

# Esquire

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## Vetville

More than two million American veterans have served in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Many came home wounded, most came back changed, thousands have committed suicide. Who is trying to help them? At a small farm in Tennessee, marines are taking care of one another.

By Mike Sager



### Marines

Jonathan Torgovnik

life, when he was a postmaster and a husband, a full-time father; he'd found it parked outside his empty house upon his return from his third tour in Iraq. The odometer had already run around twice. It would have to do. There was no room in the budget for a car payment — inevitably he found himself finishing out the month on pimento cheese, Wonder bread, and moonshine brewed in a 150-year-old still rescued from the family homestead that was awarded to his great-great-great-great-grandfather for his service in the Revolutionary War, at the Battle of Kings Mountain.

Andrew Beaty walked hundreds of miles in 1780 to lend his long rifle to this pivotal victory in the fight for American independence; history records him as one of the original Overmountain Men, the first wave of the storied Tennessee Volunteers. The Beaty family has continued the tradition in successive generations. Alan's father, Keith, endured some of the thickest fighting in Vietnam. Alan himself did four different stints, the last as a U. S.-government-employed mercenary commanding Ugandan and Bosnian security forces. Like their ancestor, bitten by a rattlesnake during the final assault on the British loyalists at Kings Mountain, none of the Beatys returned home from their service unscathed. Alan's wife is gone. He has no hearing in one ear, a constant ringing. Veterans Affairs gave him one of those sound-effects radios to help him sleep — and also a ton of prescription pills. The ghosts of his past are constantly aswirl. They come to him in dreams, they come to him awake: Staff Sergeant Anthony Goodwin, beloved platoon leader, a Marine's Marine — shot in the face and killed instantly; Staff Sergeant Kendall Ivy, Goodwin's battlefield replacement — killed two days later, he remembers,

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**Alan Beaty navigated a rutted road,** once again a man on a mission. His eyes tracked grimly side to side, scanning for irregularities along this dusty and familiar route in the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee. Gravel ricocheted off the undercarriage of his battered red Honda CR-V, the springs squeaked and complained. The half-assed mini-crossover van is a remnant of his former

by a small piece of shrapnel that entered just below his ass cheek and nicked an artery, causing him to bleed out; the men in Ivy's AAV, a large armored troop carrier with tanklike tracks — burned to a crisp, their bodies had to be peeled from the wreckage.

Beaty and Ivy were good friends. After a mission, they'd hang in Beaty's can at Al Asad air base in western Iraq and have a shot or two of whiskey — regular shipments from Beaty's dad came masquerading as Listerine mouthwash. Ivy's wife was pregnant. The night before he was killed, he and Beaty were watching a DVD of *The Alamo*, starring Billy Bob Thornton, talking all kinds of shit about going back in a time machine to kick some Mexican ass — *Gotta get us a coonskin cap!* They were U. S. Marines. Brothers in combat. Men trained to hunger for a fight even as they were recovering from the last, even as they dreaded the next. Now Beaty keeps Ivy's shot glass in a cabinet in his dining room. One thing that wasn't lost.

After Goodwin, after Ivy, the operational leadership of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force's RCT-2 Jump Platoon — a bodyguarding element assigned to an impossibly tall and fearless colonel whose mission was to pacify the largely Sunni western Iraq province of Al Anbar — had fallen to Sergeant Alan Beaty, thirty-one.

Upon receipt of his promotion, Beaty retreated to his can, now devoid of his friend. He'd put his face in his hands and cried like a little boy. *If there's anything you can do to take me out of this, Lord, please do it now. I don't want the responsibility of these Marines on my hands.*

That was 2005, more than six years — and two more deployments — ago. He still can't drive past a dead dog or a bag of garbage lying by the side of a road. The VA awarded him 100 percent disability: post-traumatic stress disorder. (Social Security said he's fine: They told him to get a job.) The smell of burning trash ... the smell of diesel fuel ... the loud report of a firearm in the hollow ... a rubber hose stretched across a street to count traffic ... a line of slow, stupid, complaining motherfuckers in the checkout line at the Walmart ... *anything* can set him off. The way people look at him. The way his family tried to treat him with kid gloves, like some cripple. The way he couldn't even bond with his own kids.

It's like he's home but he's not. Like part of him was left behind. Maybe that's why he kept going back.

It was only a year ago now that Beaty rode his favorite horse eighteen miles out from his farm into the wilderness, a .40-cal pistol hanging from the pommel horn of his saddle. He was broke and depressed. He felt a little bit guilty about some of the stuff that was done over there, and angry about other stuff. As part of a post-Blackwater crackdown on contract mercenaries, he'd been arrested and jailed on inflated charges involving an assault committed by a man under his command. The charges were finally dropped; his dad had borne the burden of paying for most of his defense. He'd felt useless and unproductive and off, you know? Just off. Like nothing was ever quite right. And so goddamn tired. What he would do for some sleep.

He was FUBAR, as they say in the corps.

Fucked-Up Beyond All Repair.

He just couldn't handle it no more.

So he'd planned carefully. Thought it through. It became kind of an obsession, getting all the details right. Something to keep him busy, to keep him slogging forward, one foot in front of the other. He considered slitting his wrists in the bathtub, taking an overdose of his prescription drugs. He decided he didn't want anybody he knew to find him dead.

At last he'd settled on Leonides — half Arabian, half saddlebred. Leo knows his way all over the mountain. He is famously ground tied — you can drop the reins and he'll stand for six hours in one place till you get back. Alan had figured Leo would stand over his body awhile, wondering in his loyal equine pea brain what to do next. Eventually he'd get hungry and go back to the barn. They'd send out a search party. Let the professionals deal with such things...

Now, driving the Honda, Beaty worried his goatee; along with his dark expressive brows and chocolate eyes, it gives him a rakish look much enjoyed by the local ladies, who seem none too stressed about his strict no-toothbrush policy — he also has experienced a bit of a problem bonding with women, if no trouble coupling, now that he's off some of the meds. Up before dawn, he was nearing the end of a six-hour round-trip to the Nashville airport. Of course, he would have driven six days. *One of my Marines is in trouble.* He glanced to his right, checking the welfare of his passenger. His name was Pat Myers. As far as Beaty was concerned, what had happened to Myers was on him:

*I was extremely uncomfortable with the new platoon sergeant who was succeeding me, Beaty would explain later. He wasn't the guy for the job. He was scared to go outside the wire. He didn't know how to run a convoy. He'd never get in a lead vehicle, because that's the one that always got hit. He didn't know how to do any of that crap and he didn't want to learn.*

*And then I leave him alone for twelve hours, not even that, and he's done wounded three of my Marines.*

Beaty had spotted Myers right away at the farthest bay of the baggage claim. He saw the wheelchair, recognized the tattoo on the back of his right arm, a big cross that covers his whole triceps. They'd served together for nearly a year, run eighty-four documented mobile combat patrols, always in vehicle two of the convoy. Beaty rode in the passenger seat. Lance Corporal Myers sat right behind. Rated as a radio operator, Myers never once touched the comms — instead he carried a 12-gauge shotgun, the door breacher. Myers was known in the platoon as the guy who could always make everyone laugh with his irreverent humor. No matter how dark things got, he always had some smart-ass quip to lighten the mood. He'd saved Beaty's ass on Route Uranium, between the city of Hit and Al Asad, when he noticed their Humvee was parked directly on top of a thin green wire connected to three 120mm rockets buried in the sand. Seeing his tattoo across the airport concourse, it had occurred to Beaty how many times he had followed that cross straight into the asshole of the unknown.

The last time Beaty had seen Myers was the Marine Corps birthday, November 10, 2005. Elsewhere in the world, Marines in dress blues were attending formal balls to honor their beloved branch. Lance Corporal Myers, twenty-two, was mounting up for patrol, his first in nearly two months.

For all his joking around, Myers was clearly a troubled kid. His father had been career Army, medical discharge. His mother was a nurse. The family moved around a lot — Indiana, Alaska, Texas. "My dad was an ass," Myers would later say. "He just expected way too much of me. When I was a teenager, I went to church. I played nearly every sport. I was even in band. He never came to one concert, one game, nothing. He was one of those guys, no matter how hard I tried to please him, it was never enough. I could never get it right with him. I always made these standards for myself, and they never, ever met his."

Three years after high school, Myers was working in a grocery store. He met a local recruiter. "My dad told me I wasn't man enough to be a Marine," Myers recalled. "That's the main reason I joined."



Jonathan Torgovnik

Myers rolling down the ramp he built at the farm.

Natural athlete that he was, Myers flew through basic training and the School of Infantry. Eventually he was assigned to the jump platoon. He thought he'd found his place. Until he encountered an unexpected complication: He fell in love with a female Marine.

Beaty had seen this kind of thing before. He preached to the kid; of course he wouldn't listen — never mind that now. Everyone who has ever been around Marines knows this: They do love the same way they do war. They went on a \$7,000 cruise together. After two seemingly blissful weeks, on the gangplank exiting, she told him she'd found somebody else.

When he returned to Al Asad, Myers was a train wreck. He'd come over to Beaty's can and cry — Beaty actually gave him two weeks off to get his shit together, unofficial time away from duty. During this time, Myers didn't shave, didn't shower, didn't do shit but mope around and act demented. One day he was walking across the base wearing civvies, sporting a full beard. As it happened, he passed Colonel Stephen W. Davis, the regimental commander he was being paid by the Marine Corps to protect.

Colonel Davis did a double take. "Are you okay, Myers?"

"What's up?" Myers called. He issued a goofy wave and kept on strolling.

Within three minutes Beaty's radio was blowing up. The sergeant major chewed his ass. Myers was pulled from the jump, given gate guard duty — six hours on, six hours off.

Six long weeks. Whenever the jump convoy would return from a mission, Myers would be waving them into the gate. *And us throwing bottles at him and stuff. Giving him a ton of shit. Ha ha, look at you, gate guard.*

Finally Myers could take no more. He begged with tears in his eyes, "Please let me get back on the jump."

Beaty talked to the sergeant major, went to the mat for the kid. Myers got the thumbs-up.

There was only one problem: Beaty wouldn't be there to supervise. His deployment was over. He was one wake-up from going home.

Myers reported for duty the next morning. He had shaved ... everything *except* his mustache.

The sergeant major went batshit. *As soon as we get back, you're gonna shave your fuckin' face, Marine!*

Then the new platoon sergeant informed Myers that someone else now carried the 12-gauge. Myers would be *driving* vehicle five, the caboose. He'd driven only once before. His Humvee was hit by a roadside bomb; he'd narrowly escaped death; he'd vowed never to drive again.

Not that anybody gave two shits what he'd vowed.

All he remembers is a huge explosion. It was like the ground came up to meet him; then everything went black.

He woke up clear of the wreckage. He knew he was fucked: The tough-as-nails sergeant major was holding his hand like somebody's mommy. "I guess this means I don't have to shave," Myers said, and everybody laughed.

In the Nashville airport, Myers pivoted his chair to face Beaty, each hand working a wheel in opposition. Beaty couldn't believe what he saw. Both of Myers's legs were gone above the knee, a couple of fingers were missing. He was heavier than Beaty remembered; his jug-eared face wore signs of successive generations of fights. He looked like shit, really, like he just didn't care no more, didn't have nothing in the world to look forward to. He'd gotten so fucked-up, he'd left his wheelchair in the parking lot of a roadhouse in Fort Worth. He'd driven home fine, but then he had to crawl up the driveway to his house.

The next morning, after a call from a concerned friend, a Marine gunnery sergeant assigned his case by the corps's Wounded Warrior Regiment, let herself into Myers's house with a key he'd given her for these kinds of occasions, which were becoming too numerous to count. He was already facing a DUI. He seemed to have hit rock bottom.

After rousing him the best she could, Gunny Teresa Grandinetti pulled out her cell phone and dialed a number. She handed it to Myers.

"Who is this?" Myers demanded insolently.

The Tennessee twang was unmistakable: "This is Sergeant Beaty."

Myers got real quiet. "Sarge, I'm really fucked-up." He burst into tears.

"You wanna come out here and stay with me awhile?"

"Can I come tonight?"

As it happened, Gunny Grandinetti's husband is an employee of Southwest Airlines; he finagled Myers a free ticket. They had him on a plane the next day.

Now he was in Beaty's battered red Honda CR-V, an artifact of another man's tortured history. They were on their way to Beaty's farm, 260 acres of cleared fields and forest and untended walnut trees deep in a hollow near Oneida, Tennessee, a hamlet of thirty-eight hundred in the far north central part of the state, just across the border from Kentucky.

The instant the men had laid eyes on each other in the airport, they'd both wept. *That must have been a sight*, Beaty was thinking as he drove. And then he thought: *Holy shit, another mouth to feed*. And then he thought: *Who knows where he'd have ended up if I didn't come get him*.

Maybe like Keith Hull, living under a bridge before he came to crash with Beaty. Or Jason DeLong. He was in the turret of a truck when it hit a double-stacked antitank mine; he flew in from California just to spend two days. Or Adam Hand, another turret gunner, living hand-to-mouth in Washington, D. C. He stayed for a few weeks. Now he's a mall cop; he's thinking of coming back down. Or Spencer Pellecer, still on active duty at the School of Infantry at Camp Lejeune, who finds his way every holiday to Beaty's copious and embracing leather couch — Pellecer's mother calls *Beaty* for updates. Or the score of other Marines who have found work, camaraderie, and refuge at Beaty's farm since

June of 2008, a sort of do-it-yourself halfway house for Marines broken by war. Some stay for a week; some stay for months; one guy is working on year two. Though Beaty has been asked informally by the Marines to help out from time to time, he has up to now gotten no formal support or guidance from them or the government; lately he's been thinking about applying for grants, soliciting contributions — something to help make his idea more serviceable than the sets of bunk beds in his kids' room. For now, it's a jerry-rigged operation. Whatever it takes, they make it work.

*If only there was room for all of them.*

The GPS signal cut out about a mile from the house, at the clearing by an antique whitewashed church where the congregants are said to handle snakes. The cell phone died a few hundred yards later — the Honda was picked up instead by a pack of abandoned dogs Beaty has adopted, barking and yipping and running alongside like a welcoming committee. (His old blind dog waited behind. You can kick a deflated soccer ball anywhere in the field and he'll find it and bring it back to you ... eventually.)

Beaty pulled up in the gravel before his modest cracker-box house. Horses grazed in the field behind; mountains rise in the middle distance. A small rickety porch with three steps framed the doorway. Off to one side was a pile of fresh lumber, two-bys and four-bys and such.

The engine hiccupped to a stop. "Look Devil Dog, I ain't lifting your fat ass up into the house," Beaty said, a tone of command once again swelling the barrel of his chest. He gestured toward the lumber pile. "You're gonna have to build your own ramp."

Hungover, fucked-up, possibly suicidal, Myers stared at his former platoon leader. It was hot as hell, the sun was beating down, fat bees were buzzing everywhere. He was twenty-five years old. He'd been blown up and bled out. His lungs had collapsed, his heart had stopped three times. When he'd awakened from his medically induced coma, he'd found himself in a hospital in Washington, D. C. The first person he'd seen was his mother. *I asked her if my junk was still there.* After that he'd spent two years in an army hospital in San Antonio.

Beaty climbed out of the truck and shut his door, headed for the house. "When you get the ramp built, you can roll yourself inside and I'll pour you a drink of whiskey and we'll talk about the war."

Myers sat there a moment, considering his options.

Then he clambered down from the Honda and went to work.



**On a somnolent afternoon** at Beaty's farm, rain drums relentlessly on the roof overhanging the back porch; dense fog looms, obscuring the thickly forested mountains. A war flick plays at low volume on the big screen in the living room, King Leonidas leading his elite Spartans into battle against a vastly superior force. The sounds of children's laughter and video games drift out from

**Marines Living Room**

Jonathan Torgovnik

one of the bedrooms,  
Beaty's three kids in  
residence for the

weekend.

Four men sprawl on sofas around a big old wood-burning stove, sipping beer and moonshine. His first night in the house alone, Beaty slept on the wall-to-wall carpet by the stove, too heavy for his wife to move, he supposes. Now there's a hardwood floor. Myers put that in, too. (Beaty worked by his side ... as he'd ended up doing with the ramp.)

Myers left after four months. He's back in Fort Worth, has a girlfriend and a baby; he and a partner are working on a plan to train vets as mechanics. He still visits from time to time — you should have seen him driving the hay wagon with broom handles duct-taped to his stumps so he could work the pedals. Later they duct-taped him onto a smooth-gaited Tennessee walking horse and took him for a ride up the mountain. Obviously his time with Beaty, and the camaraderie of the Marines who are always coming and going from the place, helped turn him around. The truth is, you come home and nobody understands. While you've been out killing and trying to survive, they've been shopping for groceries, ordering wine in fancy restaurants, attending to math homework. (It helped also that Gunny Grandinetti finally got the military to send him a pair of prosthetic legs.)

More recently, Myers's room at the farm has been occupied by Keith Hull. Skeleton thin with dreadlocks, the former sergeant is wearing his usual surfer shorts and rubber flip-flops despite the cold. Hull was raised in private schools, the rebellious son of a successful insurance man. He tried high-rise steel construction before he joined the corps in 1998. Following 9/11, he was assigned to Task Force 58, the first Marines on the deck in Afghanistan; they pushed straight through to Kandahar. After mustering out, Hull attempted college for several years. When he was recalled by the Marines in 2004, he was assigned to the jump as a turret gunner — "The best platoon the Marine Corps has ever made up," he says.

"Everybody was experienced," Hull remembers. "Everybody had a different MOS. It was like a James Bond platoon: No matter what situation we were in — say there was a tank to be moved or a piece of equipment that needed to be fixed, what have you — there was always somebody who knew how." Out of twenty-three in the platoon during his deployment, two were killed, four wounded. The psychic toll is yet untallied. Several months after his return, the sergeant who replaced Beaty was thrown from his motorcycle after driving off a road. There were a lot of rumors about a suicide note in his back pocket. Only the family knows for sure.

According to a recent federal-appeals-court ruling that took the VA to task for failing to care for veterans suffering from PTSD, an average of eighteen vets (from all eras) commit suicide *every day*.

Of 1.6 million Iraq/Afghan-war vets, according to a 2008 Rand Corporation study cited by the U. S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, 300,000 suffered from PTSD or major depression. As of 2011, the number of vets from those wars has surpassed two million.

By the time Hull came to Beaty's farm, he'd spiraled into homelessness. A proud and intelligent man with a gift for cleverly bending a truth, he'll tell you he was "stealth camping" while working as a bar bouncer, getting paid off the books in drugs and alcohol. That he ended up sleeping under bridges, he explains, was inspired by a Web site he came across. Admittedly he was a sorry case. His apartment was gone; he'd donated all his furniture to needy neighbors. His girlfriend was gone and so was most of the contents of his bank account. (He'd have given her the money if she'd only asked.) He'd lost his job as a janitor in a small restaurant — he worked the night shift because he couldn't stand to be around so many people; a can of beans would fall off a shelf and he'd dive for cover. He was drunk or high all the time. He'd gotten to the point where he'd asked his father to lock up his guns. He still hasn't seen his young son in a while. "I was ready to go the way of the dodo," he says.

Now Hull is chillin' in Beaty's living room, where he's pretty much been part of the furniture for the last nine months, helping play host to the dignitary who's just come limping up Myers's front ramp. (At least he's not in the bedroom staring at the popcorn ceiling. In the beginning, that's *all* he did. It was Beaty who finally dragged him to the VA.)

Lieutenant Colonel Tim Maxwell, forty-six, is one of the highest-ranking Marines to be seriously wounded in Iraq; he was on his sixth overseas tour, October 2004. While in the hospital recovering from traumatic brain and other injuries, he began ministering to wounded Devil Dogs, going from bed to bed in his bathrobe. Eventually he saw to fruition his dream of creating a Wounded Warrior Regiment, a unit to keep account of Marines after they'd been injured — a series of barracks and facilities and social services where the wounded can begin their recovery in the embrace of their fellows. (See "Wounded Battalion," *Esquire*, December 2007.) The first such barracks, at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, was named in his honor.

Like many wounded vets, Maxwell has discovered that what's broken can never really be fixed. There are ongoing complications, constant tinkering with meds, weird side effects, oddly unexplainable medical breakdowns, revisionary surgeries. In 2008, Maxwell had an operation to remove some of the remaining shrapnel from his brain — originally the doctors thought it was embedded too deep to risk extracting. As it turned out, the toxins leaching from the metal were cooking his noodle — *How do you like that?* He had reached the point where he was losing more function every day.

The surgery, followed by a long and tortured rehab, eased some of Maxwell's speech, behavioral, and cognitive problems. But it also left the strapping former triathlete without use of his right arm, with tenuous balance, and with a greatly reduced field of vision on his right side. More recently he needed further surgery on his rebuilt left elbow — all the metal had attracted a horrendous infection. "The doc wanted to put me in a cast for six weeks. I said, 'You're talking about me having to have somebody wipe my butt again. I'm not okay with that,' " Maxwell will later recall over dinner, having opted for lasagna at the best steakhouse in Oneida because he couldn't cut the meat with one hand, and because he was too proud to let somebody do it for him.

A few months ago, Maxwell flew from his home in northern Virginia to the Marine base at Camp Pendleton, north of San Diego, to try out for a Wounded Warriors Paralympics team. Despite his balance problems, he managed to ride his bike one-armed for eighteen miles without crashing. Swimming proved more difficult. Sank like a stone. A guy he met wants to teach him how to swim with one arm. Maxwell doesn't want to learn. Neither does he want to learn to write with his left hand. He is convinced he can rehab the damn right limb if he just keeps working. Already he can make his fingers move a little.

Having heard much talk of Beaty's farm, Maxwell has driven his specially equipped camper van (license plate BUMR) nearly six hundred miles from Camp Lejeune, where he was attending the dedication of a brand-new Wounded Warrior barracks. After Maxwell founded the first barracks in 2007, an entire Wounded Warrior Regiment was formed. There's a command center at Quantico, Virginia, now a second barracks at Camp Pendleton, and satellite offices around the country. Since its inception, Maxwell's regiment has helped nearly twenty-seven thousand wounded Marines. But the program benefits primarily Marines still on active duty. For those who have left the service, support is hard to find.

Retired now from the corps, Maxwell runs [SemperMax.com](http://SemperMax.com), a nonprofit support group for wounded Marines, both active and vets. He has a Web site and a zillion contacts. (As does his wife, Shannon, also active in helping wounded families. She has recently authored a children's book, *Our Daddy Is Invincible!*, aimed at helping kids cope when their parents suffer injuries at war.) Each day brings Maxwell a different project, a different hard-luck tale, another wounded Marine with a problem to solve — which means that each day Maxwell has something important to do. He would have arrived at Beaty's place sooner, but he couldn't drive straight through; he doesn't see very well in the dark anymore.

Of course, he drove some distance in the dark anyway.

"After six and a half years, the doctors are starting to tell me they don't know what to do for me," Maxwell is telling the others. Though his speech is slurred and he likes to play himself off as a humble, brain-damaged cripp, Maxwell's mind is sharp, his ideas run well before the wind, his gruff irreverence is intact. "Doctors *never* say, 'I don't know.' Those three words: They're frickin' *restricted* from saying that."



"They might lose their status as gods," Hull quips.

"The most irritating thing to me is the doctors grouping PTSD and traumatic brain injuries together because they know so little about the damn brain. They're saying we got the same problems, me and you. Well, hello? Our problems are *totally* different. They both suck. But they suck different. Like with my injury, my brain is whacked. Shrapnel is what got me, not the *kaboom*."

"There's an actual physical injury," Beaty says.

"Exactly," says Hull.

"I know I'm supposed to be a dumbass grunt, but even *I* can tell the difference between who's got what," Maxwell says. Though he was born in Ohio, he has a southern accent that showed up after the initial injury, the result of an enemy mortar round that landed serendipitously within the sandbagged doorway of his tent inside a command base. "When I was in the Wounded Warrior barracks, you'd see the PTSD guys up talking to each other at 2:00 A.M. None of them could sleep. What about you?"

Hull shrugs. *Who gives a shit?*

"You're kind of new at it — you have to learn how to fight the fight," Maxwell says.

"That's the thing that's so jacked up about PTSD," Hull says. "It's a mental degradation that you can't describe. If you hurt your arm, you have a mark. But if you hurt your mind ... it's like, *Whatthefuck*, you know? I'm like, *I've been through some bad shit before, much worse shit than this. Why can't I fix myself now?*"

"I think everybody who goes through combat has PTSD," Maxwell says.

"The experts say it's like 20 percent," Beaty offers.

Maxwell screws up his face like he's smelled something bad. "That's 'cause when you go to treatment, they ask the wrong questions. The first thing they should ask is: Did you experience combat? Did you have to return fire? Then they should ask: Did you ever lose a friend? 'Cause when you see a dude get whacked, a friend of yours, a stranger, it don't matter — it *always* fucks you up."

"What person in combat ain't lost a friend?" Hull asks.

"Exactly," says Beaty.

"You spend the rest of your life lying awake at night thinking: *If I didn't do such and such, then Tommy Smith wouldn't be dead*," Maxwell says. "It's always: my fault, my fault, my fault. *I should've been on the left side of the Hummer. I should have been on the right. I should have gone first through the door.* There's no way around it."

"The problem is getting guys into treatment," Beaty says. "My dad was a Marine in Vietnam. A Suicide Charley guy. Served in 1968. Purple Heart. He's had PTSD his whole life — but he only just started to get treatment when I did. He's been gutting it out for like thirty, forty years. Bad dreams, cold sweats, the whole nine. And he never told a soul."

"It's damn embarrassing," Maxwell says. "You've got to convince a guy he's got PTSD. You gotta be like: 'Don't feel like a wuss. It's a real injury.' "

Hull: "The docs are like, 'Tell me about your issues.' But it's hard to explain. Because sometimes I don't even have words to express how it makes me feel. And the docs are like, 'Well, you gotta come up with something.' And I'm just like, *Fuck*, you know? It feels like something's trying to come out of my chest. Like in *Alien*? That's how I think of it — it feels like something is trying to rip through my chest. It's like: *I don't understand it either, motherfucker!* I just know I'm fucked-up and I need help. I'm just really at the point where I want to fucking get my shit together and move on."

"Are you taking your meds?"

"I take something for my rage issues — so I know that works. And then I only take my other ones when I have panic attacks. Those pills are weird. It's like they make my insides calm down but it doesn't make my brain stop working. You know what I'm saying? It's like my brain is still going, *What the fuck? What the fuck? What the fuck?*"

Maxwell takes a swig of his beer. "I have days where I just sit there and ..." his voice trails off. The lamplight catches the jagged scar on the side of his head, just below the hedge line of his high-and-tight military fade.



**Marines**

Reportage by Getty Images

**Beaty and Maxwell judder** back down the rutted road on the way to town for an early dinner. Hull has volunteered to stay home with the kids, the oldest of whom is now fifteen. The sky has cleared and the moon has risen, presiding over the twilight and bare trees. With the windows down, you can hear the water in Stanley Creek, more of a rush than a babble.

Beaty points out his barn, a circa-1960s corncrib renovated by Marines, and the locust fence posts — harvested, hauled down the mountain, and set in place by Marines. "And see right here on the left? Keith Hull cleared that entire field.

It was nothing but woods when he started. He disked it up and sowed it and did everything by himself." Most of the fields were cleared

by Marines.

"It's not me asking them to come work," Beaty says. "That's the funny thing. They just show up because they want a place to go." He shakes his head, the way a person does when he feels both blessed and perplexed. "Sometimes it gets a little bit crowded."

"I'm sure there's plenty of work to be done," Maxwell says.

"There's camaraderie," Beaty says. "There's people here that understand 'em, other combat Marines. We sit around at night, and I'm not gonna lie, we sit around and have a drink or three and talk about the war. It's huge for them. This is their home."

"It's hard to feel comfortable anywhere else," Maxwell says.

Beaty scratches his head, resets his trucker cap. "When they teach you to be a Marine, they teach you to focus, because you can't be emotional in combat. You learn to be able to put things out of your

mind. You learn to build walls. We've been trained to just keep functioning, to operate without emotion, without conscience. That's what you need in war.

"But once you get back to society," Beaty continues, "the walls are still up. It's hard to have an emotional attachment to people. Because in your mind, you've been trained to know that this right here could be your last day on earth. So why allow myself to be connected to this woman? Why allow myself to be connected to my children? Lucky I got an amazing woman therapist now at the VA. It's only in the last few months that I'm learning how to take the walls down."

"The main strength of the Marine Corps is also the main weakness," Maxwell says matter-of-factly. "We're *too* well trained."

"They make 'em Marines, but nobody ever turns them back into civilians," Beaty says. "Even prisoners get halfway houses. Druggies get sober living."

Maxwell looks out the window. Crisscrossing the country, he's heard it all a million times before. He grinds his jaw, the wheels turn.

"Let's just estimate," Maxwell says at last. "What if we got a hundred grand? You'd be amazed with what we could do in this place with 100k. We make a campsite. When each kid comes in, we give him some lumber and we let him build his own cabin. We could have ten, twelve cabins, a rec hall — "

"I could sure put 'em to work," Beaty says. "Right now the only thing we're taking off the farm is hay. I thought about turning it into a tomato farm. And I got enough walnut trees to fill fifteen dump trucks with walnuts. But it's too labor-intensive. Right now I just have to let shit rot."

"It's like that movie. With that actor, you know? He builds the whatchacallit behind his — " Maxwell knits his brow, searching for a proper noun. People, places, things. It's called aphasia. It's part of the brain injury; there's no escaping it.

"*Field of Dreams?*" Beaty offers gingerly.

"If you build it, they will come," Maxwell says, pleased to have remembered the damn quote.

*Yes! Yes! Yes!* Beaty is thinking.

Turning his farm into a haven for Marines — it's one of the reasons he decided to ride his horse back down the mountain that fateful day.



Tim Maxwell And John Cybula

**Seventy miles south** of Alan Beaty's farm, John Cybula is sitting at a picnic table on the back deck of a house belonging to his girlfriend's mom. His stealth-black, Hi-Point 9mm semiautomatic pistol is broken down on the table; we've just finished emptying a few mags of hollow points into an assortment of car-stereo amps and tree stumps and other unfortunate objects that live for that purpose in the backyard. In a little

Jonathan Torgovnik

while he'll demonstrate  
how fast he can put it

back together with his eyes shut. Like he says, "Gotta stay sharp."

Cybula is twenty-five. He brings to mind Elvis Presley in his thirties, a handsome devil gone a little bit puffy, a certain darkness around the eyes, his hair carefully gelled and spiked. Chelsea is by his side; they share a pack of cigs. She is twenty-one, sweet as can be, taking the semester off from community college — she's thinking either forestry or nursing. She's got blue eyes and a rockin' little bod, an asymmetrical haircut with a pink swath dyed into the back, about as fashionista as it gets around Madisonville, Tennessee, a town so small that you can be shopping for a toothbrush at 2:00 A.M. at the local Walmart and be recognized by the local cop, who is aware that you are wanted for a probation violation. (He lets you kiss your girl and takes you to jail without cuffs.)

Cybula followed his granddad into the Marine Corps at seventeen, another boy from another family of Tennessee Volunteers — a high school quarterback who majored in cheerleaders, who wanted payback for 9/11. When we first met, in the summer of 2007, he was twenty-one. He'd been wounded in Fallujah, caught a bullet in the hip. The impact knocked him off a roof; he fell three stories and broke his pelvis. Young and gung ho, not wanting to be the weak link in the chain, he tried to rejoin his unit before his injuries had properly healed. He ended up at the Wounded Warrior barracks at Camp Lejeune, eating a fistful of meds every day.

The sky is blue, the sun is unseasonably warm, a dog sleeps at his feet. "When I first got out, I was really lost," Cybula says. "I didn't know what to do. I was on all those pain meds. It hurt to stand or sit or lie down. The only thing I was trained to do since I was seventeen was how to kill somebody. But it's not really a marketable skill. It kind of works against you, even.

"Like, I got in a fight with my stepdad. He came at me with a baseball bat. He swung and I caught it and I jerked it away from him. And you should have seen the look in his face. He knew he'd done the wrong thing. I just destroyed him. He had some messed-up vertebrae in his neck, I broke his jaw, broke his eye socket, broke a couple of his ribs.

"When the police came, I explained it to them — he came at me with a baseball bat, you know? Self-defense. But they arrested me for aggravated assault, assault with a deadly weapon, because of my Marine Corps training.

"After that, I started abusing drugs bad again — I ain't going to lie to you, I started shooting up OxyContin and crap like that. I was on drugs so bad like I had to pawn my TV, my car, everything I had. It's just like, I don't know. I went to war, I did this, I did that. I have lots of feelings inside my head; I try to tuck them away — but they always come out. I don't know how to deal with these feelings. You can ask her: Sometimes I'll just flip out and like our dog will do the littlest thing and like, what was it? What did Roxy-dog do that one night where I was wanting to take her out back and like just like blow her head off?"

Chelsea: "I don't remember what she did."

"She did something to me and I was just so pissed that I was like — "

"The one thing we fight about is the dogs," Chelsea says. "There's a difference between discipline and beating them, you know?"

"I don't *like* hurting her," Cybula says. He looks down the barrel of his weapon, making sure the chamber is clean. "I'm going to the VA now. They put me on Xanax so I'm more chill."

"He still has the worst dreams," Chelsea says.

"Tell him about the time you got up without telling me. Remember I grabbed you?"

"He sometimes just starts crying. And like, at first, I didn't want to wake him up, you know? I was afraid or whatever. So I finally asked him, I was like, 'If you have a bad dream, do you want me to wake you up?' And he was like, 'I feel like such a pussy for crying.' "

"And then I've also sleepwalked," Cybula says. "Like I woke up in my boxers standing out in the woods here behind the house. And I was like, *What am I doing outside?* It was crazy. Sometimes I can be so happy. Like, alive? And then all of the sudden I'll just be like, my head is down. And she'll be like, 'What's wrong?' And I'll just be like, 'Nothin,' and then I'll cry or something. And then sometimes I'll just be really, really *mad*. And she'll go, 'What's wrong, honey?' And I'll just be like, 'Don't talk to me.' That's why I got this pistol. Believe it or not, I don't want to hurt nobody. It's like an outlet, you know? Like when I get pissed, I'll come outside and shoot it. That's what we did in the Marine Corps. We let our stuff off by shooting guns and stuff like that."

Chelsea takes two cigarettes from the pack, hands one to her man. Gallantly he lights hers first; she smiles at him adoringly. They don't know it yet, but she's pregnant.

*If you'd like to contact Alan Beaty and the other vets on the Tennessee farm, you can use the following mailing address:*

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<http://www.esquire.com/features/marines-veterans-iraq-0811>