

Postcombat Residue

You are not broken

by MGySgt Charles A. Walker

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Simply put, Marines fight battles. That's what we do. Being a Marine is a calling and we are a unique warrior class. When Marines return from the fight, there is another battle that must be waged inside their hearts and minds. This is not new amongst warriors; it is as old as war, yet we still struggle with how to deal with it. I spoke with a chaplain once who had been a Marine infantry officer before trading in his rifle for a Bible, and he told me that there is a natural reaction to an unnatural event, something that happens when ordinary people face extraordinary events. Psychologists call it posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I don't like that phrase.

Warriors have been labeled after the fight with having a condition. This condition has changed names through the years: soldier's heart, shell shock, battle fatigue, combat stress, and so on. The Marine Corps has made great strides in recognizing symptoms and making resources available to help warriors through the difficult times that come after the fight. Much has been done in an attempt to remove the perceived stigma associated with PTSD, but too often the stigma is still there. For many, the perception is reality.

I am not a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a trained counselor, or a medical professional of any sort. As a matter of fact, 2 days after graduating high school I was on Parris Island undergoing recruit training, striving to earn the title "U.S. Marine." What I am, though, is a Marine leader, an infantryman, and a combat veteran. I have fought battles and shed blood, and have seen many fine young men fall. When I came home I entered a period of my life I refer to as "the angry and thirsty time." I know what it's like to push loved ones away, to drink too much, and to drastically swing between emotions of apathy, rage,

and deep grief. I know what it's like to become a workaholic in an effort to make a difference and have purpose. I have seen my family in a state of despair over not knowing how to help me while I continued to sow strife. All the while I kept it hidden, or so I thought. It is from this perspective that I speak.

My problem with the phrase "PTSD" lies in the word "disorder." When I hear "disorder" I hear "broken" and "unserviceable." I refused to accept that label. One day I was sitting at my desk finishing off another cup of morning coffee and I looked down at the empty mug. I have this sturdy, plain coffee cup that was given to me by a friend and mentor. It's nothing special, really. It's white and made out of hard plastic with the Marine Corps emblem on it. We found a box of them in a quadcon in Ramadi. The old "master guns" simply said, "Here, take one." I began using that cup every day, leaving it on my desk and never washing it out. After many years of use it has a black stain in it. That morning I stared into the empty cup and thought, "that's me."

This old coffee cup is solid, sturdy. You can drop it and it won't break. It's plain: just an Eagle, Globe, and Anchor on it. The coffee cup was designed to drink coffee—not water, not juice, just coffee. This is why it's called a "coffee cup." I drink coffee out of it every day—strong, black coffee. I use the cup for its primary purpose. Because I keep using it and don't stop to wash it, there is a black stain in it; a residue. The residue

serves as evidence that this cup was used for its primary purpose. In time, when I slow down, I will wash the mug, but the stain will always be there. The mug is not broken, though; it is not unserviceable. It simply shows signs that it was used for its primary purpose, that for which it was designed. It's not pretty, not fine china, and maybe you don't want to set it out for company, but it is not broken.

Likewise, we Marines emerge from combat with a residue; a stain. We are not broken, not unserviceable; instead, there is simply evidence that we were used for our primary purpose: to fight battles. When we slow down we can wash and the stain will become less visible, but in some manner it will always remain. We simply have postcombat residue.

I emerged from the angry and thirsty time through the love of my family, with time, and from the strength I found in my God. I would readily speak to another warrior, but just couldn't seem to open up to some clinically trained specialist who had never been to combat. I had to work this out with myself, my people, and my God, where "my people" denotes my family, others who share my faith, and my brothers in arms: other Marines.

I write this not as a slight to any program, resource, or specialist out there that provides assistance to warriors as they emerge from this storm inside, but simply from the perspective of one fighting man to another. Marines: Simply shake off the label they try to give you. Consider the analogy of the coffee cup and the phrase "postcombat residue." Don't let pride stand in the way of taking time to "wash out the cup." Your brothers keep the faith with you. You are not broken.

Semper Fidelis.

