

My Life as a Soldier in the “War on Terror”

—Bradley Johnson

I sat helplessly in my living room on that day, watching as the events unfolded in front of me. I remember feeling like I should jump on a plane and go help. Logically, of course, I’d have done more harm than good. I wasn’t trained: I was a civilian. I vividly remember the anger and rage as I saw the World Trade Center fall. On that day—in that moment—I decided to become a soldier.

The day I went to the recruiter’s office is one of the more memorable days of my life. The memories are as vivid as my son’s birth. The sign out front read, “Freedom Loving Patriots Apply Here.” I walked straight in and asked for the “Freedom Loving Patriot” position. I was shaking, my palms were sweaty, and my heart was pounding out of my chest. The recruiter sat me down, gave me a list of options, told me exactly what needed to be done and sent me on my way to complete a series of tasks. I needed to lose nearly thirty pounds, gather documentation, take tests, and get myself into shape

It took me nearly four months to get into shape and lose enough weight to qualify for enlistment. That, in itself, was quite the feat (I had recently turned twenty-one and drank enough beer to kill an elephant). I left for Basic Combat Training (BCT) the day after my 22nd birthday full of piss and vinegar; well, piss and leftover bourbon, maybe. Arriving at Basic Training was interesting. I’ve seen dozens of military movies and was expecting a giant guy in a round hat to scream at me as soon as I rounded the corner; but that did not happen. In fact, things were astoundingly quiet for a week. Then, I found myself center stage in the movie *Full Metal Jacket*.

I arrived in South Carolina and began my adventure from citizen to soldier. Fourteen weeks later, I returned home ready to take on the world (or at least a part of it in the Middle East). And later that year, I knew I would get my chance. But in the meantime, I re-enrolled at Eastern Kentucky University to educate

myself and become a productive member of society. Some would say that it was my ignorance (or my arrogance) that led me to school with a deployment looming over my head. I would say that I needed to plan for the best and expect the worst. When you are a “Citizen-Soldier” the citizen part is as important as the soldier part. This is the reason I decided on the National Guard instead of the active Army. I wanted the chance to help my community directly as well as to be able to fight for my country.

Classes were going well, everything was in order, and I was well on my way to graduation. Afterwards, my plan was to attend Law School. I worked part time at the local insurance office and was going through a normal day—answering calls, selling insurance, and helping customers—when my office manager pages my phone to tell me that I have a call. I answer, “Can I help you.”

The voice on the other end says, “Raging Bull.” The line went silent and I knew what it meant. My heart dropped and my breathing became labored. I felt my world spinning as the gravity of what had just happened crushed me. I was ready and I had to accept the reality of the situation. This was real. This was not a drill. I was going to war.

I quietly walked into my boss’s office and said, “I just got deployed.” Without a word he nodded and I left with little ceremony. The three-mile drive home was the longest drive of my life. I had been married for only three months and now I would have to tell my new wife that I was leaving. It was October, and by November I would be gone to train and deploy somewhere in the Middle East.

With the ground war underway in Iraq, it was fair to assume I was headed there. In a grand exit, my company left our little town and headed south to our training site to prepare for waging war. It was both a long and a short three months. Long, because I saw my family three times; short, because I knew what tasks were ahead.

After witnessing the horrors of 9/11 and deciding to become a soldier, waiting in this place made me remember that I had always watched military shows and

documentaries, wondering if I would have what it takes when the time came. I was about to find out. That's not to say that my reasons for joining the military were all blood and guts; I found honor and pride in serving. It was a privilege to stand in a long line of men and women who had fought for this great nation. In a way, being a soldier held a certain romance for me. I wasn't out to be a hero; I wasn't out for glory on the battlefield; I was simply a soldier with a job to do.

After a miserable Christmas and worse New Year, the long and miserable flight to the Area of Operations (AO) was complete. We were there. Twelve hours later, I called home to let my wife know I was in country. She replied with two words that would change my life forever: "I'm Pregnant." Knowing pregnancies last nine months and deployments last at least twelve, I knew it was going to be a long one. I would sweat and bleed, and fight for an entire country that would need me. But I was also a long ways away when my wife would need me most.

This isn't the part of my story where I give a play-by-play of my time in Iraq. This is the part where I say that Iraq sucked, people died, people shot at me, and I shot back. I also made some of the best friends one could ask for. We are still brothers in the truest sense, despite being separated by distance and time. The bonds that we forged on the battlefield are bonds that cannot be weakened by time or distance. The people I served with are the only people in the world I would trust with my kids, my woman, or my booze.

My time in Iraq produced an interesting combination of "I'm a bad motherfucker" and "Please let me get home to see my son." It's an odd combination of "Fuck you. Bring it on motherfucker" and "I just want to go home." On the one side of the coin, you are trained, ready and willing. Above all else, you are fucking pissed off. At points, you go from feeling like you are wanted and needed by the locals to feeling like they don't want you there at all. So, you think, "Fuck it." You feel like equal parts Arnold in the end of *Predator* and Mel Gibson in the beginning of *Braveheart*. You'd rather not fight, but as

long as you have to, you are going to rain down hell upon the enemy. I realize this all sounds cruel and illogical, but so is war. You truly stop caring. You don't want to shoot, but you will. And you won't think about it, until you get home that is.

My tour ended and we came home. It was on that day the real struggle began. You don't realize it while it's happening. You don't even know that it is happening, but it is. While you fight and suffer and struggle, you are also changing, becoming someone totally different. The harsh and violent realities of war force you to change. Emotions are an inconvenience—they distract you—making you feel and think instead of react. A distracted soldier is a dead soldier. My evolution was a great thing on the battlefield, but it is just as much a bad thing when you get home. The inability to share or even *have* emotions is not something to be sought after. Five—almost six—years later that fight is still going on. I know you have seen the commercials with smiling people saying, “Veterans are a priority” and “helping them” is our job. Well, all that glimmers isn't gold. I have a chest full of medals, some that you can only get from being in combat. But to get the care I needed I still had to prove to the VA through letters from my peers that I was in combat.

The enormous bureaucracy involved with the Department of Veterans Affairs is oftentimes insurmountable. A trip to the VA hospital is like a trip to the DMV; and the level of care is sketchy at best. However, the VA has done great things for me: They pay for my schooling and they pay me a living allowance to go. They compensate me for injuries incurred while I was deployed and provide me with free medical care. It does make me wonder, though: Are they paying me so that I can walk away or so that they can? For all intents and purposes, the fighting I have done cost me my sanity and sense of normalcy. Even now, years later, my best friends in the world tell me that I'm different...that I am any number of things that are...*different*. Supposedly, I am violent, aggressive, loud, agitated, and not very nice. These are the descriptions that tend to top the list. It

hurts because I know that it is most likely true. I am different. I am scarred. I am flawed. I don't intend to sound like a victim here. I vowed to give my life for my country, and I still would. The part that they don't talk about is that your life *as you knew it* will be over after experiencing combat. You will be forced to deal with and accept a new reality. And this is a reality that trades my well being for taxpayer money.

I returned to my local insurance office to find that I no longer had a job. I know that USSERA, the relief act requiring employers to give back jobs to deployed guardsmen, guaranteed my job. But my job was half above the table and half below the table. It just wasn't going to work, financially. I re-enrolled at ECU in hopes of finishing a degree. But midway through my first semester back, I was called into action again.

This time, I went to Mississippi to help in the Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts. While there, my pregnant wife had a miscarriage. It took me four days to get home, longer than it took to get home from Iraq. By the time I got home, it was over. But being the good soldier that I was, I took it in stride. However, my wife did not. She began to question whether or not I had cheated on her while deployed and, more and more frequently, arguments were the result. If I had cheated, or given her a reason to think so, I would understand. I did neither. I was too busy trying to stay alive. Sure, the Army "offers" programs to help with this type of thing if you are "on base." But we were not on base. It was at this point that my son had his first birthday. I opted for a divorce, moved out of our house, and headed back to work and school. But this time, it was culinary school.

I worked, learned, cooked, and drank...a lot. Then, I met *her* and *she* saved my life. *She* dragged me out from under the pile of pain, anger, and depression that was stacked on top of me. And *she* is now my wife. My wife has not given me a hand out; rather, she has given me a hand up. She has loved and supported me, unconditionally.

Looking back, I realize that it's not my fault. It's not anybody's fault. Things just happen. I am on my way to a 2012 graduation. My life as a soldier in the War on Terror was and still is an interesting one. I have lived and seen and smelled and done many things that I can't take back. But many of these things...I don't want to take back. The Army National Guard and the United States have given and taken away many things. But these are all small prices to pay. In the end, I hold to the belief that my son will not have to pay the same price that I have. And that assurance justifies my hardships and my struggles. Freedom is not free.

