

Time reveals, and may someday heal, old wounds

One veteran uses his experiences to connect with the next generation

I met Brian Bland just before Veterans Day. Brian, a former Marine Corps corporal who served two deployments in Iraq, had been invited to Reynolds High School in Troutdale, just east of Portland. The school was hosting a Living History Day, a day devoted to recognizing area veterans and inviting them to share their stories with the student body.



Robert Britt

Robert Britt is a writer, photographer and U.S. Army veteran with two deployments to the war in Iraq. He is currently serving a six-month fellowship with Street Roots and The Mission Continues, a nonprofit that connects post-9/11 veterans with service work in their communities.

All our modern wars were represented: WWII, Korea, Vietnam — each veteran sharing their story with the students. Brian, at 30 years old this month, took his place that day as a representative of our new generation of veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, his two tours to the Middle East earning him his seat.

In front of a class of about 15 students, Brian had at his flank three survivors of the war in Vietnam. And after one told his story of being at sea aboard the USS Oriskany the day a fire killed 44 of his shipmates in 1966, it was Brian's turn to share his story.

He had joined the Marine Corps in mid-2001 and was in boot camp on 9/11. Trained as a combat engineer, he deployed to Kuwait in 2003 and his unit was among those to breach the Iraqi border for the invasion forces that March.

His unit returned to the States soon after, he told the class, but by early 2004, he was back in Iraq.

This time, his engineer battalion was sent to the outskirts of Falluja, where the first of two battles for control of the city was beginning to unfold. His unit was tasked with constructing a traffic control point at a highway offramp on the outlying area of the city — a site aptly nicknamed Cloverleaf.

"We heard about other units taking mass casualties there, so we knew it was going to be rough," he would later say. "People were writing letters to their families and keeping them in their blouses. I wasn't planning on dying, but by that point I'd just accepted it."

As he and his comrades began setting up a series of Hesco barriers — earth-filled gabions used to control access or provide protection from enemy fire. They soon came under fire. A coordinated attack of small arms fire, rocket-propelled grenades and mortar rounds peppered the area.

"It was like all hell broke loose," Brian said. "As soon as we started unloading the trucks, they started shooting RPGs and AKs. You could see the RPGs skipping off the road."

In the immediate confusion, his squad dispersed and fled the area, leaving Brian isolated. For about 30 minutes he was left alone, stranded, and a real-world counter to the motto of "never leave a fallen Marine behind."

His squad returned once they realized what had happened and after spending four more days at Cloverleaf and several more months in Falluja, Brian left the battlefield. He came home without physical injury, but the seed of trauma had been planted.



Brian Bland on campus at Portland State University where he is finishing his bachelor's degree in history.

PHOTO BY ROBERT BRITT

In 2005, Brian returned to Portland after receiving his discharge papers and his reintegration began smoothly. He landed a job with an armored car company and had filed for service-connected disability for post traumatic stress disorder while he was still in the Marines, so his claim had been quickly approved.

But there's a strange thing about coming home. Everyday life seems almost boring after you've lived in the clamor of war, and sometimes it's in this calm when memories of trauma begin to work themselves out.

Brian began drinking, initially in celebration of his safe return home, but soon he was turning to alcohol and drugs to control his PTSD symptoms.

Eventually, he recognized there was a problem.

Sometime in 2007, he first thought he needed to get help. After talking with a doctor at the PTSD clinic he was prescribed antidepressants, which he took for a couple of weeks before giving up on them when they didn't immediately help.

He went back to the bottle. A bottle of Grey Goose, three or four vicodins, some marijuana. All this, he says, were in preparation for a night out at the bars, where he would easily spend \$100 on drinks.

"That was a Friday or Saturday night for awhile," he says. "And I was also going to dollar drink nights and spending \$20-\$30 and having the time of my life. People liked hanging out with me because I was drunk all the time."

The alcohol and drug abuse got so bad, he says, that he was smoking pot in the mornings before work so that he could fight off the setting hangovers.

He was taking college courses using his VA education benefits, but the government mistakenly overpaid him and called for repayment months later. Already struggling with anxiety and depression, Brian avoided the bills for the debt and it was soon sent to collections. The government began garnishing both his monthly disability and education benefits.

By late 2010, Brian was seriously struggling with anxiety and depression, and his new financial problems strained an already stressful situation.

One day that October, he decided that he had enough. He was going to make it easy

on everybody. As he sat at home, he took out his Ka-Bar knife and intended to stab it into his heart. He had — as a counselor would ask — a plan.

In a moment of happy coincidence, his then-girlfriend returned home before he could carry out his plan. "I realized then that things needed to change," he says. He was admitted to a local hospital and spent four days in the mental health ward.

As he shared this with the class, Brian stopped for a moment. "Other than my

counselors at the VA, and maybe some family, I've never told those stories to anybody," he said.

The students, young enough to be free from the social constraints of everyday conversation, began asking questions. *What's it like having PTSD? What was it like being left behind? Were you*

scared?

Despite never having shared his story in such a public way, he says he was glad the students were inquisitive. He says he found some relief in telling his story that day and hopes to speak to more groups about his combat experience and his PTSD.

Brian meets with his VA counselors about once a week and says he is doing much better. He has learned a lot about PTSD, and his drinking is nothing like it was. Now, he says, he might go out and have a couple of beers on the weekends, but that's it.

His latest great moment of self-realization was coming to the conclusion that there is no magic cure for PTSD. "It's never going to go away," he says. "The hope is to give you the skills to manage your symptoms and to have the most productive life you can have, knowing that it's never going to go away completely."

Now married with two sons, Brian is finishing his bachelor's degree in history at Portland State. He plans to pursue a master's in counseling with the hopes of getting a job in the VA system so he can help other veterans.

He also wants to work to fight the public's misconceptions about PTSD and the negative stigma attached to it.

Though common, PTSD is not the leading disability among veterans. According to the VA's most recent annual report, only about 544,000 of the 3.54 million veterans receive

disability compensation for PTSD. And of all service-connected disability compensations started in 2011, only 5.3 percent were for PTSD.

Brian's frustrations in navigating the VA system still continue. He has waited more than 16 months to have his disability rating adjusted to reflect how his PTSD has manifested in the years since his discharge.

At one point, he says, his claim was stalled because the VA needed the medical records from his hospitalization for attempting suicide. "But nobody told me," Brian says. "I could have just gotten the records myself." He did. A week and a half after he found out about the problem, he submitted the hospital records to the VA.

"At this point, I'm tired of calling them and asking about it," he says. "I keep hearing the same thing, for months now: 'It'll be done soon. It'll be done soon.'"

In addition to his battles with the VA claims backlog, Brian still fights with depression and the other symptoms of his PTSD. He relives the days at Cloverleaf in a series of nightmares, each playing out the same scenario but with varied results.

He says he still deals with his symptoms on a daily basis — avoidance, anxiety, nightmares, depression, a general uneasy feeling in crowded areas, including some large classrooms—but he continues working to manage them.

"I have my days," he says. "Ups and downs."

Having painted the picture of Brian's struggles, it needs to be said that his difficulties cannot be assumed to apply to every veteran. The veteran population is as varied as the population it is sworn to defend. And for every veteran fighting these internal battles during reintegration, there are likely 10 others who are finding a smooth transition into the civilian world.

But in sharing Brian's story, I am in some ways sharing my own, as well as those of many of our brothers- and sisters-in-arms. Brian is by no means alone in his new battle. Many of us returned home with wounds that can't be seen. Many of us are confused by anxiety and depression as we try to move forward. Many of us are still learning about our own PTSD and how it affects us. And tragically, too many of us — an estimated 18 veterans a day — are losing the fight with depression and suicide.

For all of us trying to come home, we look for understanding — from others and from within ourselves.