COMING BACK

Article & Photograph by Aaron Holsag

Fort McCoy, Western Wisconsin. January 2010. Negative 14 degrees, (at least that is what my phone said that day). Captain Roan calls us all in to talk about what to expect in the months to come once we reach Kandahar Province; “the next twelve months of our lives will be a small part; we will go do our jobs, come home and all of this will be over.” At the time I thought little of it. I thought “twelve months should not be too long, and it will be over and then I come home, no biggie.”

I have been home for roughly five months and I look back on what the commander said that cold January day in Wisconsin. Now I realize what the Captain said was a load of crap. Most soldiers will tell you that life in Afghanistan was simple. It was, once you got past your first month. You are scared but eventually that becomes normal, and normal became dodging bullets and mortars, and wondering when you are going to get your next shower. The fight now is for us to carry on with our lives and win back some of what we lost while in Southern Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the way you adjust to normal in Kandahar Province does not translate well to life back in the United States.

Coming home from the war has become even harder for my friends and I than operating in Afghanistan under less than hospitable conditions for the twelve months we were there. The most common issues being depression, high anxiety (especially in my case), and an uncertainty that scares us because we have no idea what we are going to do with our lives now.

We all experience overwhelming emotions when people ask us how it was in Afghanistan. I usually respond with “Yup, real shotty and explodish,” specifically to avoid the question. We do not want to talk to someone who is attempting to feel what we did, especially when we know the inevitable follow up question is, “Did you kill anyone?”

For my friend Tom, coming home from Afghanistan as a 25 year old Sergeant was easier than coming home from Iraq as a 19 year old Specialist because he knew what to expect. Sophie, a “Ke$ha” doppelganger, was excited to come home; I remember before we left Kandahar she was jumping around in excitement. When she returned she had fun, partied, saw family, traveled, it all lasted for about four months until the reality of being home settled in. Going out with old friends is no longer what it used to be. She says she can only be around her friends for so long before she wants to go home and be around other soldiers like us. Life is no longer what it used to be. She says she can only be around other soldiers like us.

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Phil, I think, has had a better time with coming home than we have; he has a wife to hold his hand every step of the way. When he first got home he was paranoid of everybody around, he was paranoid of people in Fort
Collins, as absurd as that sounds. Phil drove our trucks on most of the convoys. Because of his experiences driving around in Afghanistan, driving back here in the states has changed for him; his wife took away his driving privileges for a month because he was so aggressive on the road. After the first month or two of being home, the anxiety and suspicion of people came down. Phil says he is still a bit jump; especially around fireworks. "My wife is always sure to point out that they are fireworks when they go off," he explains. Although he did not experience some of the depression that others of us did, he has become irritable when it comes to general courtesy; when he says "Hello" to someone he sees on the street, he expects a polite "Hello" in return. It frustrates the hell out of him when he does not get that. At work, when people do not perform simple tasks like showing up on time, when people don't move with what we call "a sense of purpose," when they don't follow simple instructions, he feels that he needs to counsel them immediately to resolve the issue. For Phil, these are simple tasks and things that should be done with no problem because they are so easy.

Like Tom, Sophie, and Phil, I have experienced some of all these different frustrations and emotions. When we were on the flight line getting ready to go back to Kyrgyzstan I was as excited as Sophie was. A week later I realized that coming home was not as great as it seemed. It was not until I moved out of my own here in Fort Collins that I experienced my first deep depression, it lasted for about a week and a half. It still happens every now and then without provocation or warning. Even though I was back in school in the first week of the summer session nothing is good enough.

I sometimes begin to rage in my mind at the slightest perceived offense, requiring all of my willpower to prevent lashing out at the perpetrator. I have to bite my tongue and work at being polite while waiting in line at McDonald's and having to wait because they forgot tomatoes on someone's burger, and they now feel it is their duty to make a big deal about it. I realize that people don't know any better. We see things differently. I try not to tell people I just got back from Afghanistan, but every now and then it slips out unavoidably, and people ask: How is it over there? Are we making a difference? Did you see a lot of action? Did you kill anyone? These questions irritate and confuse me and the friends I served with. I don't know why people ask us the things they do. We understand people are genuinely curious, however, asking us these questions does not make us feel good. We endured things most people cannot imagine, and when we are asked about it, it takes us back to those real nightmares. All we want to do is enjoy what we have here and now.

If you are walking through Old Town and you come across a Veteran and feel compelled to express your gratitude, please do so with a firm handshake and smile, and know that is enough. The emotional and physical aftermath of war on the individual is enough for us to remember our experiences on a daily basis. Tom, Sophie, Phil and I do not need strangers reminding us of it.