

## I Tie Flies in My Sleep

*An Autoethnographic Examination of Recreation and Reintegration for  
a Veteran with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*

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### Abstract

This autoethnographic account details the author's ongoing struggle with combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and how leisure was integral in his journey toward recovery. By showing the mental and emotional struggles of life with the disorder, this paper offers an alternative viewpoint from the traditional scientific studies of PTSD, which bury soldiers' voices under layers of analysis. The purpose of this paper is to deepen and expand an understanding of both combat-related PTSD and the power of leisure in an individual's recovery from combat trauma.

**Keywords:** *OIF/OEF veteran; posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); autoethnography; coping; family rituals; leisure; reintegration*

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Once I returned from Iraq, I spoke at various schools about my year in combat. Everywhere I went, someone asked “What was it like?” I struggled to answer this question each time; I often oversimplified by saying, “It was hot!” Believe me, it went way past hot! War is so dissimilar to what may be considered normal, it is almost beyond explanation. This autoethnography is my attempt to explain. I invite you, the reader, to “come close and experience this world for yourself” (Tillman-Healy, 1996).

This autoethnographic narrative is told through a collection of stories representing three interconnected themes in my life with PTSD. Each theme contains three parts: a wartime traumatic experience (or possible impetus for future symptoms), a related post-war traumatic interaction with a family member (the expression of symptoms following the war), and a leisure experience that helped minimize the impact of symptoms in my life (expressed as personal leisure, leisure ritual and family leisure). Although there were many traumatic experiences to choose from, only a small portion can be recounted here, as this autoethnography is not intended to be an exhaustive retelling of all my traumatic experiences.

This narrative offers lessons that may provoke potential conversations concerning the use of leisure in treating PTSD among combat veterans; however, my observations are not intended to question advice provided by medical professionals, nor are they intended to make positivist claims concerning leisure that can be generalized to all sufferers of combat-related PTSD. I do not claim to be an “expert” on PTSD; however, I offer an alternative view of the disorder that many professionals cannot. My story recounts what living with PTSD feels like through the lens of my personal recovery journey. I embraced both individual leisure and family leisure rituals, as a means of improving health, quality of life, and reducing symptoms of PTSD. In telling this story, I accept the emotional and professional risk associated with sharing the darkest and most painful secrets of my life. I expose my vulnerable self (Ellis, 1999) by revealing the complexities of my trauma and hope to encourage open dialogue regarding alternate viewpoints of this condition and its treatment by means of leisure.

### **Prologue**

I sought to gain some control over my PTSD symptoms. I believed the more I knew about my condition, the less fearful I would be. I devoured academic articles, books, and popular media about both the characteristics of PTSD and the events that could cause it (e.g., Demers, 2009; Evans, McHugh, Hopwood, & Watt, 2003; Feczner & Bjorklund, 2009; Guerra & Calhoun, 2011; Ciaglo, 2013). While I studied PTSD, I felt many of these authors were describing my life exactly. I found myself thinking

These articles and books describe an illness that is typified by persistent re-experiencing of trauma. Check. They describe a condition characterized by avoidance or reminders of trauma through isolation. Check. They describe an illness where sufferers demonstrate a high level of anxiety, psychological arousal, and emotional numbing. Check, check, and check. They describe an illness where sufferers’ abuse substances, exhibit suicidal ideations, engage in domestic abuse, thrill seeking, and antisocial behavior. Check all of the above.

The more I learned about PTSD, the more I felt as though I were staring at myself in the mirror.

## **Episode 1: Firefight on the Freeway**

Near the end of 2004, my company was transferred to southeast Iraq. Due to increased daytime attacks against American troops, higher command mandated all convoys be conducted

at night under strict black-out conditions (i.e., using no running lights, only infrared markers, and night vision goggles [NVGs]).

Our company was large enough to provide our own required convoy security. This meant that the first and last vehicle in each convoy were designated “gun trucks” and were fitted with either a semiautomatic grenade launcher or fully automatic, belt-fed, machine guns. Every third vehicle was also similarly armed. Additionally, all personnel carried personal weapons pointed out of windows, while remaining awake and alert and watching for danger.

In order to see our surroundings, we wore night vision goggles (NVGs) mounted on our helmets that folded down in front of our eyes. NVGs gather all outside light and project a small green image inches from your eyes. It is as straining on the eyes as pressing your nose against a television on static. This eye strain, coupled with the wind from the open window and drone of the engine, make it difficult to stay awake and alert. I became tired and bored until we approached a brilliantly illuminated complex called the Umm al-Qura (“Mother of All Cities”) mosque in Baghdad. I saw the unmistakable green streak of tracers flying across the highway and could hear gunfire coming from both sides of the road. The mosque was blazing bright green in my NVGs when someone shouted over the radio “Contact right! Contact right!” to signal the convoy was being fired on.

I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach as I scanned my firing sector. A car pulled parallel to mine, matching our speed, and time seemed to slow to a crawl. I remember thinking how bizarre it was that this car was driving backward as a man stuck his whole upper body out of the rear window with a rifle in his hands. I simultaneously saw the muzzle flash and heard the sound of an automatic weapon as he opened fire on our vehicle. My first thought was *“That’s a hell of a lot louder than I thought it would be.”* I was instantly awake and alert; and definitely no longer bored.

Every muscle in my body contracted as I began screaming, “CONTACT LEFT! CONTACT LEFT!” Pandemonium ensued as a cacophony of voices battled to be heard over the radio. The convoy commander unleashed a stream of obscenities as he struggled to gain control of the radio chatter and calm his troops. My heart racing, I held my breath and stared down the barrel of my M-16; scanning the faces in the vehicle firing on us, I took aim. I could clearly make out the faces of the driver and the shooter. I also identified a third person in the front passenger seat.

I was terrified. At some point, I began breathing again, but not regularly. I tried to make sense of the figure in the passenger seat whose face was obscured by what appeared to be a burka (traditional attire for Iraqi women that hides their faces). With my finger on the trigger, a disturbing thought flashed through my mind; *“If I shoot her, CNN & Al Jazeera will plaster the headline all over TV and the Internet, ‘Army medic kills carload of innocent women.’”*

Never mind that men in the car were trying to kill us. I was paralyzed by fear. Not a fear of dying or being wounded, not a fear of the enemy, but fear that the media in my own country would crucify me for defending myself and my compatriots. I was frozen. Target acquired, finger on the trigger, and I could not bring myself to shoot.

Our driver made a hard right turn taking us out of the firefight and onto an alternate route. Just like that, it was over. My veins were flushed with adrenaline, my heart still racing, muscles contracting, my breath shallow and rapid, and my mind still burned with the ghostlike image of that man shooting at me. It seemed surreal, and I needed to verify what had just happened. I shouted to the driver, “Did you see that? Did that just happen? Was that guy really shooting at us?” The driver shouted back, “Yeah, man! I can’t believe it!” and I felt elated to be alive.

After several miles, the convoy commander called for us to halt and hold an after action review (AAR). Thankfully, no one in our convoy was wounded. During the AAR, the convoy

commander singled me out and questioned me about my motive for not shooting back. If I had acquired a target, why had I failed to return fire? He was angry, and I felt as though I had let him and everyone in the convoy down. A new feeling crept into my heart—shame. I had been terrified in the moment, but now I felt like a coward for not squeezing the trigger. This experience would haunt me months later in the peace and quiet of my own home.

### Coming Home

When I stepped off the battlefield, I hoped to leave the disturbing images of war behind me. I yearned to find a small corner of the world to live out my life in peace. I was interested in returning to the solace of my family and hoping for an end to my wartime narrative. Yet it was only a matter of weeks before the nightmares began.

The explosion is so powerful I am knocked into back of the driver's seat. My ears are still ringing from the blast when I see the muzzle flash to my left. I hear screaming and shooting through a muffled haze as an insurgent, his head wrapped in the typical checkered keffiyah, rushes toward me, firing his AK-47.

In an instant I am locked in mortal combat with my assailant. He is on top of me; the gun replaced by a bayonet slashing toward my throat. I block the thrust with my left arm, grab the rag on his head and roll with all my might. Using the centrifugal force of the roll, I desperately smash his face with my right fist. I feel bones crack as I connect and he screams in a woman's voice.

Our struggle continues. I have him trapped beneath me now and am punching furiously and blindly with both arms. Again I hear him screaming in a woman's voice.

Suddenly, I am awake with clenched fists straddling my wife in bed. She is screaming and shielding her head from further blows. It takes a few moments for me to realize I am not in Iraq; I am in bed with my wife. Her screaming turned to sobs as I became fully aware of the situation. *What kind of monster beats his wife?* I scrambled to the corner of the room, curling into the fetal position at the horror of what I had just done. Fixed in my sight is the terror in my wife's eyes. She looks at me as though she doesn't know me anymore. And she's right; I am no longer the man she married.

Nightmares and flashbacks are among the many symptoms of PTSD (Feczer & Bjorklund, 2009). Only a few months after I returned from the war, symptoms of PTSD became more than words on a page to me, they became my lived experience. They bored into every aspect of my life; disrupted family relationships and friendships, challenged my belief system, stretched my mental and emotional paradigms to the breaking point, and shook me to the very core. My life today resembles normalcy; however, many burdens left by my war experience remain unseen, beneath the surface.

Once my wife's gentle protector, I am consumed by anger, fear, and anxiety. At times, I feel dead inside, incapable of the gentle feelings of connection. I am constantly agitated, irritable, and unpredictable. At the slightest provocation, rage consumes me until it devours everything around me and destroys all it touches. I have become cold, calculating, unfeeling, and capable of extreme violence without remorse. Yearning no longer for a gentle touch or kind word, I hunger for revenge, justice, retribution, blood, and adrenaline. I am an empty husk of my former self.

Reason dictates these behaviors have no place outside of war. I am also cognitively aware that I am no longer in the war; however, the battle rages on within me. I want the old me back,

but he is dead. My wife's crying causes me to wonder what kind of monster I have become. I have become something to hate and revile, and I wish *this* me were dead so I would stop hurting those I love. I want to show my family I love them, in the normal ways, but I am unable to control the monster within me.

**Coping poorly.** After this incident, we tried to pretend it didn't happen and we put on the façade that all was well at home. We went about our lives with work, church, and school for the kids. Everything looked normal from the outside, yet my wife later remarked it was "like walking on eggshells" when I was around, never knowing what would set me off. When I sought advice from my chain of command, my first sergeant insisted "PTSD isn't even a real illness! It's a souvenir you picked up in Iraq that you didn't have to claim at customs. Now, get over it!" I tried to suck it up and shake it off to no avail.

I had left Iraq; however, Iraq had not left me. Plagued by intrusive thoughts, nightmares, flashbacks, and paranoia, and fueled by my family's fear of me, I sought help from the Veterans Administration (VA) hospital through counseling, group therapy, and medication. All I wanted was for the symptoms to stop. I wanted the old me back. My primary concern became numbing the emotional pain and preventing myself from acting out against my family. I reasoned; "*If I can sedate the monster, it can't hurt me or my family.*"

The drugs numbed the pain, and I began thinking, "*If one works so good, two or three must work even better.*" Life became a jumble of one drugged stupor after another. I spiraled into a pattern of abuse and justification. "*It's not like I'm doing illegal drugs, the VA gave them to me, they make me better,*" I thought as I swallowed a handful of pills. Eventually the drugs weren't enough, and my life became a series of painful moments, and I began looking for a more permanent solution.

War hardened me and I had become accustomed to violence. During the war, violence made sense; it was a means to an end, it was acceptable. Those attitudes followed me home. I still believed only a monster would be violent with his own family, yet I could not control the rage inside me. I was filled with guilt, violent memories, and persistent reminders of combat. I wanted it all to stop. It was my job to protect my family, not hurt them. If I hurt them, I believed I did not deserve to live. So I looked for opportunities to end my life (Guerra & Calhoun, 2011; Jakupcak et al., 2009), believing my family would be better off without me and safe from the monster I'd become. Concerned, my therapist admitted me to the acute psychiatric care unit at the VA. For a week, doctors adjusted my medication while I attended group and individual therapy to learn how to cope with PTSD symptoms. This stay in the hospital served its purpose in making me slightly more stable through medication, but it did not provide any lasting relief from my symptoms.

**Coping better: Why I fly fish.** While I was in the hospital, my wife contacted a disabled veteran friend of hers who used fly fishing as a means of rehabilitating himself. He invited me to Idaho for a professionally guided fishing retreat with other disabled veterans. I made excuses not to join him: "I've never fly fished before," "It looks complicated," "I don't have any gear."

He assured me it would be worth my time, and I finally relented. I distrust most strangers, but he was a veteran, and disabled as well, and that meant he was familiar with my struggles. The first evening we watched a fly-tying demonstration. It looked extremely complicated, and they used unfamiliar language, but I was intrigued by how they could make foam, feathers, and fibers look so much like a real insect.

In the morning, we dressed for cold weather and drove to the river. Our guides gave us simple instructions, rigged our lines, and then rowed into the river. As we drifted lazily down

the river, the guide explained the basics of casting, mending the line, and what to watch and feel for when a fish struck. I felt exhilarated as my strike indicator was sucked under the surface and I felt a fish dart away. I lifted my rod in the air and fought the fish. Instantly there was only the fish and me. My heart raced as it tugged on the line and my mouth formed an involuntary smile as I reeled and tugged back. As quickly as it began, our battle was over, and my line arched over my head as the fish freed itself.

There I stood in the middle of nature surrounded by thousands of gallons of water, mountains, trees, and birds, with snowflakes sticking to my nose and eyelashes. Gone were the images of the dead and dying. Absent was the strangulation of anxiety in my chest. I was completely in the moment, surrounded by a gentle breeze with the boat rocking beneath my feet. The harder I concentrated on my fly, the less aware I was of ancillary distractions including negative emotions and anxiety. For the first time in years, I felt something other than anger, rage, and fear...I felt peace. Years of constantly being on alert had taken its toll on my soul. But, in that moment on the water with a fly rod in hand, embraced by nature, I felt peace, and it felt good. Peace was persistent throughout the day, and I experienced my first real respite in years.

Soon my therapist suggested I find new pursuits that could revive a zest for life. I practiced casting my fly-rod in the front yard, read fly fishing blogs and magazines, and talked regularly with my friend in Idaho. Eventually, others at the VA suggested I pursue a career as a recreation therapist. As part of an internship, my friend and I created a weekly fly-tying class that he would teach and I would assist. We got donations of equipment and supplies, spread the word to other veterans, and scheduled everything with the staff at the VA.

The day before our first class, my friend fell sick and called to tell me I would have to teach in his stead. I panicked. I had never tied a fly in my life; how was I supposed to teach it? I watched several videos on the Internet, printed instructions for a woolly bugger, practiced at home a couple of times, then walked into class hoping the others would think I knew what I was doing. The formula worked, and I taught the weekly class until I returned to school.

While fishing provided me with relief, it was difficult to drop everything to go fishing whenever my symptoms occurred. However, I experienced similar relief when I tied flies. I leaned heavily on this activity to escape my negative emotions. I shared with other veterans how tying flies and fishing helped me cope with PTSD. The activity did not eradicate my symptoms, but it did help mitigate and manage negative emotions; that in turn gave me hope of recovery.

Over time, the frequency of waking in the middle of the night in full combat mode decreased. One morning, my wife remarked, "You must have been dreaming about tying flies last night." She had awakened suddenly to observe me talking in my sleep and moving my hands through the air in the motions she had seen me use while tying. She said that if I was going to toss and turn at night, she'd rather wake to see me tying flies in my sleep as opposed to being punched in the ribs.

## Episode 2: Flashbacks

I was picking up medical supplies from the air-conditioned hospital when every siren on base screeched at full volume; announcing yet another attack. I remember thinking "*You've got to be kidding me! Not again!*" Everyone on base stopped what they were doing and evacuated all buildings, tents, and vehicles, to seek cover in the nearest concrete bunker. The outside heat assaulted me like I was entering a blast furnace. Adding to the misery, I was crammed like a sardine into the inadequate space of an overcrowded bomb shelter hoping to avoid incoming shrapnel.

In the nearly 120 degrees, it was impossible to feel clean, so most people didn't bother trying. The smell was putrid. My senses were barraged by the nauseating stench of stale cigarette smoke and unwashed soldiers mingled with the reek of burning garbage, human waste, and the iron-tinged smell of dried blood. "*Just another day in paradise*," I thought as I settled in to await the all clear.

Among those sharing my bunker was an Iraqi family. The mother knelt behind her husband, who was sitting cross-legged with a child draped across his lap. This miserable child was wrapped, from the waist up, with day-old gauze caked with dried blood, plasma, and dirt. Many families cooked with kerosene stoves, and children were often burned when the stove or cooking pot was knocked over. Some burns, however, were the result of parents pouring scalding water on misbehaving children. I wondered about the cause of this boy's suffering. He lay open-mouthed and whimpered in the oppressive heat as flies landed on his bandages and face. His whimpers were interrupted occasionally by a choked sob or desperate gasp for air.

My training as a medic commanded me to give aid and comfort to the wounded, but I had left my aid bag as we rushed out of the hospital, and I was without means of relieving the boy's pain. I felt powerless to improve his situation. A wave of self-contempt and guilt washed over me and choked my conscience at my perceived failure to act. I closed my eyes and silently pleaded with God to make the boy stop crying. Not because I wanted him to feel better, but because every whimper accused me of failure. I no longer cared about his suffering; I was not driven by compassion. His crying made me feel uncomfortable, and I didn't want to be uncomfortable any more. I stopped seeing him as a patient, or even an actual person. He was just a source of noise now, and I wanted him to be quiet. Not because it meant his suffering would end; simply so I wouldn't have to listen to it any more.

This type of crying and whining became synonymous with horrific wounds and seemingly endless suffering I observed firsthand. These images crowded my conscious thought, invaded my dreams, and made it difficult to sleep. I became cold and calloused toward whining and complaining and even harsh in my reaction to people who were genuinely hurt. This caused me to wonder at times if I had become some sort of monster.

### Back Home

Once home, I began experiencing increased anxiety, difficulty connecting with others, trouble falling and staying asleep, and conflict at work and home. My family relationships were strained as I struggled to understand and define where I fit in (Feczer & Bjorklund, 2009). Amid these struggles, I arrived home from work tired, agitated, and hungry. My son asked for permission to play at a friend's house just as we were sitting down for dinner. Irritated that he would ask so close to dinner, I told him no.

Whining, he asked, "Why not?"

Feeling as though he were challenging my authority, I raised my voice and retorted, "Because, I'm the dad, and I say so. That's why not!"

"You never let me do anything I want to do!" he immediately shot back.

Something snapped inside me, and I was transported across time and space. I no longer saw my son, but a vision filled with flies and the face of the crying boy from the bunker. Hearing the whining Iraqi boy and wanting only the noise and accusations to stop, I unleashed fury on my son and bellowed, "You want something to cry about? I'll give you something to cry about."

I no longer cared about my son's complaint. I wasn't really seeing or hearing his protests. I heard only the pathetic whining of the burned boy crying for relief, and I wanted that out of my head, even if it meant beating it out. I only wanted silence.



His frantic screaming could not penetrate the disorienting rage that engulfed me as I dragged my son into another room. He kept crying. I shouted for him to shut up as I pulled him onto my lap. He continued to cry. I repeated the command as I exhausted my arm spanking him. He was shrieking now.

"Shut up!" I yelled, with spittle flying from my lips. I roared in exasperation, and I heaved him to the floor.

The more he cried, the more enraged I felt at my inability to stop the crying. I pounced on top of him and repeatedly slammed my fist into the floor inches from his head as I screamed "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"

He finally did.

Only then did the fog clear enough for me to see the terror in my son's eyes as he cowered on the floor beneath me. Slowly, a realization of where I was and what I had done overcame me as I tumbled away from my boy and began sobbing uncontrollably from the unspeakable grief that gripped my heart. The monster of rage growing inside me finally broke its bonds and took control of me. I could no longer cage the monster; it was controlling me, and finally I admitted I needed professional help. Although I had been admitted to the hospital for acute psychiatric care multiple times, it was obvious I needed something more. I was admitted to a long-term residential program for veterans with PTSD and received parenting classes, group therapy, and leisure education as additional tools for coping with PTSD.

### **Leisure Ritual to Heal Relationships**

During my rehabilitation, I admitted the spanking incident was domestic violence, which is all too common among veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) (Goff, Crow, Reisbig, & Hamilton, 2007). Wanting to ensure my family's safety, I self-reported the incident to child protective services. The parenting lessons I attended introduced to the concept of leisure rituals as a means of mending broken relationships (Doherty, 1997). Hoping to assuage my guilt, our family created a leisure ritual centered on bedtime. I tucked each child into bed, kissed them on the cheek or forehead, and exchanged I-love-yous. For a moment, each night, it all would be right in the world. The ritual was generally the same with every child; however, it became significantly more meaningful between my middle son and me as I repeated nightly how sincerely sorry I was that I lost control that night long ago. The guilt continued to consume me until, months later, he finally said, "Dad, I forgive you. You don't have to say it anymore."

Our nightly ritual differed from the rest because he insisted on unmaking his bed completely and having me put his five blankets on him in a certain order. He maintained that if they did not go on in the right order he had bad dreams, so we followed the right order every night. Once he was sufficiently tucked in, we exchanged a hug and an "I love you." We talked about his day, shared jokes and stories affording us the chance to stay connected emotionally while expressing mutual love and respect. The most amazing aspect of this ritual was how long it survived. Throughout his senior year in high school, and every night until he left home, regardless of how late he went to bed, he would find me, waking me if necessary, and ask, "Dad, will you come tuck me in?" At a time when many adolescent/parent relationships are under duress, my son and I experienced a daily oasis from the tumult through this intimate leisure ritual. As Doherty (1997) claims, this simple act provided a special connection that strengthened the bond between my son and me. Juxtaposed against the spanking incident, we see even the deepest emotional scars can be ameliorated through purposeful leisure rituals.



### Episode 3: Rocket Attack on the PX

I was stationed on one of the largest American bases north of Baghdad, home to more than 24,000 troops. In addition to a fighter squadron, combat support hospital, and flight wing of medevac helicopters, Camp Anaconda boasted a movie theater, post exchange (PX), Olympic-sized pool, and even a Burger King and Subway for rest and relaxation purposes. We were attacked almost daily by mortars, rockets, and small arms fire; however, the base was large enough that the attacks never threatened the entire population. Insurgents would typically hit targets of opportunity in sporadic shootings or launch explosives at people or equipment surrounding the edge of the base.

As a result, any time we left the protection of a building we were required to wear what we affectionately called “battle rattle.” This consisted of our weapon and ammunition, Individual Body Armor (IBA), and Kevlar helmet. For me, this included various emergency medical supplies as well. The IBAs were fitted with front and back ceramic bullet-proof plates, weighed 45 pounds, and increased the feel of the outside temperature by 10 to 15 degrees.

In April, 2004, I was promoted alongside five other soldiers. Following the ceremony, my buddy and I walked to the alterations shop in the PX compound to have my new rank sewn onto all my uniforms. As we walked into the alterations shop, I heard a loud BOOM and remember thinking it was caused by the person behind me slamming the door shut, and I turned to comment accusingly. Through the glass doors I saw a black cloud of smoke and dust rising above the roof of the building. Thinking there might be wounded, I started toward the door, trying to leave the shop and run around to the front of the building to do my job as a medic. My buddy grabbed the handle on the back of my IBA and pulled me back, saying we had to stay inside where it was safe. I yelled back that there were probably casualties just around the corner and I needed to get to them. To make matters worse, a commissioned officer ordered me to stay inside and not go aid the wounded.

The ground trembled again, almost knocking me down. The lights in the building flickered out when the sound of the second explosion reached us. I turned to see smoke and dust billowing from the building a few meters from us. I was filled with fear and anger as I imagined wounded soldiers while someone was preventing me from doing my job. The doors across the courtyard burst open as someone screamed for a medic. There was no holding me back this time, and I bolted toward the beckoning soldiers. I entered a hallway crammed with soldiers seeking cover. I was assaulted by the usual smell of cigarettes and sweat, smoke and dust, plus the metallic smell of blood—lots of it!

The entryway doors were shattered inward with shards of glass everywhere. I pushed my way through the tangle of soldiers in an effort to get to the injured. Time seemed to slow down as I remember seeing several soldiers from my company in the hallway. I felt their stares, and when I met their eyes, they seemed to be accusing me of not getting there sooner. I finally pushed past the last soldier in time to watch a pair of boots being dragged through an enormous pool of blood. Two medics loaded the wounded soldier on a stretcher as he muttered something about choosing the wrong day to buy shaving cream. I followed the gruesome party out the entrance and took in the scene of carnage.

It was chaos with soldiers kneeling, giving aid to others who lay or sat bleeding on the ground. Several stretchers were being carried to waiting vehicles that served as make-shift ambulances. One soldier cradled his head from a shrapnel wound, screaming about how much it burned. A soldier lay on the ground with his foot blown off. Another had his femoral artery sev-

ered by shrapnel. A group of civilian personnel who had been standing at the bus stop where the first mortar landed now lay scattered around a crater. Some of the wounded screamed in agony and fear as others stared blankly or stumbled around dazed.

Blood was spattered everywhere, more than I'd ever seen in my life. In the middle of the entryway to the PX was an immense pool. The center was deep maroon, and the outer edges were smeared thin and bright red. Footprints broke the surface of the pool leading toward the exit, the oppressive heat baking them into dark red cakes on the floor. *"There's too much blood for that guy to make it,"* I thought.

I locked eyes with another soldier as he shook his head. His gaze begged me for answers, and I felt as though he was asking me why it had taken so long for me to arrive. I felt awful; my stomach rose to my throat and continued to turn over and over. I turned back to survey the scene as a janitor came with a mop and bucket. Every swab made the mess grow larger as he smeared blood all over the lobby. The scene filled me with fury. I remember thinking *"What the hell are you doing, trying to pretend this never happened? That guy hasn't even been gone 5 minutes! Give him a little respect!"*

In all, 17 people were wounded that day, and two died, including the one I watched being carried away. I still feel regret for not getting there sooner. Had I arrived on the scene earlier, I believed I could have saved his life. In retrospect, however, I realized that if I had broken free after the first explosion, I would have been running around the corner at the exact moment the second rocket landed and could have been a casualty myself. My buddy likely saved my life when he grabbed my IBA. I should be grateful, but the images of 19 other people who weren't so lucky haunt me even still.

#### Fourth of July Fireworks

After my doctor readjusted of my medications, I actually thought I was getting better—until the Fourth of July rolled around. Expecting to be anxious when the neighbors set off their traditional store-bought fireworks in the street, I planned to preemptively take medication to calm my nerves so I could make an appearance at the neighborhood gathering, pretending the pyrotechnics didn't bother me.

I was standing in my bedroom when I heard the first explosion in our neighborhood. The fireworks included a series of 20 rapidly firing rockets that shoot 50 feet in the air then explode in succession. It sounds very similar to an AK-47 from a distance. I dove for cover and crawled halfway under my bed. As the explosions rattled my bedroom window, I began to relive that day at the PX. The images of the dead and dying crowded my consciousness. The sights and smells were refreshed in my memory, and the image of one soldier dying as I was unable to save him kept repeating in my mind as I lay, cowering, half-concealed under my bed. I went looking for anything to help me numb the pain and confusion. I found my anxiety medication and swallowed several until the edges of my vision smeared.

The neighbors gathered in the street to share desserts and fireworks, and I desperately wanted to fit in. I wanted to feel normal and not be bothered by the noise or lights; I did not want to let my wife and children down again by not participating in a neighborhood event. So I let the meds do their job and then joined the party outside. In my drugged state, I believed I was acting normal, but I actually just bounced from conversation to conversation, more mumbling than talking. When I felt I had made enough conversation I retreated to the rear of the gathering and paced back and forth, jumping at every pop and snap until I couldn't take it anymore. I excused myself to go back inside, images from Iraq swimming in my mind until I eventually passed out.

Emotional numbing is commonly aided by the use of alcohol and medication (Price & Stevens, 2011). The drive behind this symptom seems to be the desire to avoid reminders of trauma, leading to a loss of interest in pursuits previously enjoyed (Feeny, Zoellner, Fitzgibbons, & Foa, 2005). For me, it manifested itself as a desire to escape feeling all emotions and the horrors I could not stop from playing in my mind. I began participating less in family leisure activities, even avoiding healthy individual leisure pursuits (Evans et al., 2003). The memories of mangled bodies and life-threatening situations would override my ability to deal with “real-time” emotions.

It wasn't that I couldn't feel appropriate emotions for my loved ones; it was that I was overwhelmed by past emotions until I was too exhausted to feel anything else (and I didn't *want* to feel anything else). My wife and kids were embarrassed by me, made excuses for my behavior, then cried themselves to sleep in the privacy of our home. They learned quickly that they could no longer depend on me to do basic things like get out of bed, shower, work, or stay awake for any extracurricular activity. I tried avoiding negative emotions until I no longer wanted to feel anything at all. Escaping emotion became more important to me than being a good husband, father, neighbor, or friend. This explains my family's diminished satisfaction as I distanced myself from them physically and emotionally (Friedman, 2006). To cope, I abused my prescribed anxiety medication in an effort to drown out the flashbacks, nightmares, pain, and disappointment I saw in the faces of family. It became obvious to me why so many veterans with PTSD struggle with substance abuse (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008).

### Recreational Outreach

While I was admitted to the long-term residential treatment program for PTSD, we were assigned to schedule recreation time and activities designed to make us stretch our comfort zones and to reintegrate into civilian society. As we were planning our weekend activities around the beginning of July, one of my fellow patients remarked how difficult Independence Day celebrations were with fireworks, crowds, and confusion. Our treatment team urged us to overcome our irrational fears and attend public celebrations anyway. This patient remarked, privately, that he would like to see a bunch of veterans get together in nature to celebrate the fourth of July away from the crowds.

His comments stayed with me as I began studying to become a recreation therapist. As I considered his comments and the personal benefit I received by being in nature and participating in leisure, I had a desire to share these benefits. My first efforts were with my family, and after we noticed leisure participation improving our lives, we wanted to share it with other families like ours. This is indicative of the process Erik and Joan Erikson (1981) called generativity, wherein people who go through difficulty eventually arrive at a point where they want to give back or help others. When I first began using recreation to address my PTSD symptoms, I was in no condition to even consider other people. As I experienced the amelioration of symptoms, however, I was able to see outside my own difficulties and began to notice the similar challenges of other veterans and their families. This opened up opportunities for me to reach out to other veterans.

During graduate school, my family and I launched a nonprofit organization to share the healing benefits of family recreation with other disabled veterans and their families. We finally acted on my friend's comment about veterans getting together in nature by hosting 12 disabled veterans and their families for a four-day Firework-Free Fourth of July Celebration in 2012. Food, lodging, and activities were provided at no cost to the veterans. Activities were considered for how they could improve family relationships, teach communication skills, and improve qual-

ity of life. Families participated in ice-breaker games to get to know each other and feel part of a larger community. Each family stayed in its own camping cabin. We introduced outdoor games that were inexpensive and required relatively few resources. Participants enjoyed a half-day ride on a restored steam engine train through the mountains, canyons, and valleys of Utah. Actors dressed in period clothing and performed a train robbery while veterans and family members took pictures, and conversed with peers about various topics both related and unrelated to military service.

The evening of Independence Day, participants enjoyed a barbeque, outdoor games, and a benefit concert performed by local artists, including a band of disabled veterans. The crowning event was a flag retiring ceremony for a 30-by-60-foot garrison flag. Every family member and veteran was involved in the process of retiring the flag. Several veterans stayed up late discussing how moving the ceremony was for them.

One day included plans for boating, adaptive waterskiing, swimming, and hiking; however, these activities were cancelled due to rain. The participating families quickly adapted by moving inside the campground recreation room and playing indoor games and recuperating from the previous day's activities. Before returning home, families discussed as a group what had gone well and what could be improved. Each family received a gift package including games they could play at home and were asked to remember to play together at least once per week.

While our Independence Day celebration was unconventional, I felt a deeper connection to my family and the families of other veterans who were dealing with difficulties similar to our own. As a result, my family and I felt better connected because I did not withdraw from activities and stayed engaged emotionally.

### **How I Wrote My Story: The Use of Autoethnography**

Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe autoethnography as a systematic sociological introspection process of gazing at the data of the researcher's life through a wide-angle lens and examining the social and cultural aspects of a formative experience (p. 739). Yet few examples of what makes autoethnography systematic had been offered until Chang (2008) suggested a semi-structured format including seven steps.

Chang (2008) suggests seven steps as a guide in creating a narrative. First, a conceptual preparation where I identified the significant meaning of my combat experiences, my subsequent PTSD, the use of leisure as a coping mechanism, and the relevance of these topics to society as a whole. Second, I employed a personal memory collection process, reviewing my personal journals from Iraq, treatment notes, and other medical records. Third, I participated regularly in self-observation and reflection as part of prolonged exposure therapy (PET) and group and individual treatment, all of which pushed me to reflect on and write about my traumatic experiences. Fourth, I collected external data from family members and other veterans to verify the accuracy of my recollections and interpretations. Fifth, I managed the data using NVivo 9 software to categorize events and organize them chronologically. Sixth, I analyzed data using traditional qualitative techniques of axial and open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Seventh, and finally, I wrote the autoethnography in a narrative format blending my experiences with current literature on the topic.

### **Discussion: What It All Means**

The leisure stress and coping literature describes stress as the presence of worry or anxiety and internal or external pressures, which are fleeting and can be coped with until a return to a

state where it is absent (Iwasaki & Schneider, 2003). My experience with combat-related PTSD has been more than a temporary or transitional presence of worry and anxiety. It became my “new normal” (Demers, 2009). In my experience, peace and calm became transitory and temporary during a pervasive state of negative emotional being.

My world became a cacophony of nightmares, flashbacks, depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide (Rourke, Hobbie, Schwartz, & Kazak, 2006). I utilized every remedy offered by the VA, finding little relief. The persistence of my symptoms challenged my entire belief system, shattered my paradigms for coping, and forced me to develop new approaches for dealing with debilitation. I had lost hope that things could improve. I believed I was losing my family and that I deserved to because of the monstrous things I had subjected them to. I surrendered to the disorder, embraced it, and got lost in it. PTSD is not experienced in a vacuum; and the effects of my war trauma rippled outward, negatively impacted nearly every social situation, including my family interactions (Lester et al., 2010), driving my family to dysfunction and the brink of dissolution (Zoroya, 2005; Shea, Vujanovic, Mansfield, Sevin, & Liu, 2010).

While leisure is not a panacea for every ailment, it made an enormous difference in my recovery journey. Once my friend got me to the river, something changed. Knee-deep in the water and surrounded by nature's grandeur, the symptoms plaguing me began to dissolve, and for the first time in years, I finally felt at peace. That peace gave birth to a belief in the possibility of recovery and hope for a better future. I believe providing a sense of *hope* is the fundamental contribution of leisure in the coping and recovery process. As that hope for recovery grew I realized life could go on; not my old one, but a new life. Fly-fishing marked a new beginning, one on which I continue to build.

### **Who I Am Now: What Leisure Seems to be Doing for Me**

Leisure has long been recognized as a potent force for both its individual benefits and potential for improving family cohesion, adaptability, and communication (Freeman & Zabriskie, 2003; Shaw & Dawson, 2001), these are the benefits I experienced firsthand. The rejuvenative, diversionary, and therapeutic benefits of leisure (Caldwell, 2005; Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber, & Dattilo, 2003) are what started me on the road to recovery. Leisure has been observed as a coping mechanism for a myriad of ailments including chronic stress (Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002; Hood & Carruthers, 2002; Juniper, 2005; Iwasaki, Mackay, Mactavish, Ristock, & Bartlett, 2006), my experience suggests combat-related PTSD can be included in that list.

When I was first diagnosed with PTSD and told I would have it for the rest of my life, I felt almost as though I'd been issued a death sentence. I held a traditional, medical view of recovery as achieving a static point that included the elimination of psychiatric symptoms. I have since come to view recovery as “a complex, multidimensional, and subjective process of growth, healing, and transformation” (Mancini, Hardiman, & Lawson, 2005, p. 48). My recovery from combat-related PTSD is still in progress—as Arai et al. (2008) describe, a “long journey an individual embarks on in search of a deeper understanding of self” (p. 38). I believe my personal experience confirms this process of recovery, as my PTSD symptoms were reduced through a sense of empowerment, emotional support, and palliative coping (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000).

I addressed my symptoms of emotional avoidance and social isolation through intentional family rituals where I experienced firsthand the healing influence of positive social support, improving my sense of trust, intimacy, and appropriate boundaries (Arai et al., 2008). These leisure rituals provided opportunities to repair strained relationships, starting with renewed friendship (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000, p. 164) and deepening from there.

My leisure participation was critical to finding an effective respite from the negative emotional states associated with PTSD (Patry, Blanchard, & Mask, 2007). Fly-fishing and other leisure activities provided a buffer between negative emotions, giving me the needed time to regroup and move forward (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000).

### **Will I Ever Be the Same?**

The man I was before the war didn't come home. The new me can be short tempered and cranky. Freeway traffic and crowds still cause me anxiety, and I still jump at loud noises. However, I possess a hope for recovery that I did not feel when I was hospitalized. I have experienced respite (Patry et al., 2007) and relief from my symptoms through leisure participation (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000), and that keeps me trying to recover rather than surrendering to my symptoms. I am healing. I may never be completely restored to my pre-war self; however, I am grateful for where the road to recovery has led me.

My symptoms no longer entirely consume me. I have found a measure of peace from the turmoil and a means of coping when the demons of war catch me unawares. I recognize my combat-related PTSD may be a lifelong battle with associated ups and downs; that this period of improvement may be transitory. I also understand the necessity of constant attention, vigilance, and active leisure participation (Iwasaki et al., 2013) in order to maintain its benefits.

What helped me reach this point in recovery is a pertinent question, considering I still have relapses and admit the grip of this disability is not easy to break. The answer lies in my individual and family leisure involvement (i.e., fly-fishing, fly-tying, and family leisure rituals). Using my own experiences as evidence, recommend leisure activities as a treatment for veterans with combat-related PTSD that provide a sense of hope and help to revitalize intimate relationships (Arai et al., 2008, Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000).

## **Conclusions**

Involvement in leisure pursuits did more than change my life; it literally saved my life. Prior to that first fish, I had given up on life. I was a broken man and believed all I deserved was broken relationships. I had nothing to look forward to. I was PTSD and PTSD was me.

After an initial dabbling in leisure pursuits, I embarked on a journey to learn all I could about the therapeutic benefits of leisure solely to help heal myself. Leisure became part of my everyday life and now helps define me. Leisure provided a nonthreatening environment where I could begin to repair damaged relationships with my wife and children; it improved our sense of cohesion and our quality of life.

Combat-related PTSD is a condition that can persist throughout one's life (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Benedict, 2009; Price & Stevens, 2011). When I wonder if I will ever totally recover, I am reminded of World War II veterans still living with the effects of PTSD. I have not been able to fully break free of its bonds, but I do have tools that allow me planned breathers (Patry et al., 2007). Leisure replaced my addiction to medication (Glasser, 1976). It is far healthier for me physically, emotionally, and socially. My leisure participation has truly been therapeutic recreation, and it has grown into a firm belief that leisure can legitimately be used to help veterans with combat-related PTSD recover.

Further research is clearly needed to better understand how leisure can be used to help treat veterans. Future research should include a broader range of recovery and mental health research. Consideration of the deeper theoretical underpinnings is necessary to understand what conditions must exist to bring about the change I experienced. A full ethnographic study of veterans

and their families could serve to determine whether my experience with leisure is typical. Future studies could also include an organic exploration into what veterans believe they need to get better; as opposed to providers externally deciding what services should be offered leading to more effective treatment models and programming.

I conclude by accepting I will ever be the man I was before the war. But I am also not the man described in the stories here. I will I probably deal with PTSD the rest of my life. But that is no longer a death sentence because I can fish for relief or tie flies for a break. I can experience love, kindness, and connectedness through family rituals. And instead of nightmares, I can even tie flies in my sleep.

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