

LOST, from page 1

did — but had done other stories with the military, including getting to know them in places like Kosovo. So I hadn't spent long periods of time. But I think, like most reporters, embedding is something that became much more prevalent in Iraq and Afghanistan than it ever had before.

R.R.: *Had you had any personal interactions with military service people? Was anyone in your family ever in the military?*

B.W.: Yeah, my grandfather was: the Coast Guard, back in World War I. And my father was in the army in the Korean War.

R.R.: *So, I feel almost crass asking questions about what happened to you on Jan. 29, 2006.*

B.W.: Yeah. Jan. 29, 2006. I was actually with the 4th Infantry, up in Taji, which is north of Baghdad. And we were out, to see how the U.S. military was passing more control and power to the Iraqi military. Me and my team, we decided to ride along in an Iraqi tank and see how they operated. And that started a change in our lives.

R.R.: *Do you have any memories of the explosion? At all?*

B.W.: You know, it's hard to (he chuckles) define "remember," "memories." I do remember sort of instantly going out. And I do know one other thing: When I woke up, I still remember what I saw when I opened my eyes — I was out for a minute — I looked up and I saw that one of my teammates was bleeding out of his face. And I asked, "Am I alive?" and they said, "Yes." That's the last thing I remember.

R.R.: *And when you came back to consciousness, where were you?*

B.W.: I was in Bethesda Naval Hospital. I had been unconscious for 36 days.

R.R.: *I had a friend who was ill in the hospital for two days and lost consciousness, and (she) went through this instance of trying to recall what happened those two days. So I'm going to ask you: How was it for you to — well, not to have lost, but have been unconscious for 36 days of your life?*

B.W.: (Laughs.) Well, during those 36 days, I don't have any memory of it at all, so it was perfectly fine. And painless. I had no nightmares. Nothing like that.

Like most of us, when we emerge out of an event like that, depending on how bad you are, you're pretty lucky to be alive. I know that's true for almost everybody that I've met. But then over time you start to realize how much you've changed, and how life could be when you'd be able to predict what your future's going to be like. And I think for the ones who've been injured in these wars — again, in how extensive and how bad your injury is — you certainly go into moments of depression and frustration. It depends on what happens to you. And a lot of it depends on who you've got around you as well. Those with very strong families are able to recover a little bit more, at least in the beginning.

R.R.: *How soon after your recovery began did you start interacting with other people who had brain-related trauma?*

B.W.: Well, certainly the ones there in Bethesda Naval, when I was there. And then of course, a lot of speech therapists, physical therapists. They're not the ones with the injuries, but they're the ones who are very knowledgeable about it. I did hook up with a traumatic brain injury world, when I went to meetings. And when I did a story for ABC, I met a lot of people with very similar problems.

R.R.: *In a way, you're aligned with a unique group of people, in that your injury occurred when you were embedded with the military. So what have people in the military who have brain injuries taught you about living with this injury?*

B.W.: Taught me? I don't know. There's about 1.5 million people in our country that get brain injury, so there's certainly plenty to go around. But I know there have been estimates coming out of the wars that well over 300,000 have gotten some kind of brain injury in Iraq and Afghanistan. You're talking about long-term recovery for brain injury, which didn't really exist at the same level in previous wars: There was not so much IEDs, but powerful bombs dropped from jets, the planes from above. The bullets, they're flying horizontally: Either they'd kill you or let you live, likely not (with) brain injury problems.

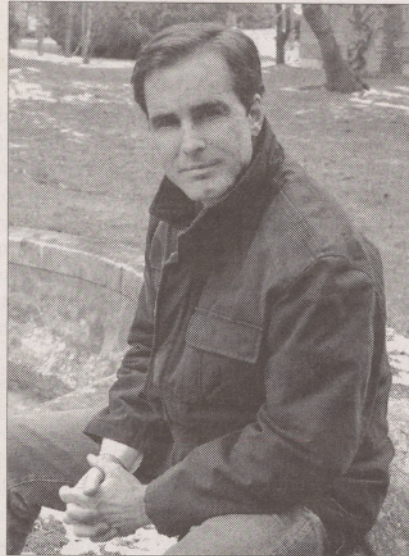
But now because of IEDs, you've got a lot of people, some of them with very obvious, physical injuries and some of them with invisible ones that are caused by the pressure of the blast and not so much rocks piercing through the skull. So it's not so much what they taught me: It's that they taught therapists and family members, because there's been so many people.

R.R.: *When did it occur to you to start your foundation?*

B.W.: This was largely started by my wife, Lee, and my three brothers, that moment that I woke up and they all realized that I was going to speak and was going to live. With them in Bethesda Naval with floors filled with those with similar injuries to what I had, just knowing that they had the ability to try to help (the injured) to get as much treatment and community support as I was getting: They were so moved by it and felt obligated to begin this. I was still somewhat unconscious. I was awake, but still very confused. And they absolutely launched into it and were never going to let it go.

R.R.: *Now you're talking about homeless vets.*

B.W.: You know, homeless vets is kind of



"People are welcomed back as heroes, but the different kinds of injuries that exist make it difficult for them to get hired; (and) there is a huge problem with the economy — all of which is causing homelessness.

an interesting thing because I think we largely associate homelessness with the veterans who have come out of Vietnam. That was a different kind of homelessness in the sense that the economy was fairly decent back during that time, in the late 60s, early 1970s,

compared to now. So it was not so much the economy that caused that, but it was more rejection of people when they did return home.

Now it's the opposite. People are welcomed back as heroes, but the different kinds of injuries that exist make it difficult for them to get hired; (and) there is a huge problem with the economy — all of which is causing homelessness. So it's changed. Homelessness: It's happening more when they come back, as opposed to Vietnam, when that was largely five and 10 years after the war was over that they become homeless. And sometimes, mental problems would emerge because their lives were so completely changed, not so much by the deployment and what they went through in the war, but when they got off the plane, they were spat upon.

R.R.: *What can we do to help homeless vets?*

B.W.: Jobs, jobs, jobs are the biggest thing. Find 'em a job and they'll be a lot better off.

Obviously, there's some psychological help that needs to (happen) for a lot of people. We've got multiple deployments now. I've met some on their fourth, fifth deployment. Some with Special Ops are on their ninth deployment. We've got a very small number of people serving in this war because it's voluntary; it's not a draft. So yeah, when they come back — the numbers of suicides are going up, divorce is going up, the amount of depression for veterans is much greater than it is for those who are not veterans. So, yes, there are obviously mental problems that

have been emerging because of these wars.

R.R.: *Since your injury there, how many times have you been back to Iraq?*

B.W.: Just once. I was trying to get to Balad (a city roughly 50 miles north of Baghdad) a year and a half ago. Mostly my wife does not want me to go to wars anymore. I don't blame her. But there was a dust storm, so I couldn't get that far. So we landed in Mosul and had to turn out right away and head over to Afghanistan, which was going to be our second stop anyway. But I did not get back to Balad, and I wanted to go thank the medics, doctors and nurses who saved my life there. But I did see the ones in both Kabul and Kandahar in Afghanistan. Basically all of that shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan: Not only the troops have moved in there, but so have the doctors, the nurses, the medics and everyone else. That's the new war.

R.R.: *It's the new war. And do vets who were in Iraq have a different experience when they come back than vets who were in Afghanistan?*

B.W.: Sure. Afghanistan is a much more rural country and Iraq is an urban country. So there's a different way that it looks and feels. And Afghanistan of course is much larger, so there's a lot of violence that shifts from one place to another. But the other thing is that the kinds of IED explosions are different and the injuries, therefore, in Afghanistan are different than they were in Iraq.

See, there are a whole lot of (injuries) because there is step-up in foot patrols in Afghanistan. People are getting out of the tanks and Humvees and the MRAPs (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles). They're getting out of those to walk around, wanting to try to win over the trust from the people, but also because there's not that much going on on the road. They have to get off the road. Therefore, there's more stepping on the IED, which means that the explosion is going vertically up, as opposed to diagonally or 45 degrees, like it was with me, from the side, off the road. So that's changed the kinds of injuries. You see a lot more double amputees, triple amputees than you had in Iraq. And those are really upsetting.

R.R.: *There's a panel after your talk that you give. What do you hope will come out of this event?*

B.W.: It's always great to hear from people. I'm especially interested in hearing what people know and what people have seen, because probably those that have served are in neighborhoods where people don't know where they are or who they are. So it's great when people have friends and they tell how they're handling it and how they're doing it: how proud they are, how discouraged they are. There's all sorts of feelings about those that come back, so it's good to have those conversations.

Originally published by Real Change News, Seattle, Wash.



Natural Kitchen & Home

2106 SE Division
503•231•5175
miradorcommunitystore.com
Mon-Sat 10-6 • Sun 11-5

Canning jars & equipment, cookware, kitchen tools & appliances

Organic cotton sheets, towels, & blankets

Food dryers

Juicers

Books on meat-free cooking, gardening & sustainability

NEW SEASONS

MARKET



Home Grown

shop local
eat fresh

The friendliest store in town.

EASY & FUN TO SHOP • LOCALLY OWNED & OPERATED
www.newseasonsmarket.com