

Returned Combat Veteran: 'Anxiety Trumps Logic'

by BENJAMIN TUPPER



Courtesy of Cpl. Radek Polanski
Army National Guard Capt. Benjamin Tupper was embedded with Afghan troops in Paktika, near the Pakistan border.

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*Like many U.S. veterans, commentator Benjamin Tupper has read Tim O'Brien's famous book about the Vietnam War, *The Things They Carried*. Tupper's war was in Afghanistan, but he says O'Brien's observations hold true, decades later.*

Most of the physical items we soldiers carry are owned by the government, like body armor and weapons and helmets. These are unceremoniously returned to Uncle Sam as we out-process from military service.

But the emotional baggage is ours to keep. The memories are packed deep inside our own private

war museums. Sometimes the outside world gets a peek at these painful artifacts when they rise to the surface, manifested by bouts of depression, rage or guilt.

Like most combat veterans, I keep many of my postwar idiosyncrasies private, for fear they might alienate my friends and family. If I aired them, I fear I'd receive an impromptu intervention, and be dragged off to a mental hospital for further evaluation.

A good case in point is the anxiety I still feel at being outside arm's reach of a weapon. I know it's absurd to fear that a squad of Taliban may be laying an ambush in my suburban neighborhood. But when an event or sound or smell recalls a moment at war, my anxiety trumps logic.

So when I came home three years ago, I bought the exact same model of combat shotgun we carried in Afghanistan.

Tupper On NPR

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Aug. 18, 2008

Then I bought the same M4 carbine rifle, complete with a combat reflex site. And an M9 pistol, identical to the one that never left my side over there. Now I keep it in my truck. I stuffed the shotgun under my mattress in case the Taliban attack at night. And the rifle is positioned at the ready in my office.

No one — not even my wife — knew I had woven this security blanket of weapons to cover me from home to work and all points in between. No one knew, that is, until a couple months ago, when I spoke to a group of student veterans and their faculty advisers.

One Iraq war veteran in the classroom confessed he felt alienated and vulnerable back home, unarmed and defenseless. In an attempt to show he wasn't alone, I revealed the secret of my personal arsenal.

Right after I said it, I knew I'd gone too far. I expected the students and professors to lean back in their chairs and nervously eyeball the shortest path to the exit.

Instead, one student stood up and pulled out a large hunting knife he'd concealed on his waist. He said when he turned in his M16, he began carrying this knife. Not a day had gone by since he returned from Iraq that he didn't carry it.

Then a professor reached into his pocket and pulled out a tube of ChapStick.

He said the day he left his job as a police officer, he had to turn in his pistol. He also moved to carrying a concealed knife. After a couple of years, he mustered up the courage to transition from the knife to his lethal tube of ChapStick.

He trained himself to accept the ChapStick as a protective talisman. It provided the peace of mind he'd previously achieved with the knife and gun.

For five cathartic minutes, this conversation among veterans of the military and law enforcement sounded like a chapter from O'Brien's book: the stories warriors never tell, for fear civilians will never understand.

In the end, for better or for worse, we know the things that we carried are now carrying us.

Ben Tupper is a major in the Army National Guard. His latest book is [Dudes of War](#).