2019 Writing Seminar for Combat Medics and Corpsmen

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Transformative. Rejuvenating. Inspirational.
This fall, The War Horse hosted our Writing Seminar for Medics and Corpsmen at Boulder Crest Retreat, thanks to generous support from the Wounded Warrior Project and many other partners. The six-day expenses-paid retreat, which also included a tour of The Washington Post newsroom, brought together a dozen veterans with Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists and bestselling authors. Together, they worked to help our 2019 War Horse Fellows find and shape their stories as immigrants, first responders, survivors of sexual violence, and much more.

Since 2017, The War Horse has hosted four writing seminars for veterans and military families. Those 50 fellows have written 75 stories for The War Horse about topics ranging from mental health and suicide to school shootings and gender issues. Past fellows have also published with USA Today, CNN, and The New York Times. During our most recent community-building event for medics and corpsmen, comprised of six women and six men, all military branches were represented. And the breadth of experiences among our 2019 War Horse Fellows was remarkable—we look forward to continuing to work with them to publish their reflections.

“Hearing other people say the words that I have about my own experience was ground shaking,” said Gretel Weiskopf, a 2019 War Horse Fellow who has served 19 years in the Wisconsin National Guard. “The lack of judgement and familiar one-upping that you can see in veterans did not live here. I will always be grateful for the environment The War Horse created,” she said. “There is real work that goes into this organization and this retreat, and one of the transformative notions is that someone would do this for me.”

Once selected, War Horse Fellows receive a welcome packet explaining details about travel accommodations, activities and our newsroom’s community standards. Fellows described a “smooth and seamless process,” logistics that “were perfect,” and that receiving a travel stipend “made it less stressful financially to come.” The onboarding process was also redesigned this year to better set expectations and best prepare our incoming cohort, while also allowing our team to tailor the curriculum to the unique needs of our incoming writers. As a result, all 12 fellows reported arriving to our seminar understanding that they would be expected to write about and discuss potentially traumatic issues. Most importantly, upon arrival, all 12 members of our 2019 cohort felt as though The War Horse provided adequate resources to deal with the difficult issues we discussed and that the material was presented in a way that was sensitive to their experiences.

Before attending The War Horse Seminar, two-thirds of 2019 War Horse Fellows reported that they knew people who could help get their stories published but that they did not feel comfortable asking for help with their writing. After the writing seminar, all 12 fellows felt confident they had gained mentors they could approach for help. Before attending, two-thirds believed they couldn’t convey what they wanted to say or didn’t have the ability to share their story. After the workshop, all 12 reported a stronger ability to tell their story and left feeling good or very good about telling their story.

Before attending The War Horse Seminar, nearly half of attendees reported that they didn’t believe their stories were important. Following our week together, the entire cohort believed their stories were important and wanted to tell them.
Because our writing seminars are designed for writers of all experience levels, the personal benefits to each attendee vary. For many, our seminars plant a seed of curiosity about writing and forge a supportive community. One fellow noted, “The attention to detail was incredible. It’s difficult to say you don’t have a seat at the table when even the coffee mug has your name on it.” For more experienced writers, the experience is restorative. “I’ve been struggling to get back into the writing grind for months since I had a nervous breakdown and this experience unblocked me mentally. I feel like my old self.”

Throughout their week together, War Horse Fellows worked alongside multiple guest speakers who each volunteered their time to work one-on-one with our writers. The first speaker of the week was Robert Rosenthal, a founding board member of The War Horse and a revered investigative reporter, who bravely shared his story of losing his son to suicide. “You have to find purpose in the pain,” he said. Rosenthal’s honesty resonated with many in the cohort. One fellow wrote that Rosenthal sharing such a personal story “set the tone that this was a safe place that genuinely cares about community,” and that as a result the vets “could think and look inward at things and tease out some of the hurt and pain.”

War Horse Fellows also benefited from the moments of relaxation scheduled throughout the seminar. In a sentiment echoed by many attendees, one said, “It was easy to get my thoughts on paper without distractions of noise and city life,” and that “the gardens, horses, mountains, nature were all beneficial tools in relaxing and allowing focus in writing or just taking a break from my words.” Between guest speakers and events, classes were presented by David Chrisinger, director of writing seminars, who has led all four of the War Horse writing retreats. “Dave’s classes were very informative without being tedious,” one attendee said. “He covered the fundamentals in a fun, simple, and accessible way and without ego, which is absolutely key.” Another described Dave’s teaching style as “excellent on all fronts. Very patient and really insightful feedback.”

On the second day of the seminar, the cohort met Dan Lamothe, a war correspondent for The Washington Post who discussed the importance of honest writing and the need for self-care throughout the process. Fellows described his session as “fantastic” and that his one-on-one “time spent visiting with us fireside was more valuable than anything else.” Later that evening, The War Horse hosted a networking bonfire with advocates from the D.C. area and journalists from PBS NewsHour, NPR, The Fuller Project, and other leading newsrooms. We began the evening with a build-your-own-taco bar featuring food from local veteran farmers. After dinner, we enjoyed conversation and s’mores around a bonfire.

Throughout the entire week, our meals were served by Navy veteran and chef Rachael Harris, who joined us for our second writing seminar. “She’s a wonderful chef,” said a self-declared picky eater. “Everything was so tasty and thoughtfully prepared.” Even those with the most refined palates agreed. Karen Stabiner, a renowned food writer who has been a guest speaker at three War Horse Writing Seminars, said, “Rachael makes the best kind of food, which has nothing to do with a particular cuisine or technique. She cooks from the heart; she cooks to sustain and comfort people. It comes through in every meal—and in the snacks she put out every day for fellows or speakers who needed sustenance—emotional as well as nutritional. She’s as much a part of the program as those of us who were on the agenda.”

During our third day together, Stabiner presented to the cohort. Fellows described her as “encouraging and empathetic” and said she shared “excellent lessons in the use of detail and creating immersive scenes,” and “like all the instructors, her advice was pragmatic and honest,” wrote one medic.

“I’ve participated in three War Horse Writing Seminars, and each time I ask Thomas and The War Horse team if they’re sure they want a civilian in the mix,” said Stabiner. “When they say ‘yes,’ I switch to wondering how I will connect with fellows whose experience is so different from
my own. And each time I am gratified by how quickly we manage to find common ground.

“I’ve come to believe that telling a difficult story requires the bravery to confront it—which in turn requires faith in a future that acknowledges the past but is not defined by it. I shared essays this year about being the mother of the bride, and about my elderly mother’s illness, chosen on purpose because they were so far from the stories the fellows wanted to tell,” said Stabiner. “After my presentation one medic approached to ask if I would like to see a photo of an engagement ring she liked. Sure, I said, as long as I can see a photo of the guy who plans to give it to you—and we were off on a conversation about weddings and dresses, about happiness and a future she couldn’t have imagined several years ago. She’s going to grow as a writer and a person, and I believe that each year I grow in understanding and compassion as well. I wouldn’t miss these workshops.”

During our final day together, the cohort learned about editing and publishing their reflections with The War Horse and how to be prepared for the pitch process throughout their careers as writers. To assist with this, literary agent Stuart Krichevsky spoke to the group. The cohort said they appreciated “his kind approach” and that his “eye for detail and meaning was absurdly high quality.” Wendy Wolf, the executive editor of Viking Books, also spoke at the session, who the cohort felt brought “seasoned knowledge and a warm presence.”

During our seminars, in addition to editorial support, The War Horse places a high priority on the mental wellness of our fellows. To assist in this effort, Jodi Salamino, a counselor who has worked alongside wounded veterans and their families for more than 15 years, joined our team for the week. “Jodi saw that I was struggling and with each day she took time, if not extra time to listen, to ask questions that in turn made me look inward and ask myself questions. This was why I was able to put my thoughts, my anger and frustration, and fears to paper.”

Other War Horse Fellows also appreciated the focus on mental health. “Having a counselor available was so instrumental in dealing with
emotions that resurfaced,” said one vet. Many others found it reassuring just knowing that a mental health professional was present if needed. “These 12 fellows, strangers to each other, belonged together,” said Salamino. “As a mentor and advocate/advisor for mental health and wellness, this program is perfectly poised on the spectrum of opportunities to enable post-traumatic growth.

“As they contemplated their personal stories of fallen comrades, moral crisis, blame, and faced layers of pain it was remarkable to watch them transition from caution and fear to curiosity, resolve, and even humor,” said Salamino. “The Writing Seminar with all its inherent encouragement let the fellows trust not only a process that taught new skills, but they could trust themselves to tell their story with a deep altruistic impact.”

Many of our 2019 War Horse Fellows agreed that our Writing Seminar for Medics and Corpsmen was transformational, both personally and professionally as writers. One vet said, “With the new knowledge and skills I have to work with, I have a deeper understanding of what the process of revision entails. What the construction of story can be, and the value of writing several drafts to get to the bits that make the good one. Reading out loud wasn’t easy but it was an opportunity to grow.”

The sense of community among our 2019 War Horse Fellows also increased. “I haven’t felt that close to a group of people since deployment. It was being understood by those around me that enables me to write what I did,” wrote one medic. “They got me, they knew where I was coming from, they became a source of encouragement.”

And on November 11, 2019, less than one month after our writing retreat, 2019 War Horse Fellow Adam Linehan published his story about losing patients in combat for The New York Times Magazine as its Veterans Day feature. He explored addiction and thoughts of suicide, the struggle of transitioning homes, and how our writing seminar helped him be able to share his experiences of war with the world. In his words:

“I wanted to turn back in the other direction. As introductions began, I was brainstorming excuses when one fellow, an Air Force veteran named Jen, said something that caught my attention. She had worked in a combat-support hospital near Kandahar City in 2010. The story she had come to Virginia to tell began with her and her colleagues running across the hospital landing zone to a Black Hawk full of dead American soldiers.

“I noted some familiar details in her brief description of the casualties as they appeared when the helicopter crew chief slid open the cargo door—the missing heads, the charred flesh. She mentioned that only one of the bodies was still wearing a name tape and that someone asked what it read. ‘Carver,’ she said. ‘He had beautiful green eyes.’ At which point I volunteered to introduce my story next. ‘Those were my guys,’ I began. ‘I put them in that helicopter.’”

Five days later, when it was time for everyone to go back to wherever they came from, back to our respective ecosystems, nobody wanted to leave. We exchanged emails and phone numbers and promised to stay in touch. All of us had done this dance before. Military life is full of hard goodbyes. But you are always looking forward to something: block leave, the end of a deployment, reuniting with friends and family, retirement. Then you get out, and you can’t stop looking back. That’s why we had gone to Virginia—to figure out how to carry the stories. To unstick ourselves from the past. Because moving on isn’t the same thing as running away. That was my takeaway, at least. I realized that along with the traumatic memories, I had also buried the side of me who can cope with them.

“It was liberating to be in a place where war and its repercussions aren’t kept shrouded in mystery. And humbling. I remembered why I got into journalism in the first place. War is a failure to communicate, and nothing good comes from veterans’ keeping quiet about it…”
Reflections from 2019 War Horse Fellows

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No one slept soundly. We all heard the whistling of incoming mortars, a decrescendo then WHOMP. But louder than you think WHOMP sounds like. It was the WHOMP you feel. One, then two. My roommates, stumbling over to my low foam mattress bed, surrounded me in a bear hug until the sounds stopped. I don’t know how many explosions hit, but I remember saying in dry humor, “Maybe we should spread out.”

*   *   *

It’s been 16 years since my two friends, Sara and Mary, and I were there, and this is one of the stories from Mosul, Iraq, I can lightheartedly share that seems to go over better than the ones I could tell while hardly breathing. I’m convinced that no one really wants to hear what it is like to be terrified, when your throat’s always tight and sleep sometimes looks like sleep, but you’re really just lying with your eyes closed, silently panicked. Or maybe I don’t share much of the detail because it doesn’t have a place in polite conversation.

The three of us were 21- and 22-year-old Army journalists back then, charged with telling stories of the war while living through it ourselves during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2004. Before that, I had served as a combat medic. While in Mosul for the next year, I did both, serving not only as a photojournalist but also as a medic.

Our office took up a corner of a commandeered palace, my friends on the video side and myself on the photo and print side. A sprawling white mission board hung on a wall with dates, contacts, and names of the assigned journalists. We lined up our gear on the exterior walls in dusty scuffed pelican cases. When our names were up, we would selectively take only the necessary lenses, batteries, and dust cloths, always remembering to only carry the essentials so we could keep up.

Our missions ranged from school openings to Iraqi force graduations, which we’d document for a few hours, producing the final product in a day, no matter how late we’d have to stay up in order to finish. Other missions required multiple
embeds with different units—field artillery, infantry, or military police units—where I would try as hard as possible to assimilate quickly, so as not to be a burden.

"I'm convinced no one really wants to hear what it is like to be terrified..." 

I remember how hot it was in Iraq with air so thick and burning it had to be a deliberate thought to inhale, and there were days, weeks, and months before you saw a cloud. It’s my immediate memories of Iraq, the ones that float forward when a smell, name, or date come up, in scenes set at night. That’s when many of the missions would happen, with my only choice to keep up with the soldiers strung in a line around me until the light crested and I could concentrate on getting photos.

About every three months the aid station at our forward operating base would be assigned a new doctor. Younger men with fresh uniforms and sarcasm, neither of which lasted for very long, would arrive at the small white plaster-walled building. Sometimes I witnessed when both the sarcasm and fresh uniform wore away, and other times I returned from a mission and realized the change had already happened.

The trailer I lived in with Sara and Mary was a thin metal box, four beds, three lockers, a small fridge, microwave, and a wall air-conditioner unit. We called this place home for a year, and I can’t remember the day we left. We came back to this place each night we were not out on a mission. The fourth bed was used as our living room, and as often as we could we would sit hip to hip to watch anything we could find on a laptop. The engrossing escape into a movie or show was nothing short of transformative. But what I can still feel now is the heaviness, as if an iron blanket closed around my shoulders when each show finished, and I remembered where I was.

* * *

Years have passed and the details of my daily conversations with Mary and Sara have faded, but the feelings around certain moments are still vivid. The way any of us opened our trailer’s flimsy door revealed a lot of about how we were...
feeling. If Mary came in throwing her gear, you knew to duck and ask questions later. Other times she walked in half-dancing, ear buds in, wearing her fitness uniform and weight-lifting gloves—also a sign that she grew up in a town that supported the motto, “Dance as if no one is watching.” Sara, who I grew up with in Madison, Wisconsin, and was nicknamed “Sara plain and tall” by my older brother, would gracefully enter with long even steps, but let her gear crash down in a rough muffled thud on the hollow floor tiles. She would sit down on the edge of her bed, knees spidering up under her elbows after what was usually a long day. Each of us, then as specialists in the Army, always had a deadline, always had a next hit time, always had somewhere we were required to be. For me it was either an editor with a never-ceasing supply of red ink or listening for the next mortar fire that signaled my assignment at the aid station.

So, I continue to share stories about how in those moments, I told Sara and Mary that we should split up rather than let one well-placed mortar take out the three of us, or other stories that strike the surface of funny. Like when one of our interpreters, a stout, bald, strikingly joyous Iraqi man, always said Mary would make a perfect bride. “She is very tall and her father owns a business,” he would say. “What is there not to love! She is very tall!”

Or how our non-commissioned officer, when out with us on humanitarian missions, would coordinate with the locals, then come back and report how many goats and sheep he sold us for and what great brides we were going to make.

Or the time when a well-intended fun run around the perimeter of the forward operating base was interrupted by the near-daily mortar rain. Everyone’s times were a little off from having to run for cover and wait for the rounds to stop coming in.

* * *

Now, so many years later, it seems as though maybe Sara and Mary took my advice too well that first night we heard mortars come in. Although we come back together for weddings, births, and rare weekends with one another, a group chat is now what we have to keep our over-filled lives strung together. And in those conversations, rarely do we stumble into the thick black line of our story together in Iraq. Now I read more into what they don’t bring up, the consequence of knowing each other in war, when the score for our lives was written with the highest high notes of relief and the lowest low notes of fear.

Naturally our husbands have become our confidants now.

I had been married for eight years before I realized I had never told my husband about the details of that year in Iraq. In a very illogical way, I felt like I had already told him. But one warm
evening after the kids were in bed, in that hour between when they go to bed and we do, sitting on our teal basket-weave couch, folding a stray load of laundry, he emphatically said, “No, you have to actually say the words for me to know.”

So, I finally did.

He will no doubt be embarrassed when I describe how much I love the hair on the side of his neck behind his ear, how it curls into a letter C and when it gets to an O, he feels it’s time to cut it. But he is the one who has taught me again how to love and how to forgive and feel the stretch of emotions in between. And he is the one who patiently listens to all my stories, including the ones that are not meant to be shared.

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Gretel Weiskopf, a 2019 War Horse Fellow, served as an Army photojournalist and combat medic in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2004. She has been in the Wisconsin Army National Guard for 19 years. She lives in Wauwatosa with her husband and children.
"Where is the blood?"

All my medical training came into focus at that moment. I took off the green T-shirt that covered a gash on Sledd’s neck. It was big and wide, but no blood oozed from it. I looked closer; it didn’t look like an entry wound based on my hospital corpsman training. I remembered learning that exit wounds are four times larger than the entry wound. But a voice in the back of my mind kept nagging me, “Where is the blood?” “Where is the blood?”

I looked over at Simpson, the other Marine in my unit who was shot, his hands shattered with mangled flesh. I thought I should probably take care of him first, but I kept thinking “Where is the blood?” I continued with Sledd, conducting a full body sweep to ensure he was not bleeding from other areas, but it was futile. Then I made a conscious decision to remove his pants with trauma shears to assess his lower extremities. As I cut off his belt and pants, the most blood I had ever seen gushed from his buttocks.

Eureka! I found the blood. Notwithstanding I didn’t recall ever being taught the process of using a tourniquet for a hip or bottom, I improvised and used his torn pants and belt to stop the blood flow, then applied an IV to stabilize him until a medivac helicopter arrived.

We were finishing up six months into our Western Pacific deployment. The 3rd Battalion 1st Marines was stationed on Failaka Island, less than 50 miles from the coast of Kuwait. The island used to be a resort for the wealthy before it was turned into rubble during the Gulf War.

We staged our area close to the beach, setting up tents by platoon, with our backpacks and weapons neatly arranged to maintain unity. Then we relaxed. After we completed our routine training for the morning, I picked up the Tom Clancy novel The Sum of All Fears and read in my tent. In the far distance I could hear the call for Muslim prayer, nearby noises of Marines playing makeshift baseball, and others splashing away in the ocean.
When I heard sporadic gunfire very close by, the first thought that came to my mind was there goes Gunny Eickhoff. He loved to dispose of rounds of unused ammunition. But the sounds became more frequent. I took my eyes away from the book and suddenly saw the face of death. The assailant stepped out of a white SUV, spraying AK-47 bullets from right to left, without any particular target.

I took shelter behind our gear and watched as terror came closer and closer toward me. I ran for cover to the next tent where two Marines from the 2nd Platoon were hiding. I saw the best of the best Marines running for safety in the ocean because there were no other places to hide. My unit was unarmed because we were supposed to be protected by the Kuwaiti police and the Coast Guard. With no weapons, we were almost literally caught with our pants down. I could feel the adrenaline pumping in my heart and the bile in my mouth, thinking this is where it all ends. Then, two Marines from different positions started engaging the attacker.

It never crossed my mind that I would be combat tested on an island as beautiful as Failaka. When I heard the universal call, “Corpsman up” ringing through the air, without hesitation, I picked up my medical bag and dashed in the sand following the directions of Marines pointing to a dry well across from our tents. It felt like eternity running there. I could see and hear the popping sounds of the gunfire all around me, as the rounds landed on the beach. It reminded me of a Rambo movie. Looking up, I finally saw Guzman, a Marine in
my platoon, near the well. That’s when I knew I had survived the run through hell.

As an adolescent growing up in slums of Ajegunle, in Lagos, Nigeria, I had seen my fair share of violence. From watching my childhood friend being burned to death for stealing a lady’s bag, to students throwing a teacher in a well in my final year of high school, to me being beaten into a coma for three days by the police in my second year of college. But it was one incident back home that put me on the path to medicine. While I was working for my father to earn money to complete my last two years of college, I witnessed a car run over a boy who was walking back from school. He was about seven years old. I tried to help the kid, so did a few others, but the disaster was catastrophic. As I picked up the little boy, his eyes rolled back, and his guts were hanging outside his body. Realizing I was unable to do anything to assist him, I made the decision that I wanted to help people. I just didn’t know my destiny was right around the corner.

A couple of weeks after the car incident, I received a letter from the United States government that I had won the American Visa Lottery among numerous applicants. The lottery allowed thousands to migrate to the United States annually on a working visa. I actually forgot that I had applied months before, after a friend showed me a newspaper ad about the visa lottery. This is my ticket out of the slum, I thought. It took me another nine months after winning the lottery to

"Don’t get me wrong… I’m not that brave."
finally make it to Orlando, Florida. But after two months without a job, I made the daring decision to join the U.S. Army. Don’t get me wrong; I’m not that brave. I was scared out of my mind, because I had no previous military experience, nor did I know anybody in the armed forces. But I needed to support myself, so I could build a life in the United States.

Without knowing the difference between the military branches, I chose the Navy. I was initially offered a deck seaman job, but I was adamant that I would only join if I were offered a medical job. The recruiter called me at home that same day to offer me a hospital corpsman position that had just become available. During my six months of training at Great Lakes in Illinois, I’ll never forget watching a video of a corpsman working with the Marines. Right then, I knew I’d made the right choice, or maybe I just wanted to have the experience of being called “Doc.” Though it almost didn’t happen. I was 25 and the oldest in my class. It was suggested that I serve as a medic in the U.S. Embassy in London. But I didn’t want to be an attaché. I wanted to serve with the Fleet Marine Force with my classmates, my friends. We had made a pact to stay together.

Then Sledd and Simpson got shot. My decision to take care of Sledd was based on my intuition and not my training. I could have done the right thing and taken care of Simpson, the less-injured Marine who had a severely shattered hand. Months later back in the U.S. I saw Simpson again with his hands newly reconstructed, and he asked me why I did not take care of him first, and that will always stay with me.

I understand that Simpson was in pain, but I had to make a decision right then and there on who would get the most attention. Now writing about the incident, I am content to know that my actions helped doctors in the operating room revive Sledd six times before he died. Unfortunately, I did not know the extent of his injury. I was just glad that he was evacuated while still alive. Strapped to the gurney, I kept speaking to him, as if he could hear me, encouraging him that after deployment, we would meet in Florida, where he was also from, and “go party like it’s 1999.” Of course, that didn’t happen.

I was never taught to serve others growing up. My experience in the Navy showed me that I have a passion for caring for others. Now that I’m a husband and father, wherever and whenever I can help someone I simply do it. I volunteer every morning at my kid’s school as a traffic guard to prevent pedestrian accidents, since there’s no one official to do it, and serve as a youth pastor in my local church to help guide younger people, so they stay safe and make good decisions. It does not have to be in a medical setting when I help someone. I just know I don’t take anyone for granted.

Josiah Koleosho served in Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2001-2003. He earned a combat action ribbon and two Navy Achievement Medals while in the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines. Josiah was a hospital corpsman at National Medical Center, Bethesda for 10 years. After serving, he obtained degrees in computer networking, security, and cybersecurity. He currently lives in Maryland and works as a sleep technologist at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. Josiah is a 2019 War Horse Fellow.
The flags gently flapped in the hot breeze. The nation’s colors of blue, red, and white, next to the symbol of our battalion, contrasted against the monotonous tan of the desert landscape. In front of the honor guard were a pair of polished boots, a Kevlar helmet, dog tags, and an inverted M-16 with bayonet, a somber display marking the life of Specialist Robert A. Noonan of Cincinnati, Ohio. At his service, the ranks of soldiers in their chocolate chip desert fatigues stood silently in formation as our battalion commander, the “old man,” strode forward to honor his fallen soldier. “Specialist Newman,” he began, “was a fine soldier.” Newman? I thought to myself. No, I must have misheard. But a palpable tension building among the ranks made me realize I hadn’t. The battalion commander had misspoken the last name of our brother who had died the previous day. He had transgressed a sacred moment, yet the old man didn’t seem to recognize he had just broken an inviolable trust.

Soldiers are trained to kill but are also prepared to die. A bond among us is that if any should fall, we will be remembered by our comrades. In a ceremony aptly named “The Last Roll Call,” the soldier’s name is called out by the living, even as it’s removed from the unit rolls. The commander defiled that sacred moment by an unrecognized slip of the tongue, planting seeds of doubt in my mind that soldiers could be dishonored, disrespected, and devalued by their leader.

If the proper pronunciation of the name of a soldier killed in a training accident didn’t matter to the command, what would happen if we incurred the 50% casualties expected when we attacked Iraq? Were we nameless cannon fodder instead of warriors in an elite division serving in the Persian Gulf War? It was a disturbing proposition to every soldier standing in formation.

I had been an enlisted soldier and was now an
officer, in charge of the medical platoon in an infantry battalion in the 82nd Airborne Division. Being assigned to the 82nd was a dream come true because my father served in it during WW2. I assumed that everyone would strive to be the best and that leaders would strive even harder.

Leading from the front had been preached from the first leadership development class I attended at Fort Benning as a young Army specialist, through the ROTC classes at college, and at courses at Fort Sam and Fort Bragg. Be tactically and technically proficient. Know yourself. Know your soldiers. Never stop making yourself better. I took these ideals to heart and, perhaps foolishly, expected other leaders in the military to do likewise.

"... planting seeds of doubt in my mind that soldiers could be dishonored..."

I hardly knew Noonan, but his blood had made small, reddish-brown stains on the knees and wrists of my desert uniform. Part of him was physically with me, making the slight against Noonan feel personal because we had tried so hard to save him. But I wasn’t the only one who was angry. This one seemingly small thing, the old man mispronouncing Noonan’s name, caused resentment and disillusion among many in the battalion.

Noonan was fatally injured when the HMMWV he was riding in rolled over. He had been standing in the gunner’s cupola when the edge of the sand dune gave way. His helmet had mostly protected his head, but his chest was flailed and he had severe internal injuries. Desert fatigues are no match for Detroit steel.

When the radio call for medical assistance came, the battalion’s physician assistant, Chief Warrant Officer Jeff Brasfield, along with four medics and myself rushed to the rollover site. Chief shouted to go faster as I gave the driver directions. I was so afraid that I would not get us to the right place in a seemingly featureless desert and that a soldier might die because of me. Whether through skill or luck, we made it to Noonan’s location. We worked under the hot, bright Saudi sun to stabilize him for transport on an inbound medevac helicopter. The Blackhawk arrived, we loaded Noonan, Chief hopped on, and away they flew in a sand-blown whirl.

Specialist Robert Noonan died in the operating room of a U.S. Navy hospital on the east coast of Saudi Arabia. The Navy medical team tried like hell to save his life, but his injuries were too severe. Chief took the news very hard and said he replayed the entire incident in his head for years after. He was convinced that if he had done something just a little different, Noonan would have lived, even though the trauma surgeon said he would have died if the accident had happened right outside the OR.

I don’t recall if Chief and I ever talked about the old man mispronouncing Noonan’s name, but we talked about the medics’ response to the crash site. Although he berated himself, he was proud of the medics and of me. He told me on that day he accepted me as a man worthy to serve alongside. I demonstrated that I could function in a crisis. From that point on I had a brother, a friend, a confidante.

Acceptance by your fellow soldiers is important. Respect by your commanders equally so. If the troops believe that a commander does not care, then the underlying assumption is that the commander will be reckless with their lives.
Troops will serve any commander, whether a hard-ass authoritarian or a quieter soul. But troops will go through hell with a half-canteen of water and a bayonet for a commander in whom they believe. The foundation of this belief is that the old man values everyone from the most junior private to the most senior veteran. Their lives and service mean something. But how can that trust be built when the old man doesn’t care enough to correctly pronounce the name of a soldier who just gave the last full measure?

For years I would think of this event and others that occurred under the old man’s command at Bragg, in Saudi, and in Iraq. I would NOT be that kind of leader. I could, and would, do better. I would not be petty; I would value the worth of every person. I held onto the hot anger I felt at Noonan’s final farewell. I held it close like a beloved keepsake and loathed the old man.

* * *

The phone call came late one afternoon in August, almost 25 years to the day after Noonan died. The call was from Karen, Chief’s beloved wife. She sounded completely crushed. “Jeff’s dead.” I was stunned. How could this be? We were comrades with more years of friendship ahead.

Word spread of Jeff’s death among our band of brothers. I spent hours on the phone with those touched by his life. Two events were on everyone’s mind. Foremost was when Chief went into a field of unexploded munitions in Iraq to treat a severely wounded paratrooper who drove a HMMWV over a bomblet. The other was Chief’s anger and frustration about not being able to save Noonan. Naturally, we also remembered how the old man had mispronounced Noonan’s name. Some were still disgusted by the mispronunciation; others recalled it as just another error by an inept commander. Yet I could no longer agree with these sentiments. The ember of anger created by a seemingly uncaring commander so many years past would not rekindle into flame. In fact, the ember had turned to cold ashes.

After Chief’s death I found the courage to think hard about where my anger had gone. Jeff had foolishly held onto his anger at himself, at the Army, at life itself for Noonan’s death. But mine had disappeared, replaced by the knowledge that the old man and I had a lot in common. I realized I had been naive in my idealism about military service. The truth was I’d been unfairly angry at a commander who was simply another man doing the best he could in a crappy situation. I learned that failure is common and success rare. I understood that people try to do the best they can, live with the outcome of their choices, and hope to do better tomorrow.

Another veteran told me about his commander who misspoke soldiers’ names during a memorial event, but the soldiers accepted the old man’s mistake because he had proven his loyalty to those warriors time and again. That commander’s stuttering mispronunciation of soldiers’ surnames during the last roll call was not because he didn’t care, it was because he did.

Maybe that’s what happened all those years ago when Noonan died. Perhaps the old man thought a lot about his slip of the tongue. Just like Chief thought about futilely trying to save a mortally
wounded soldier. Just like I thought about my own mistakes. Our actions and choices haunt us, but ghosts can be laid to rest.

I regret wasting years spent as an enraged, naive fool. I wish that I’d realized much sooner that my anger was a burden I should lay down. But sometimes hate doesn’t feel heavy. It feels as light as a feather, yet it saps your strength like an overloaded rucksack.

When I look at a picture of the commander now, I see myself. The scars from two years under his command have faded, replaced by those of my own making. Scars from my own failings as a leader, a soldier, a husband, a father, a son, a friend. The old man’s image in my photos from the Gulf War has been replaced with a mirror showing my own tired face. It is an epiphany.

Everything I disliked about the old man was something that I’d probably done myself, and I’d done these things trying to do the best I could at the time. I’m sure there were times when I disappointed those under my leadership when there was an expectation for me to be my best. The commander was perhaps not always a good leader, but I think he was always a leader trying to be good. We were both flesh and bone, fallible human beings. That treasured keepsake of hot anger was a fool’s burden I needlessly carried all those years. I’m relieved that I tossed it away.
It’s an old adage among medics, that all bleeding stops. Eventually. I have to wonder now if that’s true. What if some wounds just keep bleeding? What if the thing that doesn’t kill us doesn’t actually make us stronger, but instead just gives us a dark sense of humor and really unhealthy coping mechanisms? Almost eight years home now, and I still feel like I’m hemorrhaging, only no one can see it but me. And it scares the shit out of me. Not because I’m afraid it’s going to kill me, but because I’m afraid it won’t.

Growing up, if you found me in front of the television, it was a safe bet I was watching M*A*S*H. I idolized the characters in that show and knew early on that I wanted to be a soldier. But not just any soldier; I wanted to be a medic, I wanted to save lives. The day I stood, raised my hand, and took my oath, that dream was realized, and I had become a soldier, and soon after that, a combat medic. I had never walked taller.

The Army came easy to me. I thrived on that fast-paced, adrenaline-driven environment, and even when I was being smoked, or chastised for being dumber than a box of rocks, I loved it. I was put in positions of leadership early on in my career, and I soaked up every chance to learn any new skill I could. I knew from the first day getting off that bus, with a yelling drill sergeant in my ear and his brown round in my face, that this was what I was going to do for the rest of my life. I had found my calling. Little did I know, I couldn’t have been more wrong. My career, and my dream, would be short-lived.

My first duty station, Camp Casey, South Korea, felt more like home than anything I had ever known, and it was there that I blossomed as a junior soldier. I took every opportunity thrown my way to grow as a medic, because I wanted to be the best. I learned how to conduct medical operations, control mass casualties, carry out
evacuations on the battlefield in mock battles. I was constantly pushing for more opportunities to learn. There was no class I didn’t want to take and no request for medical support that I wouldn’t volunteer for. I spent as much time in the field as possible, getting my hands dirty and loving every moment of it. I was on cloud nine. That was the best year of my life, and it flew by way too fast. After the year came to an end, I was approached and told that it was time to reenlist. Without hesitation, I did it, knowing this was where I belonged: in uniform. That night, we went to a local bar off-post to celebrate. It was a group of people I knew and trusted. I felt comfortable letting my hair down and having a few drinks. So I did, and in that moment, sitting there drinking soju kettles with my battles, my fellow soldiers, my friends, laughing and feeling 10 feet tall, I knew true happiness like never before. I was on top of the world, and nothing was bringing me down. And then the world went dark.

I still don’t know what happened or how long I was out. I woke up in an unfamiliar room, dark but for a small, dingy yellow light in the corner. But though the room was unfamiliar, the face above mine was one I knew all too well. It was one of my NCOs, a man I considered a friend. I was powerless to move. I couldn’t struggle, and I couldn’t scream. I blacked out again, only to come to once more, finding him on top of me. I knew I was being raped, but I couldn’t fight back. Abject terror and anger filled me, but I was helpless. I am still not sure how long this lasted, but it felt like forever, me going in and out of consciousness. Sometimes, when I would briefly regain consciousness, he would be assaulting me; other times he would be sitting watching TV, or playing on his phone. I couldn’t move. I noticed at some point my hands were tied above my head, and I would start to cry, only to have the world go dark again.

I don’t know how I got back to my room. I don’t know how I got past the guard, but I woke up in my shower, lying on the cold tile, shivering and feeling more hungover than I ever thought possible. I stumbled to my room, disoriented, not able to process what I was feeling or thinking. I put on my uniform and went down to formation. Everything was foggy, and I can’t remember anything about that day, or what happened. I just floated through it.

The next couple of weeks went by with me in something of a fugue state. Maybe it was shock, I don’t know. I just know I felt numb all the time, except when I was angry and battling the self-loathing that had settled over me. That only lifted when I would see him. I would pass him in the hall, or see him in formation, or the motor pool, or training. He was everywhere. I couldn’t bring myself to face him, so I would run, avoid, evade, escape, anything I could to not have to look at him. The worst part was, he tried to act like nothing had happened. He would smile at me, and I would scream inside. I really started drinking then. And I’m not talking just socially either. I am talking going and getting a bottle of liquor, going to my room, and trying to finish it as fast as I could. I was on a downhill slide, and I knew I was, but I couldn’t stop it.

"I was on a downhill slide, and I knew I was, but I couldn’t stop it."
knacks that I had packed with such care, and taking it with me. My dirty little secret. My destruction. I wish I could have left it there, that I had unpacked it before it destroyed me. Hindsight is a bitch.

"...I think I was hoping I would die."

The way I looked at deploying was that I was already dead inside, so what did actual death matter? Looking back, I think I was hoping I would die. I wanted to go to war. I wanted to die on the battlefield, doing what I loved. I couldn’t imagine anything else. But I didn’t die in war, on the battlefield, a hero. I instead turned into a monster. Anger was the only emotion I could feel anymore. I walked around in a daze most of the time, thinking about my next drink.

War didn’t fuck me up, no. What fucked me up was the betrayal; first by someone I trusted, and then by the Army itself. War I was prepared for. Not the other stuff. The things nobody tells you about. The drinking continued to worsen, and I was stuck in garrison. All I had was idle time on my hands, so I filled my days with the only thing that made me feel anything anymore. Liquor. I was not at all subtle with it, not caring who saw. I started getting into fights, drinking and driving, not going to work, or just showing up drunk. I even punched the chaplain’s assistant, who was a very good friend of mine. At one point, I attempted suicide for the first time, alone in my room, by swallowing a bottle of sedatives and washing them down with a bottle of Captain Morgan. I don’t remember much, but I hazily recall one of my NCOs hovering over me at one point, taking my vitals and talking to another medic I worked with. I couldn’t speak, but I wanted to tell him he better not save my life. I blacked out, and I came to as I was being taken out on a stretcher.

I spent three days in a local hospital in the psych ward, then it was back to business as usual. My command didn’t seem much interested in helping me; my first sergeant saw a bullseye on my back and made my life hell for being what he thought was a shitbag; and inside I felt broken, and completely lost. I was screaming for help, but that didn’t matter. I was a blight on the unit, and that would not be tolerated. I was done.

Confession time: I am a veteran with bad papers. I was discharged under other than honorable conditions. I felt like I had handed the Army my entire career on a silver platter. But truly, I didn’t give up on the Army: The Army gave up
on me. I was drowning, and when I was unable to save myself, nobody tried to save me. I had never reported my rape, for many reasons, and keeping quiet seemed easier than going public. I was humiliated by what had happened, I couldn’t possibly tell anyone. But the guilt of that decision still weighs on me, especially when I later learned he had raped before. If I had gone forward, I might have saved someone else from being a victim. Everything piled up until I felt like I couldn’t recover. I felt like this hollow, broken thing, full of rage and sadness. The loneliest, most heartbreaking moment of my life was the day I stood before my commander and first sergeant, with my platoon sergeant and several others present, being told I was done being a soldier. I was out of the Army, and there wasn’t a thing I could do about it. In that room full of people, I was utterly alone.

After leaving the Army, I felt disgraced, angry, ashamed, angry again. I kept drinking, trying to drown the demons in my head, but they soon learned how to swim. I went through job after job, relationship after relationship, doing my best to burn the world around me down, until it was nothing but ashes. I continued the attempts to take my own life, several times, in several ways. The VA was no help, throwing drugs at a problem that drugs can’t fix. I was the walking dead, I was a shell of my former self. I was lost.

It’s been eight years since I left the Army. I have worked odd jobs here and there, but nothing ever sticks. I have found myself on the wrong end of the law more than once, though luckily, for the most part, the officers involved have been kind and understanding. It is a miracle I am not dead, or in jail, honestly. Though most days, I wish I were dead, even now. Much of my time is spent in isolation, at my lakeside cabin, drinking the hours away, until unconsciousness takes me. Then I get up, rinse, and repeat. It is the living hell that has become my life. I think about the Army every day. I miss it, I crave it. I lament a career I will never know, and I struggle to see a future that makes sense for me. I don’t know where I will go, or what I will do with myself now, but I feel like I can’t quit. I guess that’s still the Army in me.

Nicole Johnson was born and raised in Texas. She served as an Army medic in South Korea and Afghanistan, and owned her own business focusing on point of injury care in the civilian environment. In her downtime, you can find her by the lake sitting in her Adirondack chair with a cold beer in her hand.
After a crazy shift in the E.R., I sat on the couch with my wife, Leslie, watching the news. As Tucker Carlson was talking about the coronavirus like every other TV reporter, my wife turned to me and asked, “Are you all right?”

I gave her my standard reply, “Yeah, babe, why?”

She looked at me and said, “You look empty.”

At that moment I realized I was doing a piss-poor job of masking what was going on inside my head.

I have spent the majority of my adult life preparing for what our nation is currently facing. I started my career in medicine as a Fleet Marine Force Corpsman with 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines. I served 20-plus years as a civilian EMT/Paramedic, completed a fellowship in bioterrorism and emerging infectious diseases for the National Institute of Health, and worked 12 years as a disaster and infectious disease epidemiologist. Now 22 days into my emergency medicine fellowship as a newly minted physician assistant, I’m witnessing a public health nightmare emerge firsthand. I would be remiss if I didn’t admit that the emptiness I’m feeling is associated with a fear of the future.

Airmen, coast guardsmen, Marines, sailors, and soldiers spend their careers preparing for war.

“Kill!”
“What makes the grass green?”
“Blood!”
“What makes the grass grow?”
“Guts!”

I’m sure these battle cries—echoed on any drill field, on any given morning at Camp Lejeune—haven’t changed since I was there, only the names...
and faces. But the current battle cry echoing across our country is different, and what scares me is that my neighbors, family, and friends are not taking the threat seriously. A few days ago, someone asked me if I had a current advanced directive on file and a will. At that moment, it became clear that we weren’t dealing with some conspiracy theory or media-driven hoax but the real deal. The last time I filled out or updated my will, I was 25 years old, preparing to deploy to the Mediterranean with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, weeks after we lost 14 of our brothers in a midair helicopter collision.

As an emergency room healthcare provider and based on the experiences in countries like China and Italy, I will be exposed to the coronavirus and will more than likely get sick at some point. Unlike the other ER physician assistant fellows, who are young and as far as I know healthy, I am a 48-year-old disabled veteran who developed occupational asthma as a result of toxic exposures during my service. I could probably tell my leadership about my lungs, and my increased risk for an adverse outcome should I get sick, resulting in being sidelined to a position that decreases my risk of exposure. My wife and I have had serious discussions about the increased risk, however, at this juncture the recommendations for healthcare providers with underlying conditions is to use proper protection equipment (PPE) any time we are at work and to isolate when we are not working. I don’t want people to think that I am not taking the threat seriously myself; quite the opposite. But it’s in my nature to help. Several years ago, I had a turkey buzzard fly into me while I was riding my motorcycle. After I slowly picked myself up from the ground, I did a five-point self-body check: head, arms, legs, back and … then, standing in the road in the middle of nowhere, Oklahoma, I looked up at the sky and yelled, “OK, God, you have my attention. What do you want from me?” Five months later I was accepted into a program to become a physician assistant. Call it fate or some divine plan, I know that I’m supposed to be where I am at this specific point in time and my background has prepared me for it.

"...and do more than asked, because that’s what was needed."

Growing up, I learned to work on vehicles and farm equipment. With a welder and torch, I could build you almost anything you needed. Hell, with the help of friends and family, I literally built our house, but it was as a corpsman that I found my true calling—medicine. Like the many who came before me, when the word “corpsman” was screamed, I found I was able to suppress the fear and self-preservation at the forefront of my thoughts, and do more than asked, because that’s what was needed. That ability to function in what my friend and fellow emergency medicine PA Jeff
Evans described as a “VUCA” environment—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—is what makes me who I am. And the crisis at hand is definitely volatile, uncertain, complex, and very ambiguous. The Navy not only provided training in prehospital and tactical emergency care, I learned about tropical diseases, like malaria, Lassa fever, Ebola, and Loa loa, commonly known as the African eye worm. After I left the Navy, several of my professors at the University of Oklahoma indulged my aspirations for a more defined career in medicine. Infectious diseases and epidemiology was a logical path.

During my undergraduate and graduate studies, I got my first true taste of outbreak investigations and infectious disease epidemiology conducting West Nile virus surveillance in mosquitoes, birds, horses, and humans in the early 2000s. Since 2007, I have crisscrossed the globe teaching first responders, health care workers, emergency managers, and business leaders about pandemic preparedness. I spent the majority of 2009 working the H1N1 pandemic as an epidemiologist for the Department of Homeland Security’s Center for Domestic Preparedness. For my training, it was emphasized that pandemics were the equivalent to lots of really sick people, not necessarily dead people, and that the larger issue was having supplies “just in time.” But I’ve seen the lessons learned during that time sadly lost due to politics and business, causing inattentiveness, personnel turnover, and ultimately a lack of education. We are having to find our own masks, while hospitals ask local seamstresses to make homemade ones. The emptiness my wife saw on my face the
other night is the same expression I’ve seen on so many others. Although there are no wounded Marines on the battlefield yelling, “Corpsman!” the uncertainty, chaos, and fear felt in society right now are the same.

"...we were finally going to get our chance to be circus performers."  

As we go forward, I hope people take the recommendations seriously and practice social distancing but not social disengagement. I hope we take advantage of the time to reconnect and strengthen our family foundations, putting aside old hatred and racism, and healing broken personal relationships and communities. When I was a kid, I remember reading the children’s folk story “Stone Soup.” It told the story of a man who came to a village where people were very poor and starving. He goes to the communal fire in the center of the village and starts boiling water and stones. People, being curious, asked what he was doing.

“Making stone soup,” he replied. Soon, each member of the village slowly and somewhat reluctantly began adding something: potatoes, carrots, and other vegetables to the soup, and before long they had something that they all could share and eat. Never in my lifetime has that story been more appropriate than now. I hope people get out and grow gardens, growing more than anyone can eat, and sharing it with neighbors, while maintaining social distancing, of course. We must remember, we are all in this together.

Veterans like to sit around and talk about how we wished we could saddle up and ride again. Well, now we can. This time the battle is on our doorsteps. Our families, friends, neighbors, and people who we just can’t stand to be around will need our help. Most of them have never had to operate in a VUCA environment, but we have. We can help, set an example, and lead. That’s what I plan to do, and I took an oath once upon a time to do so. And to fellow vets, so did you.

Johnnie Gilpen, a 2019 War Horse Fellow and 2017 Tillman Scholar, is a former U.S. Navy Fleet Marine Force hospital corpsman with 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines, 2nd Marine Division, at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He now lives in Union City, Oklahoma, and is currently a Physician Assistant in the greater Oklahoma City Area.
The conversation had started similarly to every other Tinder date: questions about work, weekend plans, past travel destinations, and favorite movies. The answers were boilerplate, but she had nice eyes and she lived close to my apartment, so I forged ahead. Questions turned to how we’d ended up where we were, and inevitably my time in the Army came up. I try not to lead with discussions of my service, but those four years always find their way into the conversation.

“Did you deploy?”

“Yup, twice. Once to Iraq and once to Afghanistan.”

“Really? My cousin’s friend deployed too, and he did some really crazy shit over there. Did you see some stuff too?”

“Very cool. We got really lucky and things were quiet.”

“Oh, then you’re not a combat veteran.”

It wasn’t so much of an observation as an accusation, and it was a gut punch. I nodded along as she regaled me with stories of her cousin’s friend’s exploits overseas, but somewhere between the part where he parachuted into Baghdad and when he personally wrestled Saddam to the ground, I’d already started signaling the bartender with my eyes to bring the check. Unbeknownst to her, she pulled out a cork, and a torrent of shame, guilt, and frustration came rocketing to the surface. I spent the walk home in a daze caught between attempting to figure out why someone would need to minimize my service and my own thoughts of inadequacy and embarrassment.

I had known that I wanted to be a soldier since I was 14 years old. The only other job I’d wanted up to that point was an astronaut, but I had quickly realized that I’d never be good enough at math to get into space. Growing up, I’d read extensively about hard men doing hard things in hard places, and I knew that I wanted to join their ranks—to be tested and transformed from the meek Jewish kid from the Boston suburbs...
into a warrior through the crucible of combat. Sept. 11, the Iraq invasion, and the multitude of stories emerging from dusty battlefields only served to strengthen my resolve through college, enlistment, basic training, and combat medic school. But life rarely takes the path you were expecting.

* * *

I could see Sergeant Garcia was getting antsy, his legs involuntarily bouncing as he sat in the gunner’s sling, incrementally rotating the turret from right to left. He’d been getting more and more fidgety as the missions dragged on, and it was only partially because of the fifth energy drink he’d just downed. This was Garcia’s third tour, and he wasn’t used to this length of time without shooting at something.

I was a medic with a route clearance patrol; our entire purpose was to look for trouble. Our sister platoons had regularly found it, whether in the form of a suicide vehicle attempting to ram the convoy, bucking orders and chasing down would-be bombers into an abandoned farm house, or triggering an IED consisting of six 155mm artillery shells strapped together and buried under the road. As the senior medic in the engineer company, it was my job to debrief my medics after every mission, including the ones I wasn’t on. Hearing stories of wiping a bomber’s face off the side of a truck and pulling unconscious guys out of an overturned RG33, I couldn’t help but wonder when it would be my turn.

I heard Garcia yell something and quickly rotate the turret to the right side of the truck. I turned and peered out the thick window. An RKG-3 anti-tank grenade exploded in the street with a
muffled bang and a shower of sparks. I wondered out loud if someone had thrown a firework at us, but my platoon sergeant in the front seat, normally a man of few words, angrily cut me off. “They’re throwing grenades at us, Doc!” My adrenaline surged as I realized what the explosion really was: It was finally my test. Garcia let out an audible growl as he shifted the turret further right, scanning the building the grenade had come from for some sign of the throwers, ready to unleash a hail of .50 caliber rounds. But they had disappeared into a building full of civilians, and so we pushed on down the street, rattled and angry, but all in one piece. That was it; the closest I would come to combat disappeared.

"... the closest I would come to combat disappeared."
for my service-connected issues (like my back and my hearing loss), but I’d kept my visits to a minimum to avoid the inevitable feelings of shame. The thought of visiting on a weekly basis was abhorrent, but I needed the help and the VA was a much more affordable option than going through my HMO.

I remember waiting for my first appointment, trying to rehearse what I’d tell the therapist. Yes, I was relieved I hadn’t lost a limb or been exposed to potentially crippling psychological trauma—but could I admit that pain and suffering would have been preferred to the feelings of frustration and shame I carried with me? Deep down, I knew that serving overseas under that “white cloud” had been the best-case scenario, but I was trapped by a belief that service meant facing death.

Over time, therapy has allowed me to accept that I didn’t need a test for my service to mean something. I know, deep down, that I put just as much on the line as my fellow servicemembers who saw combat. This has helped me to accept how lucky I really was to have avoided the horrors of war and to let go of those things over which I have no control. But even now, part of me still longs to hear the crack of rounds whizzing overhead or see them impacting in the dirt around me. Some days are better than others. In the meantime, it might help to find a different dating app.

Dan Elinoff served as a medical sergeant in the 1st Armored Division from 2010 to 2014, with tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He now lives in Boston, Massachusetts, and works as a defense analyst for a think tank.