

PTSD

The fight continues for retired Marine with PTSD



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LEBANON, ILL. • After the historic tornado cut through Joplin, Mo., on May 22, 2011, a flustered weatherman broadcasting from the wrecked scene made a plea for volunteers. It was a bugle call to James Sperry, watching from home in Illinois. There were dead bodies to recover, and Sperry, who served as an infantry Marine in Iraq, was an expert.

Never mind the hours he'd spent in a dark closet since coming home injured in 2004. Never mind the suicide attempt. Never mind the emotion switch stuck in the "off" position, like a tripped circuit breaker in a dark basement.

The worst part of his battle with post-traumatic stress disorder, an invisible wound affecting thousands of veterans, is time to think. A mission feels better than all the pills he gets. But this mission would tread dangerously close to the horrific thoughts he wants to forget.

"That was going to be my mission — to help those people out," Sperry, 27, said of Joplin. "And if I could stop one person from finding a body, from going through the traumatic thing of the dead weight, the smell, the horribleness that goes around that, it would make me feel better."

So he made quick arrangements for his 5-year-old daughter, Hannah. He packed a bag of food, rope, rubber gloves and tools. Then, like a good Marine, he gripped the steering wheel and rushed toward danger.

"That's where I shine," he said. "I am able to go into robot-zombie mode and go-go-go for 24 hours."

During the last part of the five-hour trip, he rode the rear bumper of an emergency vehicle with flashing lights. He drove so close — through lights and intersections — that the driver asked him upon arrival: "Who the hell are you?"

Sperry soon was equipped with two body bags, like the others on the search-and-recovery team. They found an elderly woman alive, pinned down by a beam. In a different

location, a family asked for help looking for a loved one in wreckage because they feared what they might find.

On the count of 1-2-3, Sperry helped roll bodies into bags that day. They found eight.

He kept his composure until the long drive back to Illinois. When he had time to think again. The fight inside his head continued.

Now, he has a new mission. He tries to mentor other combat vets. And he started a collaborative, nationwide project to read the names of service members killed since the American Revolution to commemorate Veterans Day.

INNOCENCE LOST

A golfer at Belleville West High School and a good student, Sperry seemed headed for business courses in college. Then Sept. 11 happened. He became fixated on becoming a Marine. He enlisted in 2003, on his 18th birthday.

It didn't matter that he scored high marks on the entrance exam. He chose the grunts. He wanted to kick in doors.

Sperry married his high school sweetheart during a break in boot camp and saw her only 27 days over the next two years. But he quickly got his wish to kick in doors in Iraq, doing phantom attacks in Fallujah.

The deployment felt like training, until his platoon started losing people. Sperry, a machine gunner, said the 31 men in his unit earned 58 purple hearts; six were killed.

Sperry lost his innocence on Aug. 15, 2004. The date is inscribed on a bracelet he wears next to the name Pfc. Fernando Hannon, one of his best friends and rack mates.

Hannon didn't want to kill anybody in Iraq, Sperry said. He had a deep laugh, loved to cook and watch soap operas. He was infatuated with the story of Cinderella. He'd saved \$50,000 since childhood for his upcoming wedding, which fellow Marines were helping plan.

Two months into the tour, Hannon was assigned to a checkpoint monitoring traffic coming in and out of Fallujah. The post had taken a lot of enemy fire. Bravado was running high. At the last minute, Sperry said, he traded spots with Hannon, who went to a quieter post in the rear. The tranquility soon went away. When Hannon engaged a white sedan headed toward a bunker, the car detonated. The bomb blast killed one Marine instantly. Hannon lost an arm and both legs.

Sperry said he alone cut down five men in an approaching car. When the skirmish was over, bodies were scattered on the ground and hanging out of burning vehicles. Charred remains needed to be bagged. Sperry volunteered for the gruesome task.

Hannon, 19, died about two hours after the car bomb attack. Word of his death devastated Sperry.

"I just remember that night opening my flak vest up, praying that one of the big mortar rounds from Fallujah would hit me in the chest, take me out of there," Sperry said.

Three months later, while going down a street in Fallujah, Sperry was hit in the head and chest with enemy fire. Shortly before he was evacuated, Marines guarded and encouraged him.

“You’re going to be all right there, buddy. All right?” one of the Marines told him, according to video footage taken at the scene. “Hang in there, you’re going to go home.”

PAINFUL MEMORIES

Sperry knew something was wrong the moment he reunited with his wife. All he could do was think about his platoon going on without him. And the more time he was back, the more time he had to process all the close calls. All the direct hits. All the bodies.

He was diagnosed with PTSD and spent 16 months recuperating in hospitals. As soon as he wasn’t constantly falling down from his head injury, he bought a motorcycle and chased the adrenaline rush of combat. He said he spent the next few years getting drunk and high and riding at speeds reaching 200 mph.

His wife, also a Marine, lived with him then at Camp Pendleton, Calif. Hannah was born. Sperry felt camaraderie from living around and partying with fellow Marines on base.

But the wick was lit.

He said he verbally and physically abused his wife. One night during a flashback, he tackled her down the stairs. News spread on base about a gunnery sergeant killing himself. Then Sperry got a rope and nearly did the same. He checked into a mental ward and stayed for a month. He met combat vets there who fought in Vietnam.

“It was crazy to see guys that had just suppressed it for so long, moved on and then — boom — it popped up 40 years later,” he said. “Then there are a lot of guys who could never move on.”

Sperry was medically retired from the Marines in 2005. Two years later, he and his family moved back to Belleville. His anger continued to rage each time he saw a civilian he thought was ungrateful or ignorant about the sacrifices of war. He relished the times in line at the grocery store or eating at a restaurant when somebody would crack a joke about the sunglasses he often wears, even at night, because his eyes are sensitive to light.

“I’d say something to the effect, ‘You know why I wear these sunglasses? Because I got shot in the head defending our country,’” he said. “I’d belittle them. Most of them just kind of put their head down and apologized. I’d keep going.”

He couldn’t relax at home either. One time in the middle of the night, he heard a loud bang at the front door. He grabbed a kitchen knife, ran outside in his underwear and tackled a man in the street.

“I took him down and held a knife to him,” said Sperry, who eventually let the man go unharmed. “He was screaming about his tire.”

The man’s wheel had come off and hit Sperry’s door.

Sperry moved to a quieter neighborhood in Lebanon where many of his neighbors are veterans. The turnoff to the subdivision is easy to miss, which he likes.

“I figured if it was hidden from most traffic it would be safer,” he said.

Soon after the move, he got divorced.

‘DISORDER’ VS. ‘INJURY’

Sperry was one of nearly 477,000 veterans who received treatment for PTSD in 2011 at Veterans Administration medical centers, up from 272,000 in 2006. Other vets are seen outside of the VA health system, or don’t seek treatment at all. Self-reliance is entrenched in military culture.

Up to 20 percent of the 2.6 million U.S. service members who deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001 are believed to have symptoms of PTSD. The type of combat and short time between multiple deployments for the long wars are contributing factors.

But only about half of service members and vets of the two wars who were diagnosed with PTSD received treatment, according to an Institute of Medicine report. Some of them feared the stigma could hurt their careers.

Still, the federal government has been credited in recent years with bolstering support for PTSD and other disorders. Mental health staff at the VA has increased from 13,800 in 2006 to 20,500. To reduce the stigma associated with seeking help, military officials have advocated swapping the “D” from “disorder” in PTSD to “I” for “injury.”

Marital and behavioral problems, depression, domestic violence, substance abuse and suicidal thoughts are commonly intertwined with the illness. People with PTSD often live with an exaggerated sense of alertness and constant anxiety.

“We know that walking down the street in Mosul in 2005 wasn’t as safe as walking down the street in Ladue in 2012, but to somebody with PTSD, they may not be making that distinction,” said Matt Miller, a social worker for the VA in St. Louis, who works with the criminal justice system and law enforcement.

A revamped, \$6.6 million PTSD clinic at Jefferson Barracks has seen steady growth since it opened last year, on track to serve about 2,500 veterans in 2012. While the number of veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is increasing, the outpatient clinic still treats more Vietnam-era vets.

Sperry became a regular at the Jefferson Barracks clinic, where therapists help veterans find new ways to think about the trauma they experienced and teach coping skills.

In 2011, Sperry also spent five months at the SHARE Military Initiative, a rehab program at the Shepherd Center in Atlanta for younger vets with traumatic brain injury and PTSD. The program was a turning point for Sperry, who started controlling his intake of booze, war movies and one nagging weakness — insurgent videos posted online.

And he looked to his daughter, Hannah, as motivation to keep moving forward.

NEW NORMAL

Sperry has become a public face for veterans issues and is regularly invited to speak at events. He and his daughter were on the pitching mound at Busch Stadium as veterans were honored before Game 1 of the 2011 World Series. He visited with President Barack Obama in the White House.

But eight years after he was hit, Sperry still isn't in the clear. He works only part time as a carpenter. He has migraines, chronic pain and dizziness. He avoids civilians as much as possible by shopping and working out at Scott Air Force Base. He still deals with survivor's guilt.

And, in perhaps his biggest struggle, he's still numb on the inside.

"He has issues of trying not to get close to friends and family members, any closer than he needs to be," said Sperry's father, Steve, of Belleville. "I can only guess that has something to do with having lost as many friends as he lost over there."

James Sperry said he has tried to turn his emotion switch back on through therapy and exercise. It won't budge.

"I straight up tell the girls, emotionally, I am not going to be there for you," he said. "Logistically, I'll do anything for you. I'll listen to your story, but I am not going to cry when you cry."

His ex-wife declined to comment. But it's no secret that spouses and children of people with PTSD can be pushed to extremes. Krissy Stevenson, 26, of Clever, in southwest Missouri, said she has learned to focus on the good times when her husband, Christopher, has flare-ups. He's a Marine who served two tours in Iraq. He's been hospitalized for his mood disorder. He's been to jail. He still gets up at night thinking he's on patrol.

"Hold on to that part that you have fallen in love with," said Krissy, pregnant with their third child. "Every little tiny small moment."

For her, that means looking to her inventory of vases. Early in their marriage, if her husband messed up, he had to come home with three flowers in a vase.

"I have so many vases," she said.

Sperry visited with Christopher Stevenson while mentoring with the Marine Corps Wounded Warrior Regiment, which helps Marines transition to civilian life. Sperry said he encourages troubled combat vets to have the courage to reach up and grab all the hands reaching down to help.

He's trying to offer more help himself. A few months ago, he and another Marine started The Fight Continues, a nonprofit group through which they offer mentoring.

It takes time to draw combat vets out from isolation, Sperry says. It takes a schedule and spirituality, a sense of something bigger than themselves. It means controlling what you take in, staying on medications and going to therapy.

It takes finding a new mission in civilian life.

But amid Sperry's effort to launch the nonprofit group, he has fallen behind on his own checklist. He's been watching hair-raising insurgent videos to stay current with Marines coming back from the war in Afghanistan. He keeps revisiting his own past, which can help, but he hasn't been to the Jefferson Barracks clinic in two months. There's an unanswered message on his phone from his therapist.

Sperry said he's been too busy with speaking engagements, and trying to organize an effort to have 1.2 million names of service members who died in combat since the Revolution read, in various pieces, at ceremonies, VFW posts and other sites across the country. He hopes to achieve the goal by Veterans Day in 2013.

He was invited to speak recently to a small crowd at Scott Air Force Base gathered to honor veterans and prisoners of war. He told the audience that he hoped The Fight Continues will help "fill the gap" for new vets who don't feel connected to doctors with no combat experience. He said too many vets, including five of his friends, have taken the "suicide route" instead of trying to get better.

Then he read a list of 21 names of people killed in Afghanistan and Iraq, including six men from his unit. When he got to the last name on the list, Sperry lifted Hannah, now 6, to the microphone.

She read the name of the Marine he traded places with on the edge of Fallujah in 2004. Hannah won't forget Pfc. Fernando Hannon either. She's named after him.

Help for Vets

Veterans Crisis Hotline

1-800-273-8255

St. Louis VA PTSD Clinic

1 Jefferson Barracks Dr., Building No. 58

(314)-894-6639

St. Louis Vet Center

2901 Olive

(314) 531-5355

East St. Louis Vet Center

1265 N. 89th Street, Ste. 5

(618) 397-6602