

from war to home:

THE IMPACT OF INVISIBLE INJURIES

FROM WAR
TO HOME



Traumatic brain injury (TBI) has been called a ‘signature wound’ of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; around 20% of post-9/11 Veterans who receive care through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have a confirmed service-related TBI. Symptoms of TBI may include headaches, memory loss, poor concentration, mood swings, sensitivity to light, and dizziness. Many Veterans with a TBI are also living with chronic pain, post-traumatic stress (PTSD), and other ‘invisible injuries’. An estimated 5 million military caregivers—family and friends—provide essential care and support to Veterans of all service eras; however, their stories often go unheard. Throughout the project we intentionally used the term ‘care partner,’ but for alignment with current VA language we use ‘caregiver’ in exhibit materials.

From War to Home: The Impact of Invisible Injuries explores the lasting effects of TBI and other invisible injuries of war and military service on Veterans and the ‘hidden heroes’ who support them.

The project is the culmination of a research collaboration between VA researchers and a group of post-9/11 Veterans and family caregivers. Using a method called photovoice, Veterans and caregivers were given cameras and asked to share their stories. They took pictures of their daily lives, gathered photos from their personal collections, and described the meaning behind each image and what they wanted others to learn from their experiences. The overall goal of the project is to build bridges of understanding and rapport between Veterans, military families, and civilians, and to give voice to the diversity of perspectives and experiences of post-9/11 Veterans and their families. Together, the researchers, Veterans, and caregivers of From War to Home are working to educate and inform VA leaders and policymakers about the experiences and needs of Veterans and families living with invisible injuries. The Veterans and caregivers of From War to Home are powerful advocates for themselves and others in their communities.

Please visit www.va.gov/FromWarToHome to learn more.

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Veterans and Caregivers

Southeast Louisiana



Drew Augustine
Sergeant
US Army

Drew is a student at UNO. He loves working with Veterans who have significant barriers to employment. He is a self-taught guitarist and keyboardist and he enjoys spending time with his wife, friends, dogs and fish.

Laurie Cancienne
Caregiver

Laurie is grateful to have her husband home safe, and happy she can support him in dealing with his short-term memory loss and other challenges. She finds support in her mom and sister to manage the challenging days. Laurie says caregivers often "put up a front that everything is ok, but inside you are really a mess," and she would like to have additional VA and community support available for caregivers.

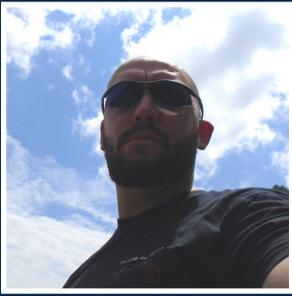


Carlos Urbina
Sergeant
US Marine Corps

Carlos likes to pass time playing his guitar and has two dogs who love him unconditionally. His injuries have caused memory problems, which challenge him to get through the day, but he takes advantage of every opportunity to improve his health through physical fitness and therapy. He strives to be productive every day and gets inspiration from friends and family. Carlos currently studies Substance Abuse Counseling and is a National Honor Society member with a 4.0 average.

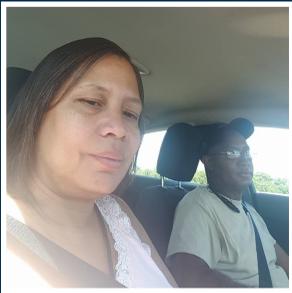
Sharon Urbina
Caregiver

Sharon is the wife and caregiver for Carlos Urbina. She draws strength from her faith and family. Sharon is the Elizabeth Dole Foundation Fellow for Louisiana and an advocate for making more VA and community resources available for families of Veterans. She and Carlos are expecting their first child.



Lewis Pyburn
Specialist
US Army

Lewis enjoys spending time with his German Shepherd puppy; he recently married, and he and his wife welcomed their first child together. He suffers from photosensitivity and needs to wear sunglasses most of the time. Lewis participates in Native American traditions, and would like to see more alternative medicine options offered through the VA such as meditation and yoga.



Craig
Staff Sergeant
US Army

Craig's family is very important to him; he loves to spend time with his mother and play video games with his eight year old son. His family lost their home in the flooding after Hurricane Katrina, and he came home to help rebuild. Craig has memory loss and chronic pain due to his injuries.

Marie Dixon
Caregiver

Marie is Craig's sister and caregiver. She says it's impossible for civilians to understand what Veterans have experienced, and she thinks Craig tries to joke around to mask the many traumas he has experienced. Marie would like to have more training and resources available to help her understand and manage his brain injury. She has several other relatives serving in the military who she supports and celebrates.



I saw John walking out with those pumpkins and I thought, that's honestly how I see him mentally every day. As if he's carrying something on his shoulders, in his head constantly. He does not walk freely.

I thought that was a really good depiction of how I see him. Let's put it this way: I have not ever taken someone's life to protect my own, but I live in the shadow of a man who does.

- Rachel E. (Caregiver)



Donny
Staff Sergeant
US Marine Corps

Donny enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2002 in response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11. He was exposed to burn pits while on deployment, in addition to his TBI. He struggles with constant pain, chronic fatigue and memory loss. He gets comfort and support from his dog, Lucy, his husband, and his many friends.

David
Caregiver

David is Donny's husband and caregiver. They met after Donny separated from the military, and David has supported Donny through getting proper diagnosis and treatment for his service-related injuries while pursuing his own career. David wishes there was more support for military caregivers, and more opportunities for them to share their stories. David and Donny are looking forward to starting a family together through adoption.



C. Chance Vaughn
Staff Sergeant
US Army

Chance came from a military family and knew he wanted to serve after finishing high school. As an Army Ranger, he deployed six times to war zones. He loves to help others in his community. He also loves hunting, fishing, doing puzzles, and spending time with his family. He is an advocate for other wounded vets.

Jennifer Vaughn
Caregiver

Jennifer is C. Chance's caregiver. They have been married over 10 years, and she still loves going on dates with him. Jennifer is grateful for the Army Ranger families that lent support to her family after her husband's injuries, but wishes there was more support for other military caregivers. She credits her faith and support from her mom with helping her through all the challenging times during her husband's recovery.



David
Petty Officer First Class
US Navy

David enjoyed mentoring younger men and women who were serving with him in the Navy. His injuries cause restricted movement, headaches, memory loss and lethargy. David is devoted to his son and daughter, and loves spending time with them, going fishing, and spending time in nature to relax.



SGT(R) Benjamin
"Beefcake" LeBoeuf
Sergeant
US Army

Benjamin has a cat that helps him through the difficult days. He suffers from a great deal of pain, but still loves to be in the outdoors on his kayak or in a duck blind. It takes him some time to process what people are saying, and he prefers they speak slowly. Ben has a wicked sense of humor and likes to make people laugh. He is a perfectionist with knowledge and experience in computer and tech solutions from his time in the service, and he wishes he could go back to work in that field.

Sarah
Caregiver

Sarah and Benjamin, her Veteran, are involved in the Wounded Warrior Project. Sarah looks to her friends for support, and she is also an artist. She is happy to have the new VA open in New Orleans. She is currently studying massage therapy.



That pretty much encompasses and describes me in one little quote.

I may never get fixed, because as far as I know, there's no cure or way of fixing a TBI. But you can make it bearable. You can still have a life. Don't give up.

The choice of giving up never occurred to me. When I feel like I'm at my weakest, that's when I pick myself up and want to push on harder.

When I feel like I'm at the point of breaking is when I get my strength.

- Tyler Plaisance

I want to tell other caregivers that the journey is hard, but the journey can also be very fulfilling as well. It might not have been what you signed up for, but it's still worth it.

I don't think society, as a whole, has that view. We are not as compassionate towards these guys as we should be. Imagine what they have to overcome. They gave that up for us. And they did it willingly.

There is still so much good, and yeah, you have to work a little harder, but everybody has their struggles in life.

If you are willing to put in the work and not give up, there can still be so much joy.

- Sharon Urbina (Caregiver)



Damian Steptore
Master Sergeant
US Army

Damian was in the Army for over 20 years and was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. He was stationed throughout the world, including stops in Korea, Germany and Italy. He has worked as a substitute teacher and in the public relations department for the New Orleans Saints. He likes to go on long drives to pass the time. He has problems with memory and organizing his activities, but gets love and support from his fiancée.

Tara Schnoor
Caregiver

Tara is the fiancée and caregiver for Damian Steptore. Tara grew up near Fort Drum, New York, and has always supported the military. She has learned empathy and patience in supporting her fiancée's health, and has developed creative ways to help Damian cope with his memory issues.



Joshua Ellis
Sergeant
US Army

Joshua was a Combat Engineer in the Army and is a gun enthusiast. He loves to relax through fishing, and wants to start a non-profit to help take other Veterans on fishing trips to support their reintegration. Joshua looks to other vets for camaraderie and help coping with returning to civilian life.



It's the medal that Brian won when he got his TBI, and to me it was almost a reflection of a brain with a piece of it cut out. He lost a piece of his brain to get that medal. That is how I look at it.

- Patricia (Caregiver)



Daniel Sonnier
Sergeant
US Army

Daniel was in the Army and earned a Purple Heart. He loves his wife, children, and their many pets. He has a service dog to help cope with symptoms from his TBI and PTSD. He enjoys hunting pigs in Mississippi with his Veteran buddies.



Damariz Sonnier
Caregiver

Damariz is the caregiver for her husband Daniel, and also takes care of their 3 children. She wants to shine a light on how much support military caregivers provide for Veterans. Damariz and Daniel have moved out of state to be closer to her family, where they have great support.



Steve
Captain
US Army

Steve joined the Army at 17, became a Ranger qualified Green Beret and specialized in explosives and tactics. He enjoyed his military career - where he attended Airborne school, Navy dive school and later became a Blackhawk pilot. Steve later went to medical school and now works at the VA in vascular surgery.



Anonymous
Corporal
US Marine Corps



Tamara
Sergeant
US Army

Tamara served in Iraq and Afghanistan while in the Army and as a contractor. She enlisted in the Army to pay off student loan debt and comes from a military family. She is the proud mother of a one year old girl with her boyfriend. She adopted a cat through the Pets for Patriots program. Tamara has problems with expressing her thoughts and with memory.



Matthew Naquin
Staff Sergeant
US Air Force

Matthew served 10 years in the Air Force and National Guard with three tours in Iraq as a service member and contractor. He is happy he was able to serve his country. He has a lot of pain and memory loss due to his injuries suffered in combat. He values seeing a sunset since it means he made it through another day.

Heidi Naquin
Caregiver

Heidi enjoys taking care of other people, and has provided care and support to her Veteran husband, children, and grandmother. She expresses that, at times, being a caregiver can be exhausting, lonely and seemingly endless. She puts her faith in God's hands to get through everything and finds support from her church.



John
Major
US Army

John is proud of his service in Afghanistan and Iraq. John struggles to maintain his faith in God, as well as with reintegration into civilian society after his deployments, recognizing that many civilians don't understand the toll war takes on a person or on the citizens of countries impacted by war. He adores his wife, daughter, and two sons.



Rachel E.
Caregiver

Rachel has a degree in psychology and is a professional photographer. She is helping her husband reintegrate into civilian life and cope with his military experiences, even though she notices that he doesn't like to share his deployment experiences. She has a strong faith and is active in her church.

Yeah, that's how I was feeling that day. I knew that something was bothering me. And I didn't know what it was; I knew something was off. Usually happens for about four days at a time, and I got to tell my wife. "Listen I don't know what's going on with me. I need a few days to get my head back on track, because I don't know what's going on. And, I don't know what I need to do to fix it, but I need to figure it out."

- SGT(R) Benjamin
"Beefcake" LeBoeuf

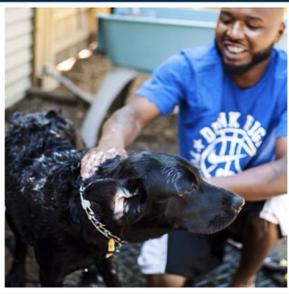


Laubs
Petty Officer First Class
US Coast Guard

Laubs followed his dad and uncle into the military. He spent four years in the Marines before joining the Coast Guard. He struggles with memory loss after being injured while on a rescue operation. He loved his time in the Coast Guard, jumping from helicopters and working as a rescue diver. His wife, Patricia, is a constant source of support and his rock.

Patricia
Caregiver

Patricia is the caregiver and wife of Laubs and supports him in his daily struggles with memory loss and his inability to understand the effects of his brain injury. She finds support in her son and daughter, her community of friends, and her advocacy work.



Spikes
Sergeant
US Army

Spikes is a disabled Veteran who did two tours overseas in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2003 and 2005. He was a Sergeant in the Army Infantry 10th Mountain Division. Today he is learning to adapt to life with his disability, one day at a time. He enjoys spending time with his family. He's an athlete, and helps with fundraisers for K9s for Warriors.



Johnique Spikes
Caregiver

Johnique enjoys taking care of her family. She has a master's degree in Education. Her father served in the military, and she gets support from her father and her mother.



Tyler Plaisance
Sergeant
US Marine Corps

Tyler was interested in joining the military since he was young, following in the footsteps of both of his great-grandfathers. He struggled transitioning into civilian life after leaving the military, but has been greatly supported by his wife. Tyler enjoys many hobbies and also helping to care for the chickens, ducks, and other animals on his farm. He is also an active member of the American Legion.

Megan Plaisance
Caregiver

Megan married Tyler in 2013 and loves being his wife and caregiver. She has many responsibilities aside from being a full-time caregiver, tending to horses and dogs -- sometimes there are as many as 47 animals on the farm. She enjoys English riding to relax and pass the time.

Veterans and Caregivers

Portland, Oregon



Justin
Sergeant
US Army

Justin comes from a family that has a strong military tradition, and he served in Iraq. He is an introspective person who values mindfulness, perseverance, and good communication. He wants people to know that some Veterans don't look like what civilians expect a Veteran to look like and not all wounds are visible. He has a son and two dogs.

Janet
Caregiver

Janet is Justin's mother and caregiver. She cares deeply for him and is committed to seeing he gets the help he needs to overcome his injuries. Janet had minimal contact with the VA before this study and did not feel confident that she knew how to best help Justin. Janet also helps care for Justin's son.



John
Captain
US Army

John enjoys the physical labor of landscaping and gardening -- projects he finds relaxing and rewarding. He has pursued multiple (maybe all of them) VA treatments for PTSD and TBI, and taken what works for him from each so he can develop his own coping strategies for his memory loss.



Lisa
Caregiver

Lisa is John's wife and caregiver. She is also a Veteran herself. Lisa volunteers at the Veterans' Care Center, because she enjoys helping other Veterans. She appreciates John's hard work around the house and commitment to his family and the military.



Allan Adams
Sergeant
US Army

Allan is a photographer who likes to capture the "changing of the seasons." He enjoys how the challenge of capturing the perfect picture makes him more patient. He enjoys cooking for his wife, Kelsey. Allan and Kelsey met after his deployments and injuries. Allan has developed tools to help him with his memory loss, but still may burn a pan or two.

Kelsey Adams
Caregiver

Kelsey is Allan's wife and caregiver. She enjoys taking long car trips and being spontaneous with her husband. She practices yoga to make space for reflection and care for herself. Even though there are stressful times dealing with Allan's traumatic brain injury, there is a lot of beauty to counter the tough times.



Alex Hussey
Specialist
US Army

Alex participated in the photovoice project with his wife, Kim Hussey. They were middle school sweethearts who married after his deployment. He has two cats and dogs, volunteers at an animal shelter, and enjoys riding horses. Alex has a great sense of humor and a wide network of support to help him live life to the fullest.

Kim Hussey
Caregiver

Kim is Alex's care partner and wife. She enjoys going fishing and taking trips with her husband. Kim appreciates everything Veteran Service Organizations have done to support Alex post-deployment. She finds support in her extended family, especially her niece, Jaylin, and nephew, Jay. To relax, Kim enjoys reading books and baking.



I've got my two sides:

I've got what's in my head from combat that I can't get out.
And I've got the outcome of living with what those events caused...

Then, there's my current life.
What I'm doing to move on,
to stay engaged,
to be part of family, friends, and life...

But the battle is finding a reason to continue...
Every day I have to choose to want to participate.

- John



J. Duncan Southall
Major
US Army

J.D. first enlisted in the Marine Corps and later served as an officer in Army Special Ops. He served in Egypt, Israel, and Iraq - where he earned a Purple Heart. He also served in relief efforts for hurricanes Katrina and Rita. He is a man of many hats—being Muslim, a social worker, a skilled mechanic, an animal lover and a loving father.



Ryan McNabb
Petty Officer
US Navy

Ryan McNabb is married with two children. He completed two tours of duty while serving in the Navy. His injuries have caused some memory loss and he struggles to remember where he puts his keys and wallet.



It comes up a lot, the feeling of me being broken.

I'm working on things and it's just not getting better...
I've tried to go back a number of times to deploy again.

Because I think for me the perception is...
"I'm a good soldier, but a bad civilian."
Like I'm broken in this kind of environment,
but I thrive in deployment.

I don't want to be seen as broken to other people.
Obviously, I want to excel in things I do,
no matter what it is.

- Veteran

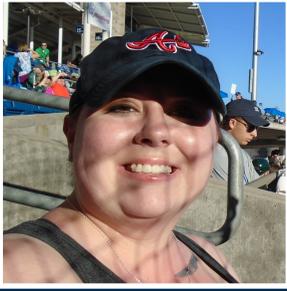
I was thinking about a mortarman that had a really bad,
disfigured head and kept himself bald because of it.

Those guys where you actually see the wounds...
I feel like people try to help them more, because it's a
more visible thing.

When an injury isn't visible, people don't take it as a big
deal. I think that if somebody is really struggling and it's
really affecting their life, they should get the help they
need. Because the wounds you can't see are harder to
diagnose and treat.

But sometimes the Veterans deny it -
"Pretend like everything's fine and normal,
and just get the suck out of your mind."

- Anonymous



Sawyer Sheldon
Specialist
US Army

Sawyer is an Army Veteran who served in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2009-2010. She has a BS in Social & Behavioral Sciences and is pursuing her post-grad work in psychology in spite of her TBI.

Sean Gallagher
Caregiver

Sean is Sawyer's caregiver (and now husband!!) They met in high school while acting. They enjoy going out to Seattle Mariners games and hiking in the woods with their two dogs. In 2018, Sean and Sawyer got married in Yosemite National Park.



Jane
Staff Sergeant
US Army

Jane is from a military family. She is an avid hiker who enjoys taking Veterans with PTSD and TBI long distance backpacking. Hiking has helped her overcome her invisible injuries. Jane also likes to research non-medicinal treatments for TBI and PTSD.



It is a long road, and the road never ends.
That's where I have needed to shift my way of
thinking.

At the beginning, I thought "We are going to get
through this inpatient program; it's going to be
like unicorns and sunshine when we come out on
the other side." It's so dumb looking back.

In that picture, you see there is shade,
like the darker times and when we struggle more.
And then there are places of light, when things
are better, when we cope better with our
symptoms.

Sometimes it's harder to cope with symptoms,
and it's okay....

It's always going to be like that.
We will always travel on this journey.

- Sharon Urbina (Caregiver)



Karim Al Hussein
Specialist
US Army

Karim Al Hussein was part of multiple ODA teams and
deployed to Iraq. After his deployment he spent two and
a half years traveling extensively. Karim is an artist and
his work was selected by the London Olympics
committee to be displayed during various events. He is a
member of the Khatt Foundation Center for Arabic
Typography (khtt.net). He developed "The Black Box
Project" so Veterans and civilians can express their
thoughts, feelings and reflections safely.

Veteran
Specialist
US Army

Anonymous
Sergeant
US Marine Corps



Eddie T.
Staff Sergeant
US Army

Eddie is studying social work at a local community college. He notices that his injuries have affected his memory and awareness of his surroundings. Eddie enjoys being outdoors. He wants other Veterans to know that there are better days ahead, and that there is always hope.



John W.
Corporal
US Army

John is a decent human and appreciates others who are decent humans. After his TBI, he was no longer as good at math as he was before deployment, so he decided to pursue a degree in art. John has served as Sergeant at Arms for his local VFW, helped other vets while taking classes to complete his degree, and finds support in his friends and family.



Emma W.
Caregiver

Emma met John after he separated from the military. She sees that the military trains soldiers with a specific skill set that is not always appreciated when the soldiers return from deployment. Emma is an economist and a brilliant conversationalist, as well as is an active supporter of the Veteran community.



Feral
Staff Sergeant
US Army

Feral enjoys riding her motorcycle, and likes spending time outdoors. Her injuries have affected her ability to focus and organize multiple things, but not her ability to share her view of the world through art and photography.



Clinton
Staff Sergeant
US Marine Corps

Ariana
Caregiver

Clinton is the proud parent of two daughters and a son. They are a constant source of support through his recovery and reintegration. His injuries have caused memory loss. He wishes that civilian society in general would have more sympathy for and understanding of Veterans' experiences.

Ariana is Clinton's daughter and enjoys fishing with her dad to relax. She is organized and likes helping her dad stay focused and remember his daily activities. In 2017, Ariana started college and moved out of state. She appointed Clinton's "mini-me" (aka her younger brother) to help her dad while she is away.



They get all twisted up.

My thinking is just kind of twisted at times,
like which direction?
I am going forward.

But, these thoughts,
they're not as clean as I would like them to be.

I'm always trying to sort them out so that I have two
direct lines.

- Ryan McNabb



Casey
Specialist
US Army

Casey is married with two sons and finds a great deal of support in his family. He wants people to understand that recovering from TBI takes a lot of time and is an uphill struggle.

Anonymous
Sergeant
US Army

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