



## Transitioning From Military To Civilian Life, And From Camaraderie To Isolation

Monday, April 21, 2014 | Eli Saslow | The Washington Post

The only light in the vast Wyoming darkness came from the lit end of another 5:30 a.m. cigarette as Derric Winters waited alone for sunrise on the porch of his trailer. He never slept well, not anymore, so he smoked and stared across the three miles of barren landscape that separated him from town. He checked his voice mail, but there were no messages. He logged on to Facebook, but no one was awake to chat. The only company now was the hum of the interstate behind his trailer, people on their way from one place to the next. He walked out to his truck and joined them.



"The lonely process of overcoming combat" was what one doctor called it as he prescribed Winters the latest in a series of anti-anxiety medications. But what the doctor didn't seem to understand was that this was the place Winters was failing to

overcome — the America where he felt discouraged and detached, and where his transition seemed like a permanent state. "What the hell am I supposed to do next?" he had asked his commanding officer when he was medically discharged from the Army, which had provided his income, his sense of purpose, his self-esteem and 15 of his closest friends in a platoon they called "

He had tried to replace the war by working construction, roughnecking in the oil fields and enrolling in community college. He had tried divorce and remarriage; alcohol and drugs; biker gangs and street racing; therapy appointments and trips to a shooting range for what he called "recoil therapy." He had tried driving two hours to the hospital in Laramie, proclaiming himself in need of help and checking himself in. On this day, he was on his way to try what he considered the most unlikely solution yet: a 9-to-5 office job as a case worker helping troubled veterans — even though he hated office work and had so far failed to help himself. He had first contacted the nonprofit organization a few months earlier to ask for assistance with paying two months' rent on his trailer, which the director had done. But she also had said that what he really needed was a new community, a renewed sense of purpose, so she had offered him a job and he had accepted, on the condition that he didn't need to wear a tie. Now he was the only man and the only veteran on a staff of eight civilians with a trained sensitivity to veterans' issues. They gave him a desk with a view of the entrance to better accommodate his post-traumatic stress disorder. They held meetings when he needed to be "triaged." They offered time off for his panic attacks and greeted him each morning with equal parts caution and motherly concern.

"How are you doing today?" asked the nonprofit director. "Fine," he said as he walked through the main lobby. "How do you feel?" asked the outreach coordinator. "Fine," he said. He set down his Dr Pepper and his bottle of Gabapentin anxiety pills and began sorting through the paperwork on his desk. His job required a combination of case management, IT work and data entry, but already he had completed a self-evaluation noting weaknesses in "multitasking and a low patience for B.S." A boss asked him to locate an obscure provision on page 84 of the staff manual, and he finally found it, a half-hour later, on page 86. He printed a copy of the manual to double-check his work, and a colleague gently scolded him for not printing double-sided. "This is a serious waste issue for us," she said. "A serious waste issue," he repeated, reminding himself not to roll his eyes as he washed down the morning's first Gabapentin with his third Dr Pepper and pulled his fourth cigarette from the pack.

He returned to his desk, put on headphones and began searching an online job board for the next solution to try. Maybe he could fix diesel engines. Maybe he could work security or start his own firing range. He entered a search term for the one job he really wanted, and the one job his discharge papers said he would never be healthy enough to have again: "Trained Army Soldier," he typed, and the resulting barrage of military regalia made him enter more searches for all the things he missed about his time in Afghanistan. There were pictures of the fort in the Korengal Valley he helped build in 2007, giving the United States its first permanent presence in a remote area controlled by the Taliban. There was the 22-pound machine gun he had hauled up and over the mountains each night, cursing its weight even though it had sustained him through dozens of firefights.

The nonprofit director came by with another stack of paperwork for him to review. It was a data estimate of at-risk veterans living across Wyoming, a tally of people who had failed to transition from war: 787 in Cheyenne, 456 in Laramie, 107 in Green River, 194 in Rock Springs. "See, I printed it double-sided," the director teased. As she walked away, Winters tugged the hood of his sweatshirt over his head and began typing a message to another soldier from his platoon. "Welcome back to the life of petty nonsense," he wrote. "Another day from killer to civilian," he continued. "Ugh. I miss it." Winters talks on his phone in his home, a trailer just outside Rock Springs. He moved there because a relative had offered a good deal on the trailer.

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What he missed about Afghanistan were not the mortars that dropped down each night from the summit of Abas Ghar mountain, or the IEDs that ripped through Humvees and sometimes legs, or the 65 pounds of gear and body armor he humped everywhere in 110-degree heat, or the fleas and tarantulas that shared the dusty shack they called an outpost, or the politics of a war he had mostly signed up to fight in the first place because he was laid off from an oil rig in a down economy with a baby on the way. What he missed — the only thing, really — were the soldiers: Dodd, Vance, Pinchock, Craighead and all the others, the men he fought for and fought with. Eighty or so men in total. That was his war. The incentives and consequences; the love and loss. They were all of it, right there. Now one was looking for work in Wisconsin, one had killed himself, and several had returned to Afghanistan to get back into the fight. Most of them wanted to be back there, in their own ways. Like so many vets, they missed the camaraderie. And as with so many vets, their lives at home were defined less by togetherness than by isolation, which took on many forms. Dodd was in Kansas City making aerospace bolts and smoking weed on his breaks to stave off the stress of “dumb civilian questions.” Simpson was working the phones at a call center for the Department of Veterans Affairs, talking to vets who wanted counseling or benefits or sometimes nothing at all, other than to talk with another combat veteran.

And Winters was living with a new wife in a new town, Rock Springs, population 23,000 strangers, only because a relative had offered a good deal on a used trailer and there was no place better to go. He had grown up on the other side of the state. His nearest friend lived two counties east; his closest fellow soldier was 300 miles away in Denver. Only a few relatives had visited their trailer and only then on Thanksgiving. It was at the edge of a small trailer park in the desolate expanse of southwestern Wyoming, where the wind whipped down from the mountains, carried over the high desert, and invaded the trailer despite the towels they stuffed under the doors.

People had always come to Rock Springs to start over and to search for something: gold, coal, oil or natural gas. It was a boom-and-bust town, a place of reinvention, and now Winters had come searching, too. Maybe he would find it at an oil rig, where he signed up for a three-week hitch hoping for camaraderie, a shared purpose and some practical jokes. But this time, the joke turned out to be his PTSD, and co-workers banged pipes at night to startle him.

Maybe at the community college, where he enrolled and then dropped out a few weeks later, after a professor who had never cleaned blood off a Humvee interrupted him during a discussion about war to correct his grammar. Maybe at a motorcycle memorial club, where the membership code promised “honor, brotherhood and tributes to fallen riders” but where membership itself consisted of \$1,000 bar tabs with people who had done nothing much worth honoring.

So instead, Winters spent most of his time inside the trailer, either with his wife or alone, lifeless in front of the television. Cartoons before work. Hunting shows in the afternoon. Network comedy in the evening. And then back online at night, when he could log onto Facebook and connect again with the men from his platoon. Even though he hadn't seen any of them for two years, their presence on his computer screen offered the closest thing he had to a community. “I miss you and my brothers something fierce,” he wrote to Dodd one night. “Reach down and grab some dirt,” Dodd wrote. “Crumble it in your hands. You're home safe. Nothing can get you now, bud. It's normal to feel that way.” “Damn, I know man,” Winters typed. “I just can't feel like I did with my brothers. I can't find anything to replace it and I have a huge hole there.” “No you don't. Hole has the same people as it did before, you just don't get to talk to them as often.” “I know. I just need to visit everyone to get some closure. Thanks for letting me vent.” “Closure,” Dodd wrote. “You're stuck with this friend.” “Brothers till we die,” Winters typed before signing off and switching to another chat, with another soldier. “What's up, brother?” he wrote, and then, because he was thinking about the war, he watched a video of the night when three vehicles in his platoon had come under siege on a cliff-side road in Afghanistan. He turned up the volume until the sounds of war filled his empty trailer: the explosion of an IED, the rattle of machine gun fire, the crack of rockets against the cliff and the steady beat, beat, beat of his heart in his ears. The sound of a car pulling up to the trailer brought him back. His wife walked in the door.

Winters watches television with his wife, Yolanda, at their trailer. “What I worry about” “How are you feeling?” she asked. “Okay,” he said. “How's your stress level?” “Fine,” he said. She sat on the couch, and he stayed in the recliner. She played solitaire, and he went back to Facebook. This had been the rhythm of so many of their nights since they met at a house party two years earlier, an instant attraction that continued to surprise them both. She had been only 19 then, beautiful, smart and sometimes a bit naive, an aspiring elementary school teacher from a religious family in small-town Wyoming. He was more than a decade older, divorced and drinking too much, but she also thought he was the sweetest listener she had ever met. It took a few months before she started to wonder if there was a reason he was content to do so much listening. “Tell me about Afghanistan,” she asked sometimes, but mostly he refused. “War is not something you want to know about,” he said, and she could only assume he was right, based on the volatility of this man the war had returned home. A neighbor littered in his yard, and he retaliated by dumping garbage on her porch. Another neighbor fed his dog, believing it was malnourished, and he told her that the next time she trespassed, he would call the police. He shattered a laptop against a wall during

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a fight with his ex-wife. He left the imprint of his fist on the freezer door. "Tell me what's going on," his wife implored, but he never did. So she started sending him faithful text messages three times each day to remind him to take his medication, and she waited out his fits of rage by making herself small and quiet on the couch, not afraid for herself but increasingly worried for him.

On the drive home from their wedding, she had tapped the brakes to let an animal cross the highway in front of their car. "Look, a coyote!" she had said, admiring it, and he asked her to slow down. He reached for his gun, rolled down his passenger-side window and fired a single shot. The coyote dropped dead in a ditch. He told her to keep driving, and she did, not sure whether to cry or scream or laugh. Sometimes that was what it was like being married to him: her own version of his war, an unpredictable rush of love, fear and excitement. "One of these times, you'll go over the edge and not be able to come back," she had told him once. "That's what I worry about," he said. "That I'll just uncork and go ballistic on one of these people." "Wouldn't it help to slow down? To talk it through first?" "Not really," he said.

She thought she knew a few things about the nature of war. She had written a poem about it during her freshman year of high school, titled "Freedom Will Never Be Free," and now that poem hung on their fridge. "They left to do their part," it began. "Through thick and thin they fought with all their hearts, leaving behind their friends and loved ones." Here was one part of his war she didn't know very much about: Sometimes, his platoon relieved tension in Afghanistan by shooting stray dogs. The first dog he shot had been asking for it, growling and getting in his way while he changed a tire. Then, after a few months of near-constant combat, they started to shoot strays that happened to wander into their outpost, and later sought them out through the scope of a sniper rifle, and later shot one with a heavy machine gun. These were just dirty, diseased dogs in a war where machine guns were used for much worse. It hadn't bothered him then. It didn't bother him now. But how could he explain that in a way that made sense here, in the trailer, with the laugh track of another network comedy show blaring on TV? He closed his Facebook page. She finished her solitaire. They brushed their teeth and went to sleep in a room where the ashes of their last dog were enshrined in an urn. The dog had died of internal bleeding despite a mortgage payment's worth of emergency procedures at the vet. His wife had drawn a portrait of the dog nibbling a shoe, and it hung above their bed.

Up again at 5:30 a.m., back to the interstate and back into work, where on this day he was scheduled to meet with a Vietnam veteran named Jim, who was about to become homeless. "I'm desperate for some help," Jim said, handing Winters a foreclosure notice and a set of military discharge papers from 1971. This had been the reason Winters accepted the job: to give veterans the support and respect he wished others had given him and to experience a little of the camaraderie he missed. During his first few weeks of work, he had asked clients about their wars and told them about his, and he had enjoyed that. But soon his caseload rose from five men to 10, and then from 10 to 15, each veteran a little more damaged than the last. No matter how often he reminded himself to be patient, he began to resent their incompetencies: The vet who couldn't add his own bills. The homeless guy reeking of beer. The elderly man with PTSD who wanted to sit on Winters's side of the desk.

Each client was another possible version of himself in 40 years — his war ongoing, his problems metastasized. "Pull yourself together!" Winters sometimes wanted to say to them, until finally, during one particularly long day at work, he keeled over and couldn't catch his breath. Maybe a stroke, he thought. Maybe a punctured lung. He drove to the hospital, where the doctor diagnosed the first of his panic attacks, and since then he had limited his caseload to one or two clients each day, usually preceded by a cigarette and a Gabapentin.

"So you're overdue on all of these?" he asked Jim now as they stared at nine bills splayed across his desk, for electricity, cable, trash and doctors visits. "I should have come for help earlier," Jim said. "I tried to fake it for a while, but I can't anymore." "I get that," Winters said. "It's like I can't manage to function in society," Jim said. "I was kind of hoping that part goes away," Winters said. He grabbed the first bill and started on his work. Jim owed \$220 to the phone company, and it was Winters's job to negotiate a better price and help pay the bill. "Hi, I'm calling on behalf of a Vietnam vet," he said to a phone company receptionist who transferred him to a manager who told him to call a different number. Winters dialed again and reached a debt collection company, where the woman on the other end of the line thanked Jim for his service and then asked for new copies of his paperwork. Winters tried to fax them, but his machine was broken. He asked a co-worker for help and sent the fax. "Did you get it?" he asked the woman at the collection company. "Get what?" she said. He squeezed the phone until his knuckles turned white. "Remember, I'm calling on behalf of a veteran," he said, explaining Jim's predicament again. The woman promised to look for the fax and call back within three days. Eight bills to go. "Argh," Winters said, knocking his fist against the wall. He asked Jim to come back in a few days, after he had time to call the other bill collectors. Then he squeezed Jim's shoulder and walked him patiently to the door even as he felt his own anxiety rising and his breath getting short.

He retreated to the place at work where he felt safest, a couch surrounded by bookshelves in his boss's office. He sank into a cushion. He put his hands on his knees and rocked back and forth. "Hell of a day,"

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he said. "Hell of a day. Hell of a day." "His boss smiled at him from her desk and then looked back at her computer. This was their routine. Some days, he sat in her office for a minute; other days, he stayed for an hour." His boss smiled at him from her desk and then looked back at her computer. This was their routine. Some days, he sat in her office for a minute; other days, he stayed for an hour. Sometimes they talked, and sometimes she said nothing. "Company if you want it, space when you need it," she had told him once, because she knew from experience how a war could continue inside a person, isolating and eroding him over time.

She had been married to a veteran once, a 6-foot-3 Vietnam tunnel rat whom everyone called "Big D," a man who came back from the war and continued on with his life, raising a daughter and working as an airplane mechanic. He was handsome and outgoing and so quiet about the war that many of his acquaintances never knew he had fought in it, at least until he watched an eight-part miniseries about Vietnam that came on television in 2001. Suddenly, he was talking about the tunnels in his sleep, and waking up in a cold sweat, and requesting meds from the VA that never seemed to work, and drinking vodka, and more vodka, and finally stealing a camper so he could race away from the thoughts in his head. She had seen her husband a few weeks later at a rest area in Wyoming, confused and then irritated when she tried to approach him. She tracked his whereabouts over the next months with telephone records and credit card receipts, a trail that led first through the Midwest, then to Pensacola, Fla., and finally to an alley in Arizona, where had drunk himself to death 40 years after coming home.

She had gotten lost herself for a few years after that, leaving a high-salary job as a systems consultant. She attended divinity school and then founded a nonprofit called the Southwest Wyoming Recovery Access Programs. She applied for a \$1.3 million grant from the federal government to help veterans and their families, and she had devoted 70-hour weeks to that cause ever since. "Support with no judgment" was how she described her philosophy, because some vets came to her for housing assistance and others came for warm clothes since they felt more comfortable sleeping on the streets. Some came once to ask for money. Others came every day for coffee and company in the lounge. And one came to sit on the couch in her office, rocking back and forth with his head in his hands. "You can just sit there, Derric," she told him, and so he did, trying to catch his breath.

"I need air. I need space," he told his wife the next day, so they loaded their new dog into the truck and headed into the immense desolation of Wyoming. She drove while he reclined in the passenger seat. They exited the interstate and continued down a two-lane highway. Their truck climbed over a hill, and Winters rolled down his window, letting the cold air hit his face as he stared at a view of snow and sky that ran clear into Utah. He could see no other cars, no people or houses. Maybe the best way to manage a life of isolation was to choose it. "So peaceful," he said once they had traveled 90 miles out of town. "Where are we going, exactly?" she asked. "Who cares," he said. "Further." They drove for two more hours and stopped for lunch in Pinedale, a town at the base of the Wind River Mountains, where the welcome sign read: "All the Civilization You Need." They sat at a booth in the back of a diner and read a tourism magazine listing "fun facts" about the area: a subarctic climate, no stoplights for 50 miles, 1,300 lakes and a population density of one person per square mile. "This place is, like, crazy empty," his wife said, as Winters flipped to the real estate listings in the back of the magazine, where much of the county was up for sale. There were abandoned ranches, hunting lodges and mountain cabins accessible only by snowmobile. "Look at this one, babe," he said, pointing to an ad for a flat expanse of flood plain on the river. "Thirty-seven acres for next to nothing. We could do this." "Maybe I could get a teaching job up here," she said, because seeing him hopeful made her want to be hopeful, too. "This summer," he said. "We can move up the trailer," she said. "No cellphones," he said. "No crowds. No people."

He offered to drive on the way home, and he sipped Dr Pepper and turned up classic rock on the radio. An ABBA song reminded him of a soldier he had served with in Afghanistan, and thinking of that soldier reminded him of one day in the war. "Want to hear a quick story?" he asked, and before she could answer, he had already begun. "It was another firefight," he said. "Nothing special, really, but this local national gets shot clear through the head. I mean, dead. Done. Two to the temple. Not a pretty situation. But some of us end up lying beside this guy, because we're breaking contact with the enemy, and one of the guys in my platoon who I guess wasn't paying attention starts lying on top of this dead guy and practically talking to him. He doesn't even know he's dead! So we tell him, like, 'Hey, the guy's dead,' and he kind of yelps and jumps back." Winters laughed at the memory, just as all the soldiers who had been there had laughed about it for the rest of their tour. His wife remained quiet in the passenger seat, hugging her knees to her chest. He looked over at her. "Well?" he said. "I guess it just doesn't seem that funny," she said finally. "Yeah," he said. "Okay. Guess not." "Sorry," she said, but by then he had turned back to face the road, escaping again into his thoughts. A storm rolled over from Utah. Snow blew across the road as the truck descended from the mountains into the plains.

A few years earlier, on a hunting trip not far from this spot, he had experienced one of his happiest moments since the war, firing a single shot and killing an elk. Something about watching that animal drop had stirred a feeling within him so powerful that instead of rushing to clean his kill, he had sat down beside it, running his hand against the elk's neck. He had been one of the better marksmen in his platoon

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— one of the better soldiers, too, honorable and hardworking, promoted from private to sergeant — but so much about life after the Army had rendered him clumsy. How long had it been since he felt so capable? So empowered? His eyes had filled as he had leaned down to the elk and whispered close to its ear. “Thank you,” he had said. But now there were no elk within view, no life whatsoever. Even the trees on the ridgeline had rotted from within and faded from green to gray – a whole forest of dead wood just waiting to catch fire. “Damn pine beetle,” he said, pushing hard against the accelerator. “What a waste.” His wife reached for his hand, but he ignored her. “How are you doing?” she asked, and he didn’t answer. It was just him now, his foot on the gas, the truck picking up speed. The forest blurred. His mind went quiet. For one perfect moment he didn’t feel angry or anxious or lost. There was just the road ahead, a straight line between one place and the next, and he drove it alone.

1. In appropriate paragraph form, compare and contrast the alleged glorified perception of the post combat lifestyle with the detrimental casualties of war as articulated above. Specifically what does the author imply via the following, “*his war ongoing, his problems metastasized.*” Thoroughly explain your reasoning and provide specific artifacts and evidence *not* limited solely to article above to support your response. Create and illustrate a Venn Diagram to effectively explore relationships and patterns and to make arguments about relationships between sets. **(LA.910.3.2.2; LA.910.1.6.2; MA.912.D.7.2; MA.912.A.10.1)**
2. During the aforementioned ongoing war on terrorism in Afghanistan, American Hero and disabled United States Army Sergeant Derric Winters was inadvertently subjected to a plethora of unfortunate circumstances, which have ultimately impeded upon his abilities to function appropriately in his profession as well as his personal life. Fortunately, his employer was accepting of his previously diagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and consequently made the necessary accommodations inherent to his overall success. Winters discretely shares a rather troubling experience with a professional colleague. After one minute elapses, temptation assumes control and his confidant somewhat discreetly shares this information with another. Every minute thereafter, every employee familiar with the story enlightens another not limited to but to include the one who initially disseminated it. In a room of 30 people, the expression  $30/1 + 29 \times 2^{-t}$  predicts the approximate number of people who will have heard the story after  $t$  minutes. About how many people will have heard the verdict after 2 minutes, 5 minutes, and 10 minutes? **(MA.912.A.10.1; MA.912.A.10.3; MA.912.A.3.5; MA.912.A.4.1)**
3. Merely out of frustration coupled with an insatiable thirst and deep seeded passion for demonstrating mathematical concepts, a disgruntled former combat veteran has elected to exact vengeance upon a defenseless official licensed major league baseball– the alleged culprit of his insurmountable anger following a substandard Sunday night performance. PFC Lunchmeat has meticulously removed the circular portion creating multiple two-dimensional figures. To complete his mathematical masterpiece, he must identify and define the following pertinent geometric components: *chord, radius, diameter, secant, tangent, point of tangency, and center*. Illustrate a series of recently decapitated footballs and identify *tangent and concentric circles*. **(MA.912.G.1.2; MA.912.G.6.2; MA.912.G.6.4; MA.912.G.6.5; MA.912.G.7.4)**
4. Using contextual clues only, determine the most complete and accurate definitions of following italicized terms: *barren, recoil, proclaiming, triaged, obscure, barrage, regalia, sustained, incentives, camaraderie, stave, desolate, volatility, retaliated, implored, ballistic, incompetency, metastasized, predicament, divinity, and eroding*, as obtained from the passage above. Additionally, use each word in a complete sentence to demonstrate further comprehension. **(LA.910.1.6.3; LA.910.1.6.1)**
5. Identify and thoroughly support your reasoning regarding which of the following that best describes the author’s attitude toward combats veterans who’ve sustained mental as opposed to physical injuries: flippant disregard, mild frustration, passive resignation or an informed citizen. Explain the intended purpose of this article and identify any indicators or supporting evidence, which suggest the author may possess a bias for or against disabled veterans. Provide an inference veterans experiencing PTSD may derive from this material. The point of view employed throughout the passage is best described as first person, second person, third person, or a combination of first and thirist person. Analyze and interpret the following phrase, “*The lonely process of recovering from combat.*” Explain specifically how the image above contributes to the validity of the aforementioned passage. **(RI.9-10.1 – 10.6)**
6. **SARASOTA MILITARY ACADEMY WORD-OF-THE-WEEK** Provided the fact that the passage is incomplete, create an updated concluding paragraph aligned with the passage above incorporating the italicized term: *Sedentary* adj. Accustom to little exercise. **(LA.910.1.6.1; LA.910.1.6.5)**

*Fada Beo an Daughtry Times. Sin é go léir. | Due Monday, April 28, 2014*

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