

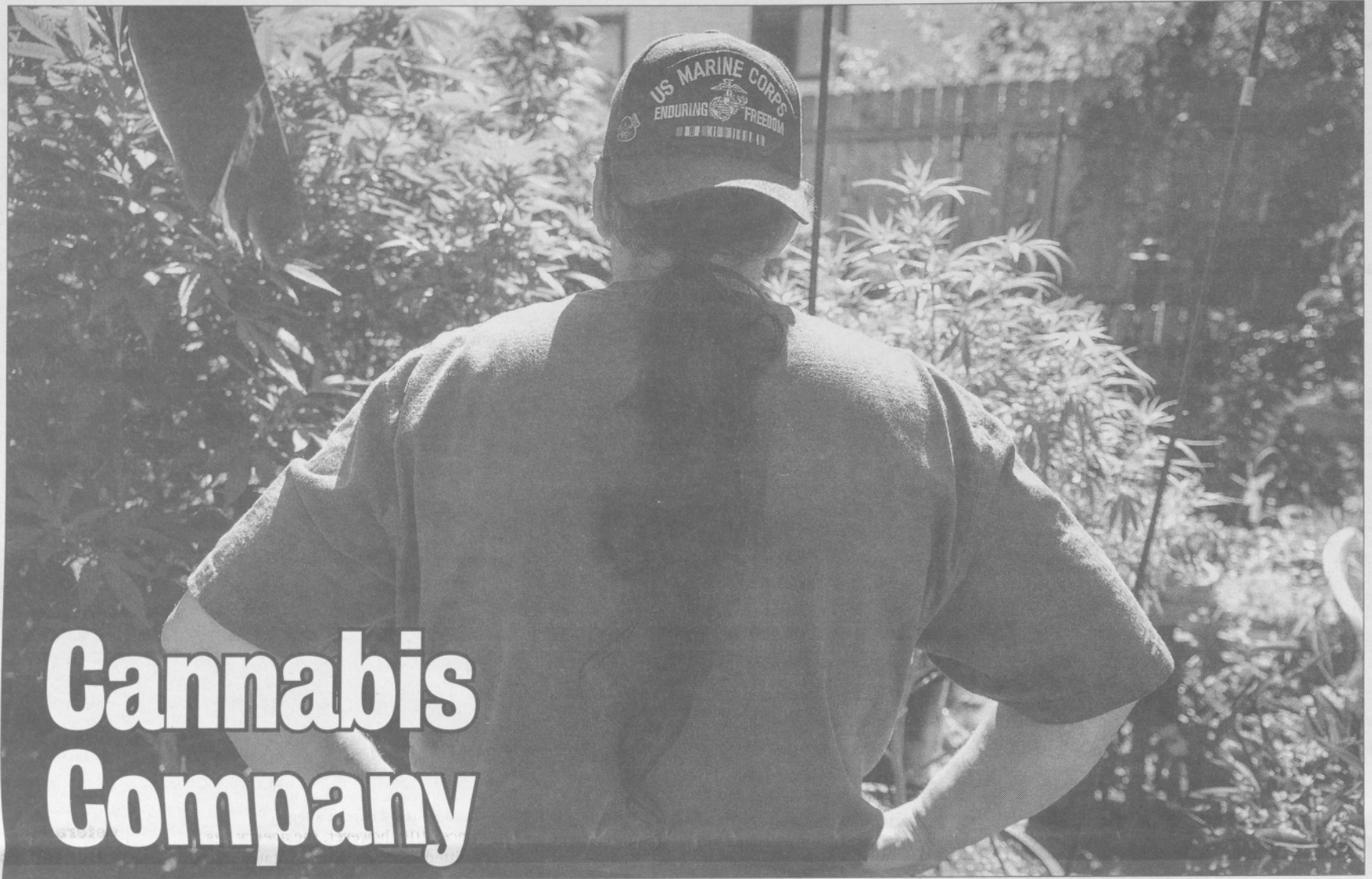


PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Hawk Marsden, who declined to have his face photographed, looks over his crop of marijuana in North Portland. He's created a new strain that helps vets like him cope with their PTSD.

Cannabis Company

Veterans say marijuana relieves post-traumatic stress and serves as an alternative to opioids for pain – too bad the VA can't recommend it

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

It was January 2011 when Anthony landed in the Middle East. He was young, laid-back and credulous. "I had no clue about the real world," he said in hindsight.

Anthony had enlisted in the U.S. Navy when he was 19 years old and working a dead-end job. Four years later, he found himself in the Nimruz province of southwestern Afghanistan, working as a medic with the Marines.

That April, a preacher at a small church in Florida publicly burned a copy of the Quran. The Taliban used the perceived transgression to incite violence against American soldiers stationed in Afghanistan. Anthony's base was attacked and overrun as a result.

After the bloodbath that spring, Anthony said, his worldview changed drastically. A lifelong Christian, he rejected his religion. He began to feel betrayed by people he'd always looked up to as he became convinced the war was nothing more than a product of capitalism.

"We're spending billions on killing people and not doing anything constructive," he said. "I'm not proud."

As the year dragged on, so did the

carnage. As a medic, he saw first hand the gruesome wounds war inflicts on the human body.

He said Afghan children were often brought to his base for medical treatment when they were sick or had been shot, and sometimes after they'd been brutally tortured by the Taliban. "I had to treat a lot of children," he said.

In 2012, Anthony returned to Portland, where he had been born and raised. Soon after, he married his fiancé, had a baby and enrolled in college under the G.I. Bill.

But something was wrong.

"Up until Afghanistan, I was timid – a people pleaser," he said, but the war turned him into "a crazy rage monster."

He drank heavily and got into bar fights.

"I was an asshole. I didn't care what anyone thought," he said. "Like many others, I was in denial of my PTSD."

He'd become a statistic – another veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder. A Department of Veterans Affairs report released the same year he was discharged

revealed nearly 30 percent of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have PTSD.

Anthony remembers his first flashback. He was playing a first-person-shooter video game at a friend's house when the room began to close in on him.

"It was just like when you see someone having a flashback in the movies," he said. "I got tunnel vision – that literally happened to me. I was scared."

He said he was too proud to seek treatment. It wasn't

until he got into a heated argument with his wife that he realized he needed to get help. He had thrown a chair across the room in front of his infant son, who began to cry.

He sought counseling, which he said helped, but his quick temper didn't subside completely.

This Memorial Day, he had a breakthrough.

"Memorial Day is always rough," he said. His then-3-year-old was aggravating him. Anthony said the boy was just behaving the

way little kids often behave, but for some reason it was touching a nerve.

Anthony decided to remove himself and take a "little hit" of weed.

"I came back, looked down at him and realized: He just wants to hang out with his daddy," he said. "It's me – I'm the one who's uptight and pushing him away. And then I smoke, and I see it differently."

He'd smoked cannabis periodically while in Afghanistan and after returning but said it was at that moment he realized he could defuse his temper instantly by smoking pot.

"This is medicine – I realized it then," he said.

Smoking weed also helped him cut back on drinking, which, looking back, he said was likely a way of self-medicating.

"If you can show me any peer-reviewed evidence that weed is worse than alcohol or pills, then I'm all ears," he said. Until then, he said, he plans to treat his PTSD with pot. As an added benefit, it also helps him tolerate his chronic back and foot pain.

Anthony agreed to be interviewed for this story under the condition of anonymity, because, he said, he wanted to speak candidly without jeopardizing his employment.

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