Doing it the Hard Way: My Life as a Story of Hope

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Doing it the Hard Way:

My Life as a Story of Hope

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the
University Honors Program
University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

May 3rd, 2012

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Cole Chair in Ethics
For Jocelyn, always...
Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity to thank two individuals who have worked with me every step of this long, and often arduous, process: Dr. Thomas Smith and Dr. Hugh LaFollette. I know I didn’t make it easy for you and, at times, I know there had to be points where both of you were frustrated with me. All I can say is thank you for having faith in me; for encouraging me to continue when writing this paper and addressing these memories became too much to bear. Thank you for both your criticisms and kind words because both forced me to view myself from a different angle and sometimes we need that. I could not have made it this far without you. Thank you.

And thank you as well, reader, for taking the time to hear my story. I hope you find inspiration in these pages and that it carries across all things you do.
Preface

In order to understand everything that follows I think it's important to understand why I joined the Army in the first place. I didn't do it for glory or recognition. I didn't do it because I felt I was a troubled youth in search of some modicum of structure (though, as it turns out, I was to some extent). I didn't do it because I felt an overwhelming sense of patriotism (although I do now). I joined because late in my high school career I learned that I was going to be a father. I'm not sure I can fully emphasize how terrified I was when I learned that fact. It's not something that every 17 year old goes through and I wasn't sure exactly how we were going to handle it. Reading back over these words more than a year after I originally wrote them I feel that maybe I’m underemphasizing things a bit here. As I approach 30 I’ve begun to realize that I needed the Army a lot more than it needed me. I think I needed to get away from home for reasons that will become abundantly clear as you continue to read this. It didn’t matter if it was college, the military or something else-I was leaving as soon as I had the chance. I don’t know how cognizant of that fact I was back then but I realize it now. Regardless, I think what that shows me most is that I was as practical back then as I am now. The Army seemed like the safest path I could have chosen but, as sometimes happens in the course of things, didn’t turn out to be what I originally planned when I enlisted. But things never seem to work out the way we expect them to, right?

Perhaps some background is in order. What childhood I remember wasn't very pleasant. I grew up in a very poor family. And I don’t mean poor as in we were the
family without a computer or anything like that. By poor I mean I can clearly remember being young and standing in lines waiting for government assistance in the form of foods such as cheese and peanut butter. My mother was a waitress and my father a drunk but I remember loving them just the same, at least early on. Isn't that how it's supposed to be when it comes to family? This thought gives me pause. Do we, or perhaps should we is a better question, love our families for no other reason than the fact that they are our families, even if their actions prove show them to be unworthy of our love? I struggle with this question on a daily basis. How can I love my parents when most of the time I don’t like them as people? And did I even really love them back then? That’s a question I find myself asking a lot these days. Maybe it’s because I have a daughter of my own and couldn’t imagine putting her through the things my parents put me through when I was a kid. Maybe I’m just an asshole who never grew to respect his parents. Maybe it’s a combination of both of these. Even now, over a year after I'd originally written this section, I'm still struggling to answer these questions. My hope is that I will attain some semblance of clarity as I progress.

Setting those questions aside for the time being, I thought we were better off when my parents divorced. I was only 9 at the time but smart enough to see the kind of person my father was and knowing that he wouldn't be around to drink away what little money we did have gave me hope that we might have an opportunity to forge a new beginning. I was wrong. The man my mom started seeing after my dad moved to North Carolina was just as big a drunk as my father ever was. He was also a crack addict and physically and emotionally abusive to both my mother and me. The problem was, he was smart, or
maybe clever would be a better way to describe him. He knew how to get away with it, isolating us from one another and then having his fun. He was sick. The only person who stood up to him was my older brother and that earned him a one way bus ticket to live with my dad in North Carolina. That was a major turning point in my life and one from which all the events that followed progressed. Once my brother was out of the picture he was free to do as he pleased, which was never a good thing.

I remember being punched, slapped, kicked, chastised, berated and put through all manner of abuse for such trivialities as dropping a glass on the floor while washing the dishes or leaving the toilet seat up in the bathroom. He actually grounded me to the bathroom for a full week at one point. I don’t remember what I did but I can’t think of any offense worthy of such punishment. I literally could not leave the bathroom unless someone was using it or taking a shower; I even ate and slept in there. I’m actually embarrassed as I write this. In a way, that’s the beauty of this assignment (I call it an assignment but I’ve long since stopped viewing it as one), I can confront the underlying emotions and factors that have led to me being the person I am at this point in my life. My best guess is that such introspection can only be beneficial but only time will tell. I’m not an adherent to Freudian psychoanalysis but I do see the possible applications and benefits of free association and talking about our problems. For that reason you may find that ever so often I will break off on a tangent that may not seem relevant to whatever I’m writing about at that point. I only ask that you please bear with me because it in that moment, it matters to me and something beneficial to you (but probably me) may follow.
It wasn't an easy life to live and I did what I thought was the best thing I could do in that situation: I read books. Books became my escape from the everyday hardship I was forced to endure. They were also either cheap so I never had to ask for money to buy them or they were free altogether from the library when I could get a ride. I also worked as much as I could in order to stay out of the house as much as possible. I mowed lawns, washed dishes, walked dogs; basically anything I could find. I just knew it was better to not be home because that entailed emotional and, more often than not, physical pain. A consequence of that is that I was forced to toe a fine line between self-preservation and being there for my mom. Now that I’m older that thought disgusts me. I can actually feel a sense of rage inside as I think about it. She was supposed to be there for me, not the other way around. But as a kid you have a different take on things and I was no different.

I think what hurt the most back then was feeling like I was letting her down. Having to watch her deal with the torment she did without ever standing up for her is something I live with every day. Now, as I reflect, it just saddens me to know that she let herself be abused like she did because she actually had a choice in the matter; I didn't, aside from running away. In truth, I don't really respect my mom, not only for not sticking up for me but for not sticking up for herself. I’ve suppressed a lot of memories from that period of my life, and for good reason, but the more I work on this the clearer things become. It’s as if a veil is being lifted. At times, it’s made it difficult to carry on writing, afraid of what I might find around the next bend. It’s terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. I trudge on because I feel that these matters lie at the core of who I am
as a person and provide the foundation for what drives me in everything I do. The more inward I look the more I realize that part of me is still that lost little boy; a child who should have been protected but was forgotten and abandoned in my most critical moments of need. I’m not trying to romanticize this; it was an ugly reality. I was a kid and she was responsible for my well-being, not the other way around. One thing I know for certain is that no child should have to suffer through the life I lived. That portion of my life came to a screeching halt when I was about 13 years old. Cognitive psychologists use the term “flashbulb memory” to describe the mental images we develop during significant events in our lives. As an example, try to remember where you were and what you were doing during the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001. I’m willing to bet your recollection of events for that day is better than that of 9/10 and 9/12. The following description is something very similar for me. I was sitting in my bedroom listening to my parents argue one day when the discussion turned, as it so often did, to me. I don’t recall what Harry (her boyfriend) was getting mad about but I knew I was in trouble (and that’s a horrible and helpless realization). It’s like the ant looking up at the shoe bearing down on him and asking what he did to deserve it. He was just there. In a nutshell, that’s me, I was just there. As I sat listening I heard my mom shout "You leave him the hell alone!" so I ran toward the door to try and lock it. I was too late. He kicked the door in and smashed me in the mouth with a wooden plank he was fond of beating us with. What I remember most clearly are his eyes as he stared at me in the drug induced rage. If you’ve ever seen a shark attack something you might have an idea of what I’m talking about. It’s terrifyingly inhuman. I
remember the pain as my tooth shattered and frothy blood began pouring from my mouth. I dashed for the French doors that led to our backyard, my only hope being to make it out and run somewhere safe where I could call the police. I was just able to wiggle free of his grasp on the collar of my shirt, clear the doorway and jump the fence. I don’t know that I’ve ever run as fast before that day or since. I went across the street to a friend’s house and called the police who showed up just a few minutes later. I watched in fear as he was escorted from the house and taken to jail. It wasn't the last time I saw him but it was the last time he ever put a finger on my mother and me. It was small victory almost lost among many defeats.

As an aside, I was 16 the next time I saw him. I was working as a cashier at Kash-N-Karry when I looked up and saw his shark-eyes and twisted smartass grin he always wore. I said the first thing that came to mind. I told him I would kill him if I ever saw him again. I meant it too. For reasons that will explained later on, I've changed my outlook on that but part of me wishes he had been waiting outside the store when I got off that night so I could take out 5+ years of pent up rage on him. I'm thankful he wasn't.

As it turns out, the victory I mentioned above was very close to being short-lived. Not long after he was taken away, he started to call the house regularly from jail. I don’t know if it was fear or love (scary) that motivated my mom to accept the charges for the first time but I know that over time she decided she was going to let him come back into our home. I had a serious decision to make. Even though I was only 13, I was well aware of the fact that if he came back things would get much worse for me. I had put him in jail and he would certainly make me suffer for it.
At that point I gave my mom an ultimatum: either she had to stop talking to him or I was going to run away from home and go live with my dad. The fact that I might leave absolutely abhorred her but for the life of me I cannot figure out why. Was she afraid of what life would be like without me or that I would have the gall to even make such a threat? I still don't know. She had forced me to live one step away from being beaten within an inch of my life, and was contemplating letting him return for an encore performance, but she would not allow me to leave the situation because she loved and needed me. What a joke.

I’ve begun to wonder after all these years exactly what it was she needed. If she loved me so much why would she let these awful things happen to me? How anyone allows those things to happen to someone they "love" might be a better question. She used to joke that one day I would be her ticket out of poverty and that she would grow old one day and I would take care of her the way she always took care of me. But when did she ever really take care of me? And who views their children like that, little cash cows to be used and abused? Even now, it sickens me.

I can see why she thought that might happen, though. You see, I was always smart, possibly even brilliant. My IQ score in kindergarten was 151 and from everything I’ve read it doesn’t deviate much over the lifespan. I was in the Gifted Program, then MAGNET, then International Baccalaureate as I progressed through the education system and was rarely challenged. She knew the implications of this fact well before I was ever aware of them. I just thought it was cool to be smart. It disgusts and infuriates me to think that even then she may have viewed me as a meal ticket out of the slums. I wish I
could tell you that this wasn’t really the case but the fact that she owes me close to
$30,000 provides a lot of support for that claim.

You might be wondering why any of this matters. I can only answer by saying the
events of my childhood shaped who I am as a person, same as they did for you and
everyone else. We all deal with adversity in our lives to some extent, though the severity
certainly varies between individuals. I've included these memories because I want you to
understand what I've lived through. But more than that, my hope is that opening myself
up in this manner will help me reconcile the conflicting emotions I deal with in my life.

I could have turned out like one of any number of children who grew up in a
similar situation and turned to drugs or crime as a response to adversity. But I didn't.
Through everything I maintained a focus on the one thing that I hoped would allow me to
rise above the dire situation in which I was raised: my education. Education is the great
equalizer. Every moment I spent grounded I had my nose in a book hoping to find some
semblance of meaning in a life that was sorely lacking it. I desperately wanted to be out
of the situation I was in and education seemed to be the best way to accomplish that.
Also, I want to have a better life than the one I was born into. And while it seems petty, I
now realize that my success is the best way to hurt those that once hurt me (and allowed
me to be hurt). Here's an example. I'm graduating in a few weeks and I asked my mom
if she would like to attend. She declined but failed to provide a reason. I was later told
that said she would not attend because she felt I wouldn't do the same for her. How petty
is that? That's the difference between me and her. I would have been there for her and
she's never been there for me. This has been a sobering realization for me to say the least, and one that I feel will affect all my future interactions with her.

That brings me to an important point I want to make about the nature of family. They say each person has two families: the family you’re born into and the family you choose. If that is the case, my two "families" couldn’t be any more different. I’ve painted a relatively dire picture of my biological family in these pages and I wanted to spend some time here talking about the people who really helped me make it through those days because I’m not sure where I would be without them.

I don’t consider myself a popular person. I would even go so far as to say that being around most people makes me extremely uncomfortable. I’ve always been that way, though. I think a large part of that had to do with growing up poor. I never felt comfortable or confident in myself. I still don’t. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out reasons why people would want to hang out with me because I really didn’t feel I had that much to offer. Our house was always disgusting and I couldn’t stand the thought of bringing people there. In all actuality I couldn’t stand being there myself. The acrid odor of smoke pervaded everything because my mom and whoever she was with at them time smoked two packs a day. The carpet smelled, not only of smoke but from the frequent offerings left behind by our dogs, offerings I was required to clean up daily.

I often went to school with clothes that were unwashed and smelled of secondhand smoke. It still shames me to say that I was the oft-mentioned “smelly kid” in my classes for most of my early years. I wouldn’t have wanted to be my friend either.
Things changed for the better when I joined the Gifted program in 2nd grade. They may have another name for it today but Gifted, as we called it, is a supplementary program for student who demonstrate higher than average aptitude or intelligence as measured by Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests administered during the 1st grade year. For me, this meant that once a week I would deviate from my normal schedule and go to the portable classroom where the rest of our Gifted class met.

I was lucky because the classes were given at my school so I didn’t have to hop on a bus and travel to another campus. The goal of the program was to push those advanced students with a more rigorous set of coursework outside of the normal curriculum. I loved it because I was not inclined to get in trouble the way I did in my more traditional courses: lashing out verbally and, at times, physically. I also loved it because it provided a positive outlet for my creative and intellectual instincts which was sorely lacking in my regular classes.

I also consider gifted class the first place I ever met people like myself. I’m not trying to speak of traditional students in a negative light, it’s just that I remember feeling that the work I was doing in those classes was entirely too easy and I couldn’t understand how people could find it difficult. The gifted students, for reasons I’ve never truly discerned, were also the most understanding people I’d met up to that point in my life. I never felt unwelcomed when I went to gifted class like I did in most of my other classes, where I was mocked and ridiculed daily.

Gifted class was the first place I remember making friends. What’s even more interesting, and something I view as unique in this day and age, is that I remain close
friends with many of the people I met back then. I consider it a testament to the strength of our friendship that we have remained close as long as we have, almost 22 years. I’ll be 30 this year and met many of these guys when I was 8 years old. I got remarried recently and four of my groomsmen were guys I met in gifted class.

I’ve asked people I’ve met throughout my life if they have friendships that go that far back and the overwhelming response is that people cannot believe we’ve been friends and stayed close as long as we have. I find a lot of people have fond memories of people that go back that far but these are guys I hang out with almost every weekend. As far as I know it’s a situation that is unique to my small group of friends (according to people I know).

I’ve often asked what it is that keeps us together when so many people drift apart over the years. Proximity? I guess that could be it. My only response to that is that over the years we have all gone our separate ways for periods of time; whether to school or to war in my case. But we always come back together. Over the past few years I’ve come to know what these guys are to me. They are the brothers I never had. They (and their parents-I would be remiss were I to leave them out of this as well) taught me what it truly meant to be a part of a family. And I don’t mean spending the night over at a friend’s house and enjoying some pizza and gaming, though we certainly did a lot of that.

My friends and their parents were well aware of the misery and danger I dealt with at home and they accepted me nonetheless. Their parents took me in when I showed up unannounced because I left home when it wasn’t safe. They fed and clothed me and made me feel like one of their own when all I ever felt before that was alone. They
showed me what it meant to be a member of a family and that you could have something without having to give something in return. It took me a long time to adjust to that. I sometimes feel like I can never fully repay them. I’ve asked myself if the reason I stay so close to them is that I’m just looking for the opportunity to try but I know in my heart that isn’t the case. We’re close because we love each other as only brothers can. I hope to grow old with these guys and watch as our kids share in the activities that we did when we were younger.

As I previously stated, I participated in the gifted program in Elementary school and the Magnet program in Middle School. I was a member of the International Baccalaureate program in high school and graduated 10th in my class. As I got closer to graduating high school I learned that I had been offered a full academic scholarship to the University of Florida. I couldn't believe it. After all the hardship and turmoil I finally had an opportunity to get away and start a new life for myself. But that’s when everything changed.

I met Kira during the middle of my senior year. We were both working at Publix at the time and hit it off as soon as we met. One thing led to another and soon we were dating. Before long, as is so often the case these days, she was pregnant. She informed me of this fact about three weeks before we graduated and I was floored. I didn't think there was any way we would make it on our own in Gainesville so I had to think of alternatives. Looking back on it now I realize I just didn’t want to be another poor family living off the system; I didn't want to be a carbon copy of my own family. I had
ambitions and drive. I wanted to be the opposite of my own family. I decided to join the Army thinking my four year commitment would provide the stability our young family needed to get through that transitional part of our lives. Serving in the military would provide a solid financial foundation for us to build from. I would gain essential skills and experience that would make it much easier to find a job later on as well. Also, I could use the GI Bill to pay for college when the time came. And while I was doing these things she could be home with our daughter during those highly important early years of her life. It seemed the ideal situation given our predicament. I knew it was a sacrifice going into the decision making process but it seemed a worthy one to get our lives together off on the right foot. I graduated high school in June of 2001 and left for Basic Combat Training the following month.

**Basic Training and 9/11:**

The thought of joining the Army scared the hell out of me which I think is a natural reaction for any 17 year old (even a seasoned 17 year old like me) though I couldn't know then the true ordeals I would face in the very near future. I was in basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky when the tragic events of September 11th, 2001 took place. We were being fitted for our Class A dress uniform when our Drill Sergeants came in screaming at us to get down and "beat our faces"-military jargon for doing push-ups until our arms felt like limp noodles. They "smoked" us, that is, made us engage in
physical training activities, for well over an hour until all of us were spent and were barely able to move.

Then they did something we'd never seen before. They gathered all of us around and told us what had happened. For the majority of my time at BCT our Drill Sergeants functioned like robots because that's the point of the entire program. They seek to break you down physically and mentally and rebuild you stronger than you were by pushing you to the limit and teaching you what your body and mind are capable of accomplishing. I'd been pushed physically and mentally before, as I've described above, but I never felt a sense of malice emanating from my Drill Sergeants the way I did with past parental figures. It was never out of spite, they simply seemed dedicated to making us believe in ourselves by pushing us past what we thought our breaking point to be. I would go so far as calling it borderline reprogramming, while psychologists may refer to it as shaping. When I left Fort Knox in October of that year I wasn't the same person I was when I got there. That day in the tailor shop the Drill Sergeants showed us a very real human side of them we hadn't seen and it terrified me. Prior to that they had never looked vulnerable. If they were worried, we had a serious problem on our hands. I knew then and there that this was real and that I needed to prepare myself mentally and physically for what was ahead, whatever it may be.

As a side note, and perhaps paradoxically, Basic Training was one of the best experiences I’ve ever had. It was the first time I’d really been out on my own and that freedom in and of itself was wholly worthwhile. A lot of my fellow soldiers hated it there, thinking that the Drill Sergeants were assholes and that the training we were
receiving was, for the most part, outdated and unnecessary. I never looked at it like that. I think that some people just have a problem with authority, an issue I never dealt with long as those in charge were worthy of the position. By that I mean some people maintain their position of authority because they earn the respect of their subordinates. My Drill Sergeants, though they could be intimidating at times, were such leaders. If you kept yourself in check and executed the given commands, they usually left you alone and they never punished you out of spite. My mom's abusive boyfriend, on the other hand, used fear as a means of establishing his authority. It was effective but I never respected him. And even now I think it was only effective because I was so young. I wouldn't tolerate that from an authority figure at this point in my life.

I embraced the freedom those 10 weeks offered and in the process learned a lot about myself. It seems paradoxical as well that I would consider Basic Training a form of freedom, but you have to remember that on more than one occasion I had been relegated to the bathroom for weeks at a time in my household. I felt free every time I walked out the front door. I also gained at least a modicum of self-confidence because for once in my life I was doing something as opposed to being told I couldn’t do anything. I heard that a lot as a kid and after awhile, regardless of how mentally tough you think are, you start to believe it.

I also left there in the best physical shape of my life. Aside from hanging out with my friends, I never played sports growing up. I was always told I was too small or that we didn’t have the money. There was one exception. My mom was in a car accident and received a decent settlement from the guy who hit her. She used some of that money
to send me and my brother to take Tae Kwon Do lessons. I thought that was a great experience but, unfortunately, the money ran out before we could earn our black belts. Anyway, I gained 15 pounds of muscle as a result of the extreme strength training regimen I endured during my time in Basic Training which was amazing to me since I arrived at Fort Knox weighing approximately 110 lbs. That boost in physical maturity did a lot for my self-confidence as well.

I learned some not-so-great things about myself at Basic Training as well. For example, I found that I didn’t experience certain emotions in the same manner as the other guys in my unit. Mail call, for example, provided most of the guys the opportunity to reconnect with the outside world that they were sorely missing. I felt no such desire. With very few exceptions the outside world represented misery and pain. I sent letters to Kira who, at the time, was pregnant with our daughter, and the friends I mentioned above but that’s really about it. They were really the only people I really wanted to maintain contact with and it was great to hear from them when they found time to write. It served as a reminder of my purpose for being there. Kira even sent me ultrasound images of our daughter about half-way through my time there which really helped motivate me to complete my training and get back home to her. As for the rest of my family, my dad and brother were in North Carolina and I had no contact information for them. In fact, I didn’t see or talk to either of them from the time my parents divorced until just before my high school graduation, a period of 8 years. Even though we’re closer now I still feel a sense of disconnect, as if they’re more like friends than family.
Another thing I learned in Basic is that I don’t experience fear the same way others do. Fear is the tool the Drill Sergeants use to break you down. They try to get into your head and under your skin so that momentarily you stop believing in yourself. Once you reach that point you really have two options: man up and deal with it or bow out as gracefully as possible. What I found interesting is that I was never really afraid of my Drill Sergeants. There was nothing they could do to me that hadn’t already been done and once you realize that, it’s actually a little bit scary. I’d seen “the bottom” in terms of being afraid and once you’re there at least two things happen. First, you never forget the darkness, pain and suffering. It becomes as much a part of you as your hair color or shoe size. Second, you know that everything else that follows will never be as bad as what you’ve seen. It’s like smashing yourself in the thumb with a hammer and then doing it again because the second blow will numb the pain of the first one. This is how I experienced Basic Training and the rest of my life as well. It’s really a double edged sword because while I know the demons I may face in the future pale in comparison to those I’ve already seen, the weight of those I carry sometimes feels like too much to bear.

Fort Bragg

After leaving Fort Knox I traveled to Fort Gordon, Georgia for Advanced Individual Training (AIT). AIT is where you learn your job. Essentially, prior to leaving for Basic Training each potential recruit takes a test called the ASVAB: Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. It's similar to many other standardized tests in that it
assesses your strengths and weaknesses across a wide range of skills. Your overall rating is known as your General Technical (GT) Score and that number determines which jobs you may apply, or sign a contract, to learn. My GT score was 122/130 so I basically could have chosen any job the military offered. I narrowed my choices to training as a communications specialist or a linguist and, in the end, I chose communications because being a linguist required a 6 year initial enlistment where as a communications position only required 4 years.

In my case I was taught how to use Multichannel Transmission Systems, radio and antenna systems capable of long range telecommunication. It seemed in every course the onus was on learning my job because one day someone's life might depend on it. They had no idea how right they were. I approached and finished AIT in the same fashion as every other level of my education; as Distinguished Honor Graduate of my class. About two weeks before graduation my class learned that we were to be separated and sent to various bases around the world. Some went to Korea, some to Alaska, and a handful went to Germany. I was sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, home of the 82nd Infantry Division (Airborne).

I was given two weeks of leave after leaving AIT to pack my things and travel to Fort Bragg. During those two weeks Kira and I got married. She had recently given birth to our daughter, Jocelyn, and we were eager to make everything official and begin our lives together. It wasn't a fancy affair, we simply went to the courthouse and said we do but it was important to me nonetheless. Having grown up in a house of disarray I was determined to make my life better and provide for my family as best I could. It was also
a decision based at least in part on finance. Once we were married I qualified for additional income to support my family.

When we arrived at Fort Bragg in January of 2002 things were crazy to say the least. My parents sold my car while I was in AIT and she had recently been in an accident and totaled hers. We traveled to Fort Bragg with our hopes for the future and all of our possessions in a 20-foot U-Haul truck. We had no money, nor any true means to get any, aside from the meager stipend I earned as an Army Private which was roughly $800 every two weeks. The additional assistance the military provides for families, Basic Allowance for Housing and Separate Rations, would not go into effect until the following month because of the amount of time it took to process my marriage license and my daughter's birth certificate. We stayed in an efficiency hotel for two weeks before Kira's aunt traveled to Fayetteville to help us out. With her assistance we were able to move into a small home. We also got financing (which I thought was reasonable at the time but later learned otherwise) for a new car. I ended up getting scammed into paying a 19% interest rate that I could not get out of for the term of the loan, but at least we had a car. It was really embarrassing to drive a 20-foot moving truck onto Fort Bragg because it had to be inspected every time, a process that entailed me unlocking the back door and allowing total strangers the opportunity to rummage through our meager personal effects because I had no place to store them. And all of this in plain view of the vehicle behind me. Again, at least we had a car! Things were going as well as could be expected but the possibility of going to war was never far from my mind.
The Army lifestyle is all about routine. I'm not really sure why they place an emphasis on routine but I would hazard a guess that it has a lot to do with discipline. I never asked. Once they are firmly established, day to day activities typically become wash, rinse, and repeat. Mondays were vehicle maintenance, Tuesdays were communication equipment maintenance, Wednesdays were Common Task Training (basic military skills training), Thursday was Sergeant's Time during which our small teams would break off for individual training, and Fridays were days to take care of anything that we missed during the week. I enjoyed it for the most part. The hardest part was the amount of time I spent at work. PT (Physical Training) took place from 7:30 to 8:30. We would then get 45 minutes to shower and eat before actual work call. Most days we got off between 5:30 and 6:00 followed by the long drive through traffic home. Once home I would iron my uniform and polish my boots for the following day. What this means is on a typical day I would spend about an hour and a half with my wife and child, not nearly enough.

As weeks turned into months it placed a lot of strain on my relationship with Kira. Thinking things would normalize over time, I never acknowledged it but it was always there nonetheless. In November that year we were ordered to participate in a two week field training exercise (FTX). These exercises were the worst. Imagine a camping trip during which you have to work 12 hour shifts maintaining a communications link and providing phones and internet to your users. While not on shift other responsibilities included maintaining a perimeter guard looking out for simulated opposing forces
(OPFOR) and helping the kitchen crew clean their dishes and other utensils. In other words, sleep was in short supply.

This particular exercise happened to coincide with one of the worst ice storms in the history of that area during which temperatures rarely rose above 20 degrees. At our site moisture in the air froze to our camouflage netting causing it to collapse on our two communication vehicles. The following morning, our commander arrived at the site with orders to pack up and head back to our company area. We were elated to be done with the training over a week early. We all believed that extreme cold was the main cause but when we got back to where the rest of our unit was we learned otherwise. We were told we were going to deploy to Iraq early sometime the next year.

For those keeping track we knew where we were going long before the public had any clue there was a potential conflict on the horizon. Our main body of military forces didn't deploy to Iraq until April the following year so we knew roughly 6 months before the general population. That was a hard pill to swallow; not just because I was going to war but because I had to leave my family behind. We spent the next three months preparing ourselves and our equipment for what lay ahead. Looking back I don't know if it was more difficult to prepare myself or my family.

Some Thoughts on War

Over the next few pages I’m going to tell you about war, not because you want or need to hear it but because, for a lot of reasons, I need to get it out. I’ve dreaded getting
to this point in my thesis. It has literally kept me up nights because some of the memories of the time I’ve spent overseas are not good ones. War is funny; not in the comical sense but in the way it seems to affect each of us differently. Our reactions also vary based on how old we are at the time of the experience and based on our experiences going in.

As a kid I remember watching many different war movies: Braveheart, Gettysburg, Platoon, Full Metal Jacket and Glory just to name a few. These movies, and more, really helped shape my early thoughts on war. I remember playing war games with little cap guns and replica pineapple grenades, each of us taking turns being American soldiers fighting back the Nazis or cowboys fighting Indians. Growing up in the South we would even play games where some of us were Blues and the rest Grays, although in our battles the South had no reason to rise again for it was always the victor. War was romantic and idealistic; there was glory to be had from fighting for your country and beating down oppressors and savages. It was always so easy to take aim and shoot down a Jap or Gook or Kraut.

As I grew older my perspective began to change. For one thing I had no time for games. My studies really occupied the majority of my days. But I also think that I dealt with so much pain and anguish at home that I really had no stomach for those types of activities. Why play war games when your life is one battle after another and you spend your days moving from one skirmish to the next? Everyone could view their life like this if they so chose but I doubt that many people do. Some people wouldn't know adversity if it hit them in the face and come undone the moment it does rear its ugly head.
Anyway, up until the moment I actually left for war for the first time, I only had a fanciful notion of what the concept actually meant. I would even go so far as to say that one cannot fully develop an outlook on it until they themselves are a part of it. That may come off condescending but that is not my intent. Indeed, there are many who have felt war's cold grip reach into their life and steal someone away from them. But I feel that even a loss such as this cannot truly help a person formulate an outlook on such a complex topic. It must be experienced firsthand and my own past has helped me come to a few different conclusions about war and its effects.

There is no glory in battle and I doubt there ever has been. War is a disgusting and condemnable undertaking that often leads men (and women) to make choices they would make in no other situation. And while I thoroughly enjoy reading epic works like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* for their entertainment value, I believe they portray an inaccurate picture of the hardships that men face in battle.

For example, it is not an easy thing to take a man's life. Think about it to yourself right now and list the circumstances in which you would commit such an act. I would hazard a guess that it's a very short list with only 3-4 items, if that. What's more, you would probably only find one acceptable reason on the battlefield: self-preservation. I would argue, though, that such an encounter on the battlefield really has less to do with war than it does with chance. I'm sure in that in the moment you and the other combatant are not thinking about the specific reasons you are in that situation (political, etc). You're thinking about staying alive no matter what you have to do. Where's the glory in this? Is this noble? These are very important questions, especially at a time in our global
development that we have the means to avoid such direct confrontation. Globalization has led to a worldwide network in which we can disseminate information with just a few keystrokes. Why then do we still find men and women losing their lives on the battlefields in meaningless wars?

Also, anyone who says that it's easy to kill another human being is either full of shit or has never really done so. This was one of the most difficult aspects of war that I found myself faced with. I'm not a spiritual person but I do believe in the value of human life; it is one of the things that separates us from lesser animals. In combat, though, we are reduced to animals and it is appalling. What's worse is that acts we commit in the heat of battle linger on inside us, fundamentally changing the person that we are.

I would also like to speak for a bit about my thoughts on our current conflict, though I must first say how excited and happy I am to know our soldiers have finally started coming home. I'm not naïve enough to believe we’ll pull all of our troops out of that region but it’s a start. The first thing I have to say is that I’m not, nor was I ever, a supporter of the Bush administration or their decision to go to war with Iraq in the first place. As an American citizen I was appalled and disgusted by the events of September 11th, 2001. Never before had a threat hit so close to home and I feel it really shook the foundations of our society like nothing before. In some way it affected all of us, either personally or by altering our perceptions of safety and national security. Being that I was in Basic Training when it happened, I would include myself among those affected personally. I don’t think I realized at the time just how much it would change my life.
Operation Iraqi Freedom I:

The first time I went to war I was 20 years old, just a kid with my entire life still ahead of me. What were you doing when you were 20? I’ve already provided an overview of the circumstances that led to my joining the military so I won’t beat that particular dead horse. Suffice it to say that when I joined deploying was the furthest thing from my mind because we weren’t at war at the time. It’s just another example of how quickly things can change.

I wish I had the words to explain to you how I felt. It was such a unique mixture of emotions that I’ve never come close to feeling like that and I doubt I ever will again. I didn’t want to believe something like that could ever happen to me. I’d tell myself that I was too smart to become fodder in a war I didn’t believe in or that my life was more valuable than the lives of my battle buddies. But that was all bullshit because we were equally expendable in the view of the Army. It sounds awful doesn’t it? Imagine how we felt. It’s funny, though, how that “me-against-the-world” mentality can inspire a person or group of people to come together and defy the odds. In our mind’s eye we were world beaters but that was just an illusion because you’ll never beat this world. The deck is stacked against us from the get go. Our only hope is to tread water for as long as we can.

One of the worst aspects of the period leading up to the actual deployment is the sense of anticipation, that palpable feeling of impending doom. None of us thought we’d make it home. It was worse for me because I had a family to consider. Most of the guys
I deployed with were relatively close to my age but didn’t have the additional burden of worrying about their wife and daughter at home suffering through their absence like I did. It didn’t take long until the effects of thinking about that every moment of every day began to wear on me. I started to distance myself from them to make it easier for them when I didn’t come home, because I was so sure that would be the case. The closer my wife tried to get to me, the more I struggled to pull away. It seems foolish now but you have to remember I was just a kid who had suffered through hardship and loss throughout the majority of my life. I didn't want anyone else to have to suffer because of decisions I had made. Looking back now, I sometimes wish I had done things differently.

I remember clearly the last night I would ever spend with Kira and Jocelyn as a single family unit. Driving home I felt as a death row inmate must feel as he slowly makes his way to the electric chair. I'm not typically a defeatist but I felt beaten, if that makes any sense. I didn't want to look my wife in the eye and tell her I was leaving the next day. I didn't want to watch my daughter sleeping and wonder if it would be the last time. But that's exactly what I did. I told her I was leaving and cried along with her so that she would know her pain was my own. I didn't make excuses or tell her everything was going to be alright because if I've learned one thing in my life, it is that things do not always turn out alright. Sometimes it doesn't work out for the best and that's just life.

When we drove on post the next morning I was amazed to see the number of family members who came out, especially considering the short notice. That expression of patriotism and love helped shed light on a depressingly grim situation. I found myself feeling uplifted and positive about deploying for the first time and although that feeling
wouldn't last it was nice to spend the last few hours with Kira and Jocelyn in a positive state.

They allowed our families to accompany us to the airport we would be flying out from but we weren't able to spend a lot of time with them because there was so much to do. We had to grab all the instruments of war we might need over there: weapons and ammunition, chemical protective suits, gas masks, etc. These were the devices that would see us home safely, or so we were told.

Just before we boarded the bus to the flight-line, I kissed my wife for the last time. I hugged my daughter as hard as I could (given her small size at the time) and said goodbye to both of them. I struggled to keep the tears back as I boarded because I didn't want them to see me cry. I wanted to be strong for them, even though I felt like it was the last time I would see them. As the bus pulled away I finally lost it, sobbing as quietly as possible until some of the guys on my team came over to reassure me that I would see them again. It certainly didn't feel that way to me. Of course, I did see them again, but that part comes later.

You know, it's funny now but I remember the flight(s) overseas being pretty enjoyable. That seems odd in retrospect but a number of factors play into that. First, I'd only been on a plane once before that so it was really a new experience for me. But I think it was more than that. It was getting past that emotional breakaway and finally beginning the deployment that really made the difference. I had dreaded leaving and saying goodbye to my family for so long that once the deed was done I finally got the opportunity to decompress a bit. It was a commercial flight too and the flight attendants,
knowing where we were going and the risks inherent in the journeys we were setting off upon, made every effort to make the flight as enjoyable for us as possible. We watched movies, ate all the food we wanted (including desserts) were free to move about the cabin and talk to each other. This last part was important because it gave us all the opportunity to express our fears and realize that we were not unique in being afraid. We were, in fact, all in the same boat destined for the same bleak destination but the fact that we were together really helped our confidence and established hope that we would make it through the deployment safely.

One other aspect of this initial flight is that we stopped in Bangor, Maine before departing on our Trans-Atlantic flight to Rammstein, Germany. Bangor, as you may or may not know, is the home (or at least it was at the time) of Stephen King, my favorite author. In the airport, I purchased some of his books because I thought it would be really interesting to have some books from his hometown; sometimes I’m a romantic like that. Later, during the deployment, I posted on a message board on his website asking if anyone would provide books to support the Morale, Welfare and Recreation tent in our camp at the time (Forward Observation Base St. Michael in Mahmudiyah). Within a month of making that post I received a massive shipment of boxes full of books for the camp and one addressed specifically to me. Inside the box, I found a full collection of Stephen King's works as well as an autographed copy of my favorite, The Dark Tower. I was stunned. It is definitely one of the nicest gifts I've ever received and I still have each of those books.
When we arrived in Kuwait, after brief stops in Germany and Cyprus, I was surprised by how barren the landscape was. And hot, especially considering it was 3 A.M. The atmosphere was solemn, appropriate considering the circumstances. I thought we would immediately be shuttled to a lodging facility of some sort but we instead transitioned into a series of lengthy and deliberately ominous sounding briefings. We discussed rules of engagement and some of the current tactics our enemies were employing to the north in Iraq. It was light out by the time we were finished and after a brief rest and opportunity to eat, we set out to find our vehicles, which had been previously loaded aboard ships and sent overseas.

I guess I should take this opportunity to describe what my job was over there. In the Army, my exact title was Multichannel Transmission Systems Operator. During my first deployment I was a member of a Small Extension Node (SEN) team responsible for providing secure and non-secure voice and data communication capabilities to various units we were attached to. What was unique about our job is that we spent very little time with our actual company. We were attached to whatever unit needed the communication assets we provided. Because of that, my experiences during that first year we were over there were extremely diverse, much more so than your typical soldier who may have only worked on one base performing a single task or set of tasks. In hindsight, it was really a benefit because it prevented us from getting complacent. Complacency is the enemy of success and the harbinger of failure.

After we found and secured our vehicles, we spent a week in Kuwait getting acclimated to the weather so that we did not have to deal with that after moving north
into Iraq. At the end of that week we rolled north in three separate convoys, straight into the heart of Baghdad. That trip was interesting, to say the least. For starters, our vehicles were not up-armored. We had flimsy nylon doors and the only protection we had on our floorboards were sandbags we filled during our week in Kuwait. Believe me, there was plenty of sand to go around! On a personal level, and this was something I didn’t expect, I wasn't prepared for the sights we would see during that trip either. From my viewpoint, everything looked destitute. I wasn't at a point in my life where I was able to understand that this is a lifestyle these people have lived for thousands of years. I won't say that I looked down on them, I just didn't understand why people would choose to live the way they do.

One other thing they failed to prepare us for was the bustling activity within the city districts. Much like rural America, rural Iraq is sparsely populated. By that I mean that as you move away from the cities, the population thins out so that you might see a handful of farms for every few miles you travel. The city centers are a different story completely. Open air markets and bazaars dominate these centers and create havoc as you attempt to drive through them.

My first experience with this came during our initial push north from Kuwait into Iraq. As we approached the city, I was overwhelmed by the number of people milling about conducting business in the streets. It is a really amazing sight, especially if you've never seen anything like it before. Unfortunately for us, the massive numbers of people forced us to slow our progression until we passed through the city area, greatly increasing the potential that we may be attacked. In addition to that, people openly approached our
vehicles asking for handouts of food and water. In a number of cases they simply
snatched loose items from the sides of some of our support vehicles. I was terrified
because the last thing I wanted was to be in such close proximity to these people. We
had been told repeatedly that any of these people could potentially be our enemies and
that we should maintain a steady awareness of their actions in case they threatened us.
Maintaining that state of hyper-vigilance is almost impossible in that situation due to the
sheer numbers of people in such a small area.

One of our missions forced us to relocate on short notice. Unable to secure an
armored vehicle to escort us, my team and I were forced to make the journey ourselves,
which was a big no-no. During the trip, one of vehicles blew out a tire in the middle of a
city district. We couldn't call for a tow because we weren't supposed to be on the road by
ourselves so we were forced to change the tire ourselves, which is a pretty difficult task
when you consider it was a HMMWV and not a regular car or truck. Four of us
maintained a 360 perimeter around the vehicles while the other two changed the tire. As
I was scanning my sector for potential danger a little girl started walking up the sidewalk
towards me. We had learned during our initial in-country briefings that our enemies had,
on occasion, been known to use children as weapons by strapping bombs to them and
sending them to interact with US and other coalition forces. Knowing this, I had to view
this little girl as a potential target.

I don't think any amount of training could have prepared me for that situation,
especially considering I have a little girl of my own. We had discussed, at length, the
idea of engaging targets but until you're actually in the situation and tested, you don’t
know how you will react. Because of that training, the reality that I might have to face and kill an armed enemy combatant was something that I had come to terms with as best I could. But this was different; this was a child who may or may not have been a threat at all. Raising my weapon and targeting this child in my sights elicited an enormous cry of protest from within me. It is by far one of the most difficult decisions I have ever had to make. As I said, I have a child of my own and all I could think of was someone else doing the same to her and it terrified me. I think in the end my actions were purely a result of my survival instincts and training taking over. I shouted "kef", the Arabic word for stop but, she kept coming. In a split second I had to make the decision to pull the trigger and end this little girl’s life or otherwise subdue her while protecting myself. As I slowly started squeezing the trigger a woman, who I assume was her mother, swooped in at the last second and picked her up and carried her away. I don't know if she had heard me yell or not but I'm thankful she showed up when she did. Even now, reflecting on that day, I don't know how different my life would be if I had actually had to shoot that child. I am haunted by the fact that I was so easily able to make the decision to pull the trigger and the time that has passed between then and now has done nothing to reduce the guilt that I feel. I feel as though I lost a significant portion of my innocence that day.

Continuing with the "roads in Iraq are perilous" theme, I have one final story concerning my travels over there. Because my team was not co-located with our parent unit we were responsible for getting our own mail from the central facility, either at Baghdad International Airport or various regional locations. I know it seems crazy that we would brave the roads once per week to get something as simple as mail but
sometimes those letters from home are the only things that keep you going. They are a reminder of what you're really fighting for and that alone made it worth the risk. This seems in stark contrast to how I felt about mail during Basic Training. I view this as a sign of personal growth between those two periods of time. I should also note that in most cases we were also making major supply runs if we were located in remote areas. During one of these trips our convoy was struck by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). As you may know, an IED, or roadside bomb, is an explosive attached to a remote detonating mechanism. Enemy forces in Iraq and Afghanistan have used these since the war began in an effort to disrupt our activities in that region. In my opinion, IEDs are a disgusting and despicable tactic employed by a bunch of cowards. Their capacity for destruction is tremendous, as evidenced by the numerous pictures you'll find by simply typing "IED" into a Google search. They are so effective that they have resulted in more than half of our casualties over there.

During that particular trip we were approaching an Iraqi Security Checkpoint when the IED exploded behind our vehicle. The effect was immediate as our vehicle was forcefully propelled into the one in front of us. My seatbelt broke and I was thrown into the seat in front of me. The impact resulted in a concussion and torn labrum in my shoulder that later required surgery. Our driver was knocked unconscious when his head connected with the driver side door and our vehicle careened off road towards a ravine. Still dazed by the blow to my head, I jumped over the seat and mashed the brake pedal with my hand, stopping the vehicle less than 10 feet from the 50 foot drop. I shudder to think what might have happened had we fallen off that precipice. Luckily for us (if I can
say that), the IED was automatically detonated as we drove over the trigger object and not followed by an immediate attack by insurgents. We would have been sitting ducks had they been able to engage us with small arms fire at that point. Thankfully, there were no casualties but it served as a grim reminder of the realities we all faced over there, that tomorrow isn't guaranteed and death can occur in the blink of an eye. It's a lesson I've never forgotten.

I deployed three times, for a total of 2 years, in 2003, 2005 and 2007. It was never easy. Rather than provide a chronological report of my deployments, I think the best approach will be to highlight some of the major experiences I had over there and the lessons I learned.

I learned a lot about loss during my first deployment and it all started with my wife. I've been putting this piece off because these memories are really emotional and, for a long time, I preferred not to engage them. When I deployed Kira, my wife, left our home in North Carolina and moved back to Long Island to be closer to her family. We made that decision because we didn't really have a support system in place at Fort Bragg and I didn't want her to be there with our young daughter by herself. It seemed sensible at the time and I would make the same decision again if I had to.

During my first few months in Iraq, things went pretty well. We were on mission and doing our job. Because I worked in communications, we had access to phones so I was able to call home on a regular basis, a luxury that many soldiers didn't have. In late May of 2003, I started to feel that Kira was growing somewhat distant. More and more of my phone calls went unanswered and I started to worry that something might be going
We were in Fallujah at the time which was, during that period, a hot-bed of activity. We were attached to the Army's 3rd Infantry Division which was responsible for capturing and securing the city and eliminating all enemy resistance in that region. During our time there we were mortared on a daily basis but thankfully never directly hit.

In June of that year, I don't remember which day, I called home to talk to Kira and Jocelyn. Jocelyn wasn’t yet able to talk but hearing her coo over the phone did wonders for my morale. She’s 10 years old now I feel the same every time we talk. Kira's sister Amanda answered the phone and told me that Kira was at a church function but should be home later in the evening. Because I felt a gap growing between us, and Kira repeatedly changed the subject when I brought it up, I asked her sister if there was anything I needed to know about what was going on back home. She confessed that Kira was not actually at a church function but was downstairs watching a movie with the guy she was seeing. I was crushed.

Thankfully, I was on shift alone because I smashed my fist against the wall of our communications van until all my knuckles were cracked open and bleeding. And then I hit it some more. The physical pain did nothing to numb the growing sense of sorrow and rage developing inside. When Kira finally got on the phone I unleashed a stream of obscenities on her that would make a priest blush. I called her every name I could think of and then made some up because I was so angry and hurt. I wanted her to feel the pain and anguish I was feeling. I just wanted to know why and what I had done to deserve this. I wanted to know how she could do something like that to me considering where I was and what I was doing. How could anyone, for that matter? It seems inhuman that
someone could toss another person aside so callously. I told her all these things and her only response was that she was sorry and furious with her sister for telling me. She had planned to wait until I got home and then let me know. Meanwhile, she would have been spending all of the money I earned over there and I would come home with nothing to show for all my efforts.

Looking back, it’s probably better that I found out when I did. If I had come home to find her with another man I don’t know how I would have reacted. Right before we deployed four Special Operations Forces had been arrested for killing their wives upon returning home only to find their wives cheating on them. Due to my emotional state after my first deployment, it is entirely possible I would have found myself in a similar situation.

I don’t remember much of the month that followed. I spent a lot of time alone, sitting outside our squat brick compound listening to 3 Doors Down and smoking cigarettes, which I had never done before. My teammate offered me a Newport to help deal with the stress and I was immediately hooked. Within a week I smoking two packs a day and dipping as well, sometimes at the same time. I wanted to feel numb because the alternative was a level of pain I couldn’t bear.

I couldn't sleep which only added to my misery. If you’ve ever dealt with insomnia, even only temporarily, you know what I’m talking about. We pulled 12 hour shifts monitoring the equipment in our van and ensuring that communications capabilities remained in place. My shift was from 10 PM to 10 AM after which I would usually try to exercise and sleep. During that period, though, there was no sleep, at least not
voluntarily. At times, I physically passed out because our bodies can only function for so long in the absence of sleep. I was a zombie, a walking corpse. I felt dead inside, as if my entire reason for living had been viciously ripped away from me. It didn't help that the temperature during the day normally reached 140 and it felt like an oven inside our small building.

At one point, I gave up. I was sitting out back of our building smoking and decided I was just going to end it. I loaded my M16A2 rifle and put the barrel in my mouth but I couldn't pull the trigger. I kept picturing my daughter growing up without her father because I was a coward. And then I thought about my own life growing up without a father and how difficult it had been for me. I didn’t want that for her. I fell to the ground, disgusted with myself, and must have passed out because I woke up sometime later to my friend Pat asking me if I was OK.

I'm sure I didn't look OK. Over the course of that month I lost 20 pounds because I couldn't eat or sleep. But that experience behind the building seemed to be a turning point in my life, like maybe the worst was behind me. I started to feel better, a little at a time at first but more as the days progressed. I focused on my daughter and that helped carry me through those days, gave me a light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak. I didn't want her to grow up without a father as I did. She became my source of strength and motivation to keep on living and has been since that time; she’s the reason for everything I do. I’m graduating this term and will be attending Graduate School in the Fall in order to provide a better life for her than the one I’ve had.
In August, we moved to Karbala and were attached to a new unit. I was doing better physically and emotionally which was necessary because they placed us on a compound with the Bulgarian Special Operations Forces. We were the only Americans on the compound which presented a unique set of challenges as we tried to overcome the language barrier. It turns out that we had nothing to worry about because they had a translator on the compound, a Bulgarian officer we came to know as Lieutenant Nick. I initially had some fears about working with a multinational group but those were assuaged relatively quickly as we began to interact with them on a regular basis. It turns out that they're not really so very different from us.

While it seems ironic for me to say that we had a good time in Karbala, that's exactly what happened. We were in a relatively safe area and weren't mortared very often. We grew really close to the guys we were supporting because we were dependent upon one another to get the mission done. They were responsible for maintaining security on the compound and within the city and needed our communication capabilities to do so. I even went on patrol with them from time to time. Thankfully, I was only involved in a few minor skirmishes and came through unscathed. We all celebrated my 21st birthday together too. I can say for a fact that nobody I know celebrated their 21st birthday in the same fashion I did. The Bulgarians didn't have the same alcohol restrictions we Americans faced so they brought out a case of vodka that flowed pretty liberally throughout the night. I know I got drunk. Looking back on things now it probably wasn't the best decision because anything could have happened that night, but we weren't concerned with that at the time. We'd already spent close to 6 months in
theatre without a break (and I was still dealing with my own personal issues) and we all desperately needed a bit of levity. Thankfully, nothing did happen and I have a great memory of my 21st birthday celebration!

I was deeply saddened when we learned our mission was coming to a close. We were being relocated to a Polish compound on the other side of Karbala. We spent most of the day we left day saying goodbye to our new friends and assuring them that we would be right down the road if they ever wanted to swing by. Unfortunately, many of them never got the chance. About two weeks after we left insurgents led a direct attack on their camp and many of them, including our friend Lieutenant Nick, were killed. I took the news really hard. While we try to steel ourselves for the possibility that we might lose a friend over there, you can never fully prepare yourself for it. So that was the day I learned about death and how it can cheapen the lives we live when it rears its ugly head. During the memorial service we held, phrases like "died with dignity" and "perished doing what they loved" were tossed around but to me they felt like utter bullshit and still do. There is no dignity in death. It is an inevitable aspect of living and nothing more. At 21, that was a difficult pill for me to swallow.
In October, I was allowed to come home on leave for two weeks. It was a much needed break from everything I was dealing with overseas. I only told a handful of people I was coming so it was a huge surprise when I walked in the front door of my parent's house with a dozen roses for my mom and a case of beer for her boyfriend. As soon as the word got out all of my friends made their way over to my parent's house and we threw an amazing party. It felt so good to see everyone, especially when I had previously convinced myself that I would never see them again and also came very close to committing suicide. I didn't tell anyone about that. In fact, this is the first I've mentioned it to anyone other than the therapist I was seeing when I got back from Afghanistan in 2007 and my wife, now that I’ve remarried. I bring it up here because this thesis has become so much more that I ever intended it to be. Opening up all these old
wounds has really helped me overcome a lot of the animosity and negativity I've carried with me for what seems like forever.

With that in mind, I feel it necessary to discuss a conversation I had with my mom the night of that party. I guess I should preface it with a bit of history. I've already included a section in these pages about her abusive ex-boyfriend Harry but I failed to mention one significant event because, at that time, I wasn't ready to face it. I’m still not. But I’ve also learned that getting my experiences out into the open has been therapeutic for me up to this point and I hope to continue that here.

When I was kid, only 10 or 11 years old, I awoke one night to the sound of muffled breathing and barely concealed sobs. I walked as silently as I could out of my bedroom and towards the living room where the sounds were coming from. I had a vague notion of what sex was but had never seen it. But this seemed terribly wrong somehow, even for someone with only a limited knowledge of the act itself. My mom was crying and every time she sobbed he hit her and told her to "shut the fuck up" so she didn't wake me up. And his movements were halted and forceful, as if he was trying to inflict pain upon her. There was blood, enough so that it was obvious to me from across the room even though it was dimly lit.

If I had known the word rape at the time, it is exactly how I would have described it. But I didn't. I just knew that he was hurting my mom and that I should do something to stop it. I went back into my bedroom and grabbed a baseball bat but when I walked back towards the living room I became paralyzed by fear. I couldn't speak, to cry out for him to stop hurting her nor could I advance forward and smash his head in with the bat as
I so desperately wanted to do. This was a man who had physically abused me, to the point of putting a gun in my mouth and telling me that if I moved he would "blow my fucking head off". I was terrified of him. I retreated back into my bedroom and buried my head underneath my pillow, ashamed and pissed off at myself for being such a coward. I've never forgiven myself for failing to take action that night. I'm crying now as I write this because even the act of remembering that night is such an emotional drain on me. Even now, it’s hard to live with those memories. You tell yourself it’s a process; that you have to forgive yourself before the healing can truly begin. You substitute acts of kindness as a method of atonement for a sin you never committed. But my only offence was being young.

I mention this here because the night I came home on leave I got really drunk and brought it up to my mom. I asked her to confirm what I thought I remembered and she told me that he did in fact rape her that night. I lost it. In a rage I started punching holes in the wall, all the while apologizing for being such a coward. She tried to make me stop, to tell me I was just a kid and I wasn't responsible but I didn't want to hear it. Like I always did, I inflicted that wrath upon myself as opposed to those who truly deserved it.

It took all of my friends to finally subdue me and calm me down, though they had no idea what had set me off in the first place. It wouldn't be the last time they would see me like that. I've still never come to terms with the events of that night and my part in them. I try to reason with myself that I was just a kid but for the most part, I just don't want to hear that. As I've gotten older the pain and that sense of letting my mom down has begun to fade. I think the main reason for that is that I've realized she's spent her
entire life making bad decisions for herself and, by proxy, me. But nobody deserves what happened to her, and to expand on that, no child should have to bear witness to it either. I've found that forcing myself to recall the memory of that night has helped me deal with the emotional damage it has done to me. Hopefully, divulging it here is just one more step on my road to recovery.

The rest of that vacation period went well. I did the best I could to see everyone and after two weeks was back in Baltimore ready to head back overseas. Something interesting happened to me that day in the airport. My unit made it mandatory that we travel in our Battle Dress Uniform, in this case I was wearing desert camouflage fatigues. Unfortunately, this makes you an easy target and while most of the looks I got were approving, one guy in particular made it very clear he was not impressed. I realized what he was doing just a second too late to avoid the massive wasp of phlegm he spit onto the front of my jacket. He called me a fascist, which I thought was funny, all things considered. I didn't retaliate, though my initial impulse was to break his jaw. With everything else I was dealing with, I'm still surprised at my restraint. Thankfully, I didn't need to worry about that as some concerned citizens intervened and he was escorted away by security. That was my first and only such experience like that and I'm actually thankful it happened because even though he may not have agreed with what I was doing (and what he did was disgusting), he was exactly the type person I was doing it for. We need reminders like that occasionally; interventions that bring us back to earth and ground us in reality once more. It helped me get my mind focused on the task at hand which turned out to be very important later on.
When I finally made my way back to my team, I received quite a shock. While I was gone, our compound had been mortared and one of the explosions caused the wall right next to my rack (sleeping area) to cave in. Had I been there I may have been crushed while I slept. Thankfully, I wasn't. It was a sobering experience that really sapped most of the positive energy I was feeling from my time at home. We were also being sent back out on mission, this time to FOB Kalsu in Iskandariya, 20 miles south of Baghdad, where we would be supporting the 82nd Infantry Division (Airborne) as they tried to quell hostilities in that area. I should tell you one thing about the 82nd right off the bat, they're a bunch of blowhards who think they are the best soldiers in the entire Army. While I respect their abilities and tactical proficiency, I'm far from impressed with their decision making skills.

Here's a shot of myself and a few teammates in Iskandariya (FOB Kalsu):
Both of our units arrived on site at the same time. The 82nd was replacing a reserve infantry unit who were on their way home and we were replacing another communications team whose members were headed to a new mission. I've always wondered why they didn't just stay there if they weren't going home too. It doesn't make sense to me that they would risk the safety of both teams by forcing them travel the dangerous roads over there when that team wasn’t going home. Either way, I’ve long since stopped questioning the decisions the Army makes. During our changeover briefings we discussed some of the tactics and strategies the enemy was employing in that region. The first thing we were told was that we should never patrol at night because the insurgents were daisy chaining IEDs (essentially setting off a chain reaction of explosives connected to one another) and crippling convoys traveling along the Main Supply Routes (MSRs). Their unit had already lost two soldiers to this practice and didn't want the 82nd to suffer a similar fate. I will give you one guess what the first thing the 82nd guys did after the reserve unit left. Yep, they went on a night patrol. Luckily, they weren't assaulted that night. That luck wouldn't hold for very long.

It was Super Bowl Sunday in 2004: Carolina vs. New England. I remember because most of us were watching the game in the MWR tent, playing spades and drinking non-alcoholic beer; anything to make it feel like home. During the 3rd quarter we received word that an 82nd convoy had been hit by IEDs and sustained heavy injuries. The Quick Reactionary Force (QRF), a guard unit whose primary task is to be mobile and ready to roll out in under 2 minutes, immediately sprang into action. Within minutes they were mounted up and moving out. Sometime later, I don't remember how much because
everything was so chaotic, what was left of the convoy made it back to the camp. The severely wounded were immediately taken to the medical facility and I was tasked with trying to call in a medevac (medical evacuation), a helicopter that would transport them to a better facility than we had on our small compound. We were told that due to an incoming sandstorm they would not be able to make any flights at that time.

Three of my brothers in arms died that night as we waited and though I didn't know them personally, their passing hit me with so much force that I was moved to tears. We all were. It's hard enough to lose someone without the additional emotional circumstances we were facing. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right that these young people should be cut down before having the opportunity to experience all this life has to offer them. And to die, alone, so far away from their families is a travesty as well. I was heartbroken for their families who were probably home celebrating and watching the same game we all were watching, oblivious to the fact that their sons' bodies lay broken and lifeless half a world away. It might as well be another world, one you enter as a boy and, if you're lucky, leave as man who has lost much of the youthful innocence you may have once had.

That was my first real experience with death. Obviously we see it in movies and on television but we know, no matter how real it may look, these are just images easily forgotten after the transition to the next scene. There would be no next scene for the ones we lost that night. The images still haunt me, in both my dreams and daytime hours. I see the young soldier with his leg blown off below the knee lying on the table, with raw flesh still oozing blood as the last of his life slips from him. I see another soldier with his
intestines torn from his midsection. When he arrived he was actually holding them inside his abdomen because shrapnel from the IED tore his stomach apart. I reflect on these memories and I am filled with sorrow and am despondent about this tragic loss of human life.

The 82nd soldiers were gracious enough to invite us to their memorial ceremony. I was the only one from my team who attended. The others preferred to grieve in their own way and I don't begrudge them that. But I wanted to know more about these people, who they were while they were alive. As their comrades shared anecdotes and stories about their time spent together, I came to feel as though I knew them as well. If you've never seen a memorial ceremony for a fallen soldier, it is an emotional event. I've included an image below to give you an idea of what the tribute looks like:

![Memorial Ceremony Image]

Each of the three casualties had a memorial similar to the one pictured above, with their own weapons, boots, Kevlar vests and dogtags. It's an emotional event and I can't recall seeing a dry eye. It serves as a remembrance of our fallen and a rallying cry for those who must carry on the mission in their stead.
Kalsu was my last mission during that first deployment. As April rolled around and our trip home approached, I reflected on the events of the year. I had lost and gained a lot. I lost my wife, some good men that I never had the opportunity to get to know, a lot of my youthful innocence and possibly even a small portion of my own sanity, though I can neither confirm nor deny that. But I also did gain some things during my time there, lessons that I still carry with me. That deployment showed me that sometimes this world can be a harsh and unforgiving place and that tomorrow isn't guaranteed. It forces you to appreciate even the simple act of waking up each day, which so many of us take for granted. The conditions over there, so different from our own here back home, made me appreciate the comforts that we share in this country, the luxuries that we also take for granted. Things as simple as hot water for bathing and a bed to sleep in, which prior to that I viewed as necessities as opposed to luxuries, mean so much more to me now than they did before I deployed. I also learned to place more faith in myself. I've spoken at length here about the confidence issues I've always dealt with, that sense of foreboding that I feel that no matter what I do I'm doomed to fail at it. But I made it through an entire year over there (relatively) unscathed. I did it! That was a big boost for my confidence which helped because I had no idea what my life would be like when I got home. It was an opportunity for me to make a fresh start.
Interim Period:

For about three months after I got back I lived my life in a kind of drunken stupor, barely cognizant of what was going on around me. And I wasn’t the only one. My friends and I roamed the bars like a pack of depraved, starved, angry wolves ready to take out our aggressions on the first thing that looked at us the wrong way. After that got boring I took to drinking by myself because it was the only way I sleep. What finally started pulling me out of it was meeting a girl. She stood by me through my worst and does still.

It’s actually really funny how I met Brandi. I was the 5th wheel on a night when we all went out to dinner together. She was dating a friend of mine and, being pissed off about being that 5th wheel, I stated my belief (at that time) that all women were bitches. I was still so spiteful over what happened with Kira that women in general left me feeling disillusioned. I had no faith or trust in them. She told me, and I’ll never forget this, that if I were her girl she would be the best thing that ever happened to me. She was right. We started dating a few months later and got married this past February after 8 years!

Meeting Brandi really helped but I found the effects were only temporary. I spent some months in relative comfort, without any major problems from the illness I was afflicted with, until I learned that we were scheduled to deploy in March, a scant eleven months after I’d gotten home. Realizing what I was going back into, depression kicked in again and I began to draw inward. Looking back on things now, though, I see evidence that the trials I endured during my first deployment helped me change my
approach to the second. Rather than pushing Brandi away, I embraced her. I wanted her to know that no matter what happened to me I would always love her and that we would make it through if we were strong for each other. I had learned that I don’t always have to go it alone.

**Operation Iraqi Freedom III:**

In April of 2005, I redeployed to Iraq. As it was our third year in that region, our orders said we were deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom III. Because we didn’t have a lot of communication missions that year, I was assigned to a convoy team. Without the slightest exaggeration I can say we easily drove 15,000 miles in the span of 8 months. I think in a lot of ways being on the road was a good thing. I avoided the monotony that comes with 12 hour shift work. I also got to see a lot of amazing sites: Al-Faw palace in Baghdad, Babylon, the Swords of Qadisiyah and more. Some parts of Iraq are actually quite beautiful. I’ve included some images below:
That was the year I got introduced to the wonderful and terrible beverage known as Red Bull. We were on the road a lot and sometimes for periods as long as 14-16 hours straight. Because sleep was at a premium we sometimes needed a little energy boost to help get through those longer trips. Red Bull provided that kick. The dining facilities gave it to us by the case (24) and it was not unusual for me to drink 4 or 5 of them in one
sitting. I think the daily recommended amount is 2 cans, no more than 3 for sure. I don't even want to know the potential damage I did to my system during that time.

Me preparing for a convoy.

For the most part, our convoys were pretty much all the same, only the destinations seemed to change. At times, small arms fire and IEDs broke the monotony but thankfully we were never directly hit. Because all I really did was convoy during that deployment, I don't really have too much to say about it. There is one particular experience, though, that has had a lasting impact on me as a person and one that I think about almost every day. I would like to take some time to discuss that here because I think it's very important in understanding who I am as a person.

I never liked driving the roads over there. In fact, because of my experiences over there, I sometimes have difficulty driving here in the United States. I’m constantly on alert for the piece of trash that may be hiding an IED or the sniper crouched patiently on the rooftops. For that reason, I was usually the Truck Commander (TC) in my vehicle,
responsible for maintaining radio contact with the other vehicles in our group. At other
times, though, I took the position of gunner and was responsible for providing security
not only for my vehicle but for all the vehicles in our group. Gunner is a dangerous
position in a convoy because you are exposed from the waist up for the duration of the
trip. It is both a mental and physical strain.

We were travelling along Main Supply Route Tampa, one of the most dangerous
roads in Iraq, when a vehicle pulled in front of us. Our front and rear trucks both had
signs indicating that civilian vehicles were not supposed to be within 50 feet of our
vehicles and that if they saw us approaching they were to pull over and allow us safe
passage. For some reason, this particular driver either wasn't aware of that protocol or
had other intentions. I radioed up to my gunner to ensure he was aware of the potential
situation developing in front of us. I instructed my driver to bump the vehicle 2 or 3 times
but he still refused to move out of our way. I told my gunner to put a few rounds into his
trunk (which was our Standard Operating Procedure at the time) to serve as a warning
that he needed to move before more hostile actions were taken. As he lined up the shot
and squeezed the trigger, the vehicle braked sharply. Instead of hitting the trunk, the
three round burst went through the rear window and into the back of the passenger in the
back seat, who immediately fell over sideways. The vehicle finally pulled over and we
later learned that it was a VBIED, a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device. For
one reason or another, they were unsuccessful in detonating the three 88 millimeter
mortar rounds hidden in the trunk. Had they been successful, the resulting explosion
would have destroyed half the vehicles in our convoy and I most surely would have been killed.

I should have been relieved in knowing that I had potentially saves numerous lives but I wasn't. The man we shot died in the car on the side of the road. It's a hard thing, knowing that your actions are directly responsible for another person's death. It wears on the soul. I try to reason with myself that we did a good thing that day but it's not easy. I think what I learned that day was that not every situation has a right decision, for while it may have saved many lives we also permanently stained at least three. I've never been the same, nor has Gabe, my gunner that day. The Iraqi, whose name I never learned, or cared to learn for that matter, died and may have left an entire family behind. I say that I don't care to know his name because I feel that naming something adds weight to it. It's better for me, and my conscience, if he remains nameless and faceless. That's one of the funny things about war I mentioned earlier. We were enemies but we didn't know each other. In another time and place we may have been friends. For that reason, I don't regret the decision I made, but I don't feel like the hero I was made out to be either.

Interim Period 2/Operation Enduring Freedom:

Returning home brought with it feeling of joy and relief but also a sense of detachment. I felt alone, without purpose. Reuniting with my girlfriend helped but wasn’t enough. The only thing I was looking forward to was getting out of the Army and the promise of never deploying again, which happened five months after I got back.
Although it was what I wanted, leaving the military left me at a crossroads. I wanted a break but needed to work and with the loss in stable income I quickly got behind on my bills and my life spiraled out of control. Again, I turned to the bottle, and much harder this time. It was unbearable.

Places where large numbers of people gather put me on edge because it reminded me of being downtown in any number of those backwater, primitive cities. Driving reminded me (and still does) of being on convoys so I was/am constantly searching for the sniper on top of the building or the IED placed inconspicuously on the side of the road, anything out of the ordinary. It makes driving quite nerve-wracking. I just wanted to get away from it all and alcohol was the escape method I used. After a few months I decided I needed a change so I volunteered to go to school for the military in Georgia. I was in a Reserve unit stationed at MacDill at the time and they granted my request. Joining the Reserves was safer than exiting the military completely because any unit that needed a person with my specific job category (MOS) could request to have me placed in their ranks.

I left for school in June and was gone until December but things only got worse. The structure I desperately wanted in my life simply was not present while in school. It was chaos characterized by, simply put, bad leadership. I had dealt with bad leadership so much in my life that I couldn’t take it anymore. I lost control. At one point I was drinking, on average, one 750ml bottle of Crown Royal per day.

Somehow I still finished first in my class and was ready to head home and get my life in order. Upon arriving back at my unit in Tampa I was waylaid by the news that I
would have to deploy again, this time to Afghanistan. They gave me three months to learn my job before sending me halfway around the world where people would be relying on me. The only thing that prevented me from drinking at this point was the knowledge that lives would depend on my abilities. I worked three months straight with, at most, 3 days off over the entire period. Because our mission in that region is still considered classified, I am unable to go into details as to what I did over there but I saw a lot of things I’d not seen before and they impacted me in many ways.

I think our trip home was most consequential for me, though. Our parent unit left us over there, desperately trying without the necessary resources to find out way home. We ended up catching a flight from Afghanistan to Kuwait and then later a flight from Kuwait to Germany on a flight carrying human remains. That was traumatizing to say the least. I couldn’t celebrate making my way home because I was surrounded by fallen comrades. And I knew that upon returning home I would be branded a hero; but these were the real heroes. When we got to Germany we learned we had just missed the last flight stateside and would have a 9 hour layover until the next one. We opted to get a hotel room instead of waiting at the terminal. At the hotel I proceeded to get extremely drunk in an effort to remove the images of those coffins from my mind. I only succeeded in getting myself arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct. That turned out to be a very important turning point in my life because I feel like that is the day I reached the rock bottom. I’ve spent every day since making my best effort to slowly climb out of the darkness that surrounded my life.
Closing Thoughts

After my last deployment in 2007 I got out of the military and went back to school. I think I’d had enough of that particular lifestyle. Emotionally, I was a wreck. I think one of the military's major failings is that they do not do enough to help soldiers cope with what they experience overseas. At times, it almost seems as if it's taboo to even mention you're having emotional issues, like it's a sign of weakness. But I think all of us are prone to these emotions. If I've learned one thing from this thesis it's that dredging up these old skeletons can have a therapeutic effect.

That's not to say that I don't have setbacks on occasion. When I got out of the Army I really felt lost. For all its shortcomings, the military did provide a sense of purpose and direction that I found myself sorely lacking. With a wealth of free time and nothing but my memories to occupy it, I began suffering from depression and insomnia. I started drinking every night, stopping at the gas station on the way home and picking up two (sometimes four) 32 oz bottles of Icehouse (because it was cheap and efficient). I would get home, lock myself in my room and drink the memories away as best I could. I hit the bars on the weekends, looking for trouble wherever I could find it, anything that would give me that adrenaline rush I felt overseas. For the life of me, I cannot explain that particular duality. I hated being overseas while I was there but when I got home I found myself yearning for that particular brand of excitement. It seems strange even to me. Perhaps that's why so many veterans are thrill seekers.
I saw a therapist for awhile. Up until now, she's one the only people with whom I've discussed a lot of the experience I've shared here. My wife is the other. I hide nothing from her because if we are to spend our lives together, as is my hope, it's only fair that she knows what she's getting into. Behavioral cognitive therapy really helped me isolate some of the ways I was letting my emotions get the best of me, as opposed to me keeping them in check. After a number of sessions, though, I stopped going to see her because she was taking me beyond what I was comfortable enough to deal with at that time.

This has been a tough assignment for me because it's hard to open up this way and face the emotions I've done my best to bury deep inside. I think I knew, in the back of my mind, how difficult it would be but also recognized that perhaps enough time had passed that I might now be ready; mature enough now to handle things. While at times things have been hard, overall I reflect and believe in my heart that this has been a worthwhile experience in terms of personal growth and maturation.

Today, as I approach 30, I find myself in a situation in which I don't feel (as) at odds with my past anymore. Does that make sense? I used to believe that all of the negativity and turmoil I'd been through made me a bad person. I was shortchanging myself every step of the way. For example, I believed that because I grew up poor, I was destined to be poor and that nobody would ever want anything to do with me. My past was an anchor that I desperately needed to be free of. I'm not quite there yet but I am making progress. I have a beautiful new wife and daughter and I love them both more than anything.
I've learned to find constructive outlets for my negative emotions. I read a lot and play video games. Both of these, on the surface, appear as nothing more than simple escape mechanisms. Maybe that is all they are but they work for me and that's all that matters. For example, I mostly play First-Person Shooters (FPSs) and Role Playing Games (RPGs) because they fulfill a need in my life. I mentioned earlier that I sometimes miss the action being deployed provided. If I play a video game like Call of Duty, a FPS set in the Middle East in which you play as a soldier fighting terrorist insurgents, it fills that need that I feel. So rather than turn to thrill seeking or binge drinking, I've found a safe outlet for that particular emotion. As I mentioned before, it is a process so I do have slip up from time to time, usually when I’m drinking. There have been occasions where I’ve been out drinking something and someone will say something about the military and I lose control. I’ve blacked out on more than one of these occasions only to wake and find myself safe at home with no clue how I got there. I’m proud to say that hasn’t happened for a long time. It used to be once every few months. I think this is a damn good indicator that I am making progress towards a better future for myself and my family.

The same applies for RPGs, in which you typically start off as a character attempting to overcome some form of adversity. The catch is you have free will to do so in whichever way you see fit. You can be the axe wielding warrior, the fleet of foot rogue or the intelligent wizard. The point is, and I cannot emphasize this enough, the choices you make matter. You may start off as a peasant and rise to become a king. This is a microcosm for how I've learned to approach my own life. Just because I grew up
poor doesn't mean that I'm doomed to a life of destitution. I can choose a better life for myself. I have to earn it, but I have the choice and that's what matters. I know it sounds simple but, as I've said, it is effective in my life and I will continue to do whatever best helps me overcome the adversity I've dealt with.

I recently read a book called The Things They Carried by Tim O’Brien. On the surface, the narrator describes his past experiences in Vietnam, the highs, the lows and everything in between. As I read that book, I couldn’t help but feel like he was writing directly to me. It reads as a combination graphic novel and memoir, a format I borrowed for the purposes of this assignment. His graphic descriptions of the materiel the members of his unit used, the physical items they carried like their weapons, boots and dog-tags act as metaphors for the emotional baggage they carry now that they are older. More than being a war story, it is a very well done attempt to explain the processes soldiers use to justify the decisions they made during their time overseas. It is a very powerful and compelling story and I hope that what I’ve written here will have a similar effect. If you are inspired by what you have read here, I wholeheartedly suggest picking it up.

I think the most important thing I will take away from this assignment is that I am a product of all my experiences, both the good and the bad. We all are. I may not have been dealt the best hand when I entered this world but I certainly haven't folded what I did get. And though I may struggle at times, I've learned to trust myself and have faith in my ability to overcome that adversity when it presents itself. I have good and bad. I’m prone to both overemphasize and underemphasize my emotions. Sometimes, I feel that
things don’t affect me as they should. My grandmother died a few years ago and, while I did feel sad, I wasn’t moved by the experience. On the other hand, I sometimes find myself moved to tears by the simplest things, a verse in a song or a particular image. Sometimes I feel broken, as if my emotional pathways have been so distorted by a lifetime of trials and hardship that I am doomed to feel this way for the rest of my life. This used to scare me because I never took the time to assess myself, to try and figure out why I might feel this way. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve become more introspective. Rather than take things at face value, I search for reasons why they affect me the way they do. This paper has been an extension of that practice and I can see the process in action as I review previous drafts.

When I first began composing this narrative I wanted you, the reader, to feel sorry for me because I felt sorry for myself. As time has progressed, I’ve seen a marked shift in my writing style. Rather than trying to elicit sympathy, I’ve focused more on simply describing my experiences and explaining how they affected me at the time (and as I’ve gotten older). I think this is very important for me in terms of personal growth because it shows that I have begun to progress forward in dealing with my emotions as opposed to letting them control me. Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope you are able to find as much meaning reading these pages as I have writing them.
Me and Pat right before our trip home (April, 2003)
Rick with fragments of an IED fired at our front gate in Karbala (2003)

Posing with the Bulgarians in Karbala (2003)
During our downtime, we played games like dominoes, or "Bones", as we called it.

This was a home we found in Baghdad that had been destroyed in the bombings that took place before we got there.
In the previous picture, this is where the bomb struck and entered the home.

Pat, Rick and I glad to be home (April 2004)