you. It's just a band-aid over the problem. Because if you take them away like I've done several times in the past, you go right back.

Where I'm sitting right now is real to me. It exists in time, in light, in feeling, in smell. Coldness, that is real. Where I was doesn't exist unless I'm there. See what I'm saying? I have to be somewhere physically to accept that it's real. That's what my therapist and I talk about. I'm working on these problems. I take every moment as it comes.

Conclusion

Combat affects each individual differently, as does returning home from combat. As illustrated from the stories above, every person who goes off to war comes home a different person, a dramatically different person. Too often we notice the physical changes of those returning: a soldier is maimed or crippled. Too seldom, however, do we reckon with mental changes. Yet from the voices of the men above we hear how psychological mutations cripple their future lives. War takes its toll on mental equilibrium. To some the effects can be ameliorated by the love of family. To others the effects persist but are hidden by the exertions of daily life. Finally, and most sadly, to others depression and thoughts of suicide linger for years. The latter may not be the walking dead, but they are the walking wounded. The price they have paid to spare our country from future terrorist acts is almost as great as soldiers who do not come home. Increasingly, we are listening to their stories. And we must never stop. The oral histories of the walking wounded must be told, heard, and heeded.

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