

CONTENTS

Introduction: A Preparatory Message to the Reader

Author's Note: Please Read This

Executive Summary

Chapter 1: The Phone Call: Here We Go!

Chapter 2: The Battle Cry: Victory or Valhalla

Chapter 3: The Chaplain's Day: Twenty-Four Seven

Chapter 4: The Encounter with Fear: A Moment in Porta-Potty

Chapter 5: The Coalition Forces: A Funny Story

Chapter 6: The Witness of War: I Saw Satan Fall like Lightning

Chapter 7: The Friendships We Forge: Our Band of Brothers

Chapter 8: The Stigma of the Army Reserve: You Are Just a Reservist

Chapter 9: The Struggle with Relationship: The Fight with Loneliness

Chapter 10: The Mistakes Made: Two Failures

Chapter 11: The End Is Near: RIP/TOA

Chapter 12: The Holidays at War: Merry Christmas, Maybe

Chapter 13: The Love of Saguaro Christian Church: My Beloved Saguaro

Chapter 14: The Last Days: I'm Coming Home

Chapter 15: The Family Interview: The Ones You Leave Behind

Chapter 16: The Historical Disappointment: A Quick Commentary

Chapter 17: The Aftereffects Part 1

Chapter 18: The Aftereffects Part 2

Chapter 19: The Healing

Epilogue: The New Road

Introduction: A Preparatory Message to the Reader

Like most Americans—and you, my readers—I didn’t grow up in a military family. I didn’t even join until I was thirty-two years old. I know what it is to have no idea what life is like for military men, women, and their families. Like most of you, until my deployment I too had lived my life completely independent of the military, even during the early years of the Iraq war. On the other hand, I deployed to a combat zone at a point in the conflict when most people didn’t even know that military operations were still going on. For over a year, my entire universe was dominated by a military engagement that rarely made the news or disrupted the normal rhythm of everyday Americans. During that year of deployment, my family and I lived in the gulf between these worlds—life in the US and life in a combat zone. That is the story of most reservists, those who are no longer really civilians but also not really military, since we are short-time full-timers and I returned to my Reserve unit shortly after the year-long tour.

Shared stories create relationships, and relationships create bridges. When those bridges are crafted in prayer, they become sacred avenues of hope between the unlikely, the courageous, the broken, and the searching.

I intend the stories in the chapters to follow to be a bridge, a way of addressing a common set of dilemmas: the gulfs between the military and civilian worlds, between veterans’ complicated experiences and a public that has become accustomed to war, and between the reality of the Guard/Reserve and a perception that only “active duty” military men and women matter. I attempt to create a dialogue between all of these through a story, my story, as a Reserve chaplain deployed to Taji, Iraq, in the US mission against ISIS.

What makes my perspective particularly unique is that I am a minister. I understand my job as crafting a bridge between the sacred stories of our God and the daily stories of my congregation. I am a storyteller of the eternal and true. I forged my stories in prayer and through the eternal story of my Christian faith. My role within the military is chaplain. It is one that is spiritually defined and executed. For those reasons, my memories of Iraq (the biblical Babylon) are inseparable from my theological orientation and capacity to tell a story. In some respects, I lived an elongated psalm reminiscent of the words “By the rivers of Babylon we set and wept when we remembered Zion [home].” It helped that I was stationed by the rivers of Babylon on Camp Taji and that I am a crier!

As a minister of the gospel, story helps me see theological dynamics that are often and easily overlooked. As a soldier and veteran of Iraq, story helps dismantle barriers; story helps to overcome the tendency to say, “You weren’t there ... You wouldn’t understand,” which is exactly how this story begins.

In 2007, I was basically brand-new to a life in the church. In beautiful Richmond, Kentucky, I learned about ministry and life. Our community was a scenic gateway to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. During these days, I made a friend, a marine. He was the son of the senior minister of the church I served as an associate minister. After recently returning from a devastating tour in Iraq, he was making the adjustment to a post-Marine Corps existence. He was unlike any veteran that I had ever met. For starters, he was younger than me. All the veterans I knew were older.

Second, he didn’t wear a black baseball-type cap, which I’d assumed was the official uniform of all veterans. These black caps were all basically the same. The brims were typically flat. The crowns were starched and arched. I could see the gold lettering indicating the war,

maybe the branch of service too. Sometimes the rank was pinned to one side of the bill. These guys (I don't think that I have ever seen a woman wear one) sat a little taller, a little prouder. Their white tennis shoes were always spotless, and their jeans were unwrinkled. Their presence begged me to make eye contact, especially the Vietnam and Korean War vets. And when I did—because let's face it, those black hats were like tractor beams of patriotic sacrifice—I inevitably nodded my head and thanked them for their service. It had been a conditioned response since September 11, 2001. Deep down, I imagined we all wished that we could engage the veterans in a deeper way, to hear the stories of these men and women, stories of their service, stories of war. I believed it was the task of the American citizen to have some understanding of the sacrifices we asked these military men and women to make on our behalf.

Earlier that year I had had an awkward run-in with an older veteran at a doctor's office. I walked into an overcrowded waiting room where there was a solitary open chair next to an older gentleman wearing a black hat emblazoned with gold lettering that read "WWII Veteran." I felt my anxiety rise as I sat in the open seat. That black hat was the source of my tension. I knew it. It is the same feeling I get when someone has food on their face, but I don't know how to tell them even as I stare uncomfortably at the crumbs. As a minister, I felt like I should talk to him. Clearly, he was proud of his service, but I didn't understand the rules of talking about military service and I didn't want to say something foolish or insensitive. *How do I talk about this man's military service when I haven't a clue what to say or ask?* I thought as I stared at the black hat. And so, I sat inches apart from the man, with no obvious way to bridge the distance between us.

The anxiety I felt next to the black hat was really a longing to connect the gap between the civilian and the military worlds, to make a path between the past and the present, a way to understand the nature of military people's sacrifices.

But that bridge didn't seem to exist in that doctor's office on this day. Instead, I felt only confused and embarrassed.

Like most Americans, I have struggled to understand the threats, the wars, and the scars our veterans have encountered in places like Vietnam or Korea. I didn't even understand the sacrifices our veterans made in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The events of 9/11 seemed like forever ago. It was a complicated reality. Less than 1 percent of the population had volunteered to serve in those recent wars. I didn't have any friends go off to fight in Iraq or Afghanistan. All I knew was that these soldiers and these wars seemed very far away from the waiting room where I was now sitting.

Of course, I was my own worst enemy in situations like this. I created mental movies about each veteran's backstory, which were undoubtedly filled with clichéd misconceptions. For example, I assumed all veterans, especially combat veterans, must have killed someone. I assumed that the Guard and Reserve components were filled with well-connected socialites who were seeking military service without having to become "real" soldiers. I assumed that only "active duty" military personnel were the real soldiers, marines, airmen, and seamen. I assumed that I couldn't understand our veterans' stories because I had not been there.

I carried all these assumptions and stress on my shoulders while in that doctor's office. *What if I say the wrong thing? What if I minimize his service? Worse, what if I trigger a tragic memory?* My mind raced. If all the media reports and common lore were true, then every black hat might as well have "PTSD" stenciled in gold lettering on the back. *He probably doesn't want to talk about his service, anyway,* I told myself and grabbed a convenient magazine.

As I read through the articles, I wondered, *Are civilians supposed to create the bridge?* And then the black hat walked out of the room, but not before I absent-mindedly barked,

“America thanks you for your service! We really do!” My pulse slowed again as he walked away. Evidently, I speak on behalf of America now.

Later that year, I made my first attempt at building a bridge with the senior minister’s son. I felt a certain obligation to create an avenue by which to cover the distance between us. But how? After fluctuating between trying to play it cool, drinking beer, and thanking him for his service for the hundredth time, I declared failure. What are you supposed to do beyond gratitude? What are you supposed to say next? How do you invite storytelling into the conversation? Obviously I shouldn’t ask whether he’d killed anyone. Certainly the topic of sex on deployments was off-limits even if it was a common detail in every war movie I’d ever watched. Presumably I needed to refrain from anything that might have been a scene in Rambo.

One night, after more alcohol than seems possible now, I summoned all the courage from the \$5 buckets of beer we were drinking to ask him—to connect with the senior minister’s son. I made the leap.

And so, I asked, “What was Iraq like?”

“It was Iraq,” he said, in a voice noticeably withdrawn.

So much for a conversation. If I remember correctly, I went and threw up.

Turns out that was an impossible question. It was too broad. It was delivered with judgment, eagerness, and preconceptions. It came off as too familiar, as if we had a shared backstory.

But I never understood any of that until I understood it personally after my own return from service in Iraq.

So, I never broached war again, and he did not volunteer any stories. I let it be.

I doubt that I am the only soul who, after trying to connect with a combat veteran, took failures like this as signs that the world of the warfighter was not meant for the civilian. In the moments following my friend's response, I reverted to meekly thanking him for his service and crossing back over the bridge I had tried to create before it crumbled still further.

It was frustrating. It was defeating. It made me seem callous. Every time I read that another combat veteran had committed suicide, that knowledge reaffirmed to me how fragile the veteran's world must be and how perilous the divide truly was. I wondered whether in the future we would look back at the black hats more as a symbol of pity than pride.

And then my story changed.

I went to Iraq in 2016 with the Army Reserve as a battalion chaplain, part of Operation Inherent Resolve. Though I didn't put on a black hat when I came back from the Middle East, I understood them differently now.

I don't think I was even home a week when I was asked, "So what was Iraq like?"

"It was Iraq." And I looked away, with a mixture of embarrassment and anger.

Like the millions of combat veterans before me, I just didn't know how to answer that overly simplistic question. And honestly, I didn't really want to answer the question. I felt this strong surge of resentment. "You weren't there. You didn't even try to be there. You just let us go, rotation after rotation, and not one thing changed about your life." My mind spiked with pent-up anger even though my lips thankfully stayed shut.

I feared becoming the classic stereotype: a veteran who does not talk about war. I fought these feelings because I didn't really see any reason for them in my situation. I had been lucky in my deployment. I didn't come back with a traumatic brain injury. I didn't come back with PTSD. I didn't have to wash the blood of my brothers or sisters off my uniform. I simply didn't know

how to talk about it even though I wanted to share my experience. Of course, some veterans don't ever, ever, ever want to talk about their experiences. There are myriad reasons for their silence, and I respect that right. They earned the right not to say a word. I unequivocally support returning soldiers who wish never to articulate a single thing about those days ever again.

But this wasn't helpful for me. And this wasn't faithful. And so, I prayed. In that season of discernment, God placed a bridge on my heart: Share stories, pray, create relationships, close the divide.

But how?

In some sense, I still don't know the answer to that primary question, but I know the first step involves pushing past basic clichés. Here are some classic examples:

1. *People assume that veterans don't like talking about their experiences because the trauma of war was so intense.* They see the movies. They play the video games. They imagine that war zones are filled with nonstop action sequences where troops are charging through one door after another. For many veterans, this was indeed a significant and scarring part of their reality. But combat zones can also be super slow. There are significant periods of "hurry up and wait." It often takes hours to make a single move.

Additionally, most soldiers have never even fired their gun in combat, much less killed anyone with it. For sure, those within the combat arms branches of our military, the grunts, the tankers, the cavalry, were asked to do things on behalf of their country that most cannot fathom. They lost friends. They lost parts of themselves externally, internally, and spiritually. They lost their lives.

But for many more, combat experiences were often defined by second-order pressures, battles from sources other than the end of a rifle or the whistle of a rocket. These were the pressures of the POGs (a quasi-derogatory term meaning “persons other than grunts”), the logisticians, the truckers, the doctors, and the mechanics. These military men and women also lost friends or lost their lives. They also lost parts of themselves externally, internally, and spiritually, but they were not the tip of the spear, the first ones in the action.

In the middle of all this chaos were people like me, the chaplain. I nurtured the living, cared for the wounded, and honored the dead. I protected the constitutional rights of free exercise of religion. I existed outside of the chain of command to act as both a barometer of morale and an ethical compass to the command teams. I was a noncombatant. I never carried a weapon at any point during my combat tour. In fact, I have never fired a weapon in uniform. Yet, since returning, I have been asked twice whether I killed anyone in combat, and I clearly disappointed those asking when I said no. “But you got a Bronze Star ...” Their eyes told me everything. To some questioners, the fact that I had never been in the thick of combat diminished my “combat” credibility. Yet, within these wars, even chaplains have lost parts of themselves externally, internally, and spiritually.

2. People discount reservists as irrelevant. As a reservist, I was often maligned as not being a “real” soldier. Truthfully, my hardest days in Iraq had nothing to do with ISIS. Instead, my most challenging days involved interactions with the active Army component who frequently looked down on us Reserves. They discounted our professional experiences as irrelevant to being a soldier. They openly discussed how unintelligent or incapable we must have been not to have been picked to serve on the active side.

Even to get into the war theater as a reservist was a journey of grit, disrespect, and luck. Yet, in order to sustain more than seventeen years of war in Iraq, the Guard and Reserve have been placed in perpetual rotations in combat zones around the world. I doubt the public could comprehend the level of effort it takes to keep a military operation going indefinitely, yet the active component rarely gave us credit for our participation. Indeed, when I was in Iraq, around 60 percent of the American presence was composed of units outside of the active Army, Air Force, and Marines.

My story was familiar to millions of reservist and Guard soldiers, airmen and marines. We weren't famous, well-connected people. We weren't avoiding drafts. If anything, the exact opposite was true. We were mostly working-class or lower-middle-class people who joined to help our country and take advantage of financial incentives like tuition assistance. We shared the experience of being ripped out of our communities and vocations due to events a world away. We did all of this with the prayer that all of our lives would still be there when we got back. We often huddled together to deal with the reality that our lives were seldom the same when we returned. Ours is a story of being inconsequential because we were such a diluted part of the community's population and the public's perception of heroism. Ours is a story of being angry about being deemed inconsequential even though we have helped shape world events. Ours is a story of living with the fact that few people from our cities or towns even know we are gone, and that their lives do not change one bit because of it. How ironic that is, since most Americans are more likely to develop a relationship with a Reserve or Guard soldier than with an active one since most cities are not home to an active post.

3. *People believe that wars are fought exclusively by young men and women.* Most people assume that the most challenging aspect of a combat theater is the enemy. Most of us reservists

are old by Army standards. We are in our thirties, forties, even fifties. We have families. The most difficult part of being deployed is missing family. There are holidays and birthdays that we'll never get back. There are parents who have passed without us being able to say our final goodbyes. There is the fear that our deployment will cause irreparable harm to our children, our marriages, and our relationships. Our deployments are intricately connected to loved ones thousands of miles away.

These clichés are not insurmountable, but they require us, the public, to hear the prayers and stories of our veterans. So, let me share some stories with you.

Before I do, a few final notes: These experiences, these stories, these prayers that I share are not chronological and are often not connected. They are independent, theological memories. All the names and military units' identifiers are omitted to protect the identity and security of those described in these pages. When possible, I obtained the permission of the soldier or contractor to talk about intimate parts of my journey with them. Considering I ministered to over twenty-five hundred personnel who often were in camp one day and gone the next, getting such permission was not always possible.

I will try not to use too many acronyms, and when I do, I will try to include a description of their meaning. Honestly, I didn't always know what I was saying when I was in Iraq. I suspect that I am not the only one. If you say something with enough authority in the military, most people will give you a pass.

Within these pages, I will try to show you what it's like being a Reserve chaplain, husband, and father at war. I think it's easier to share stories from Iraq because of my role. I was not a warrior. I was not a killer. I carried no gun. I shed no blood. For me, war was waged through the stories of those that I counseled.

Ultimately, this is the story of perpetual war, but it is also a story of faith and hope. It is the story of a country engaged in an endless war and an American public that mostly doesn't give that reality a passing thought—as long as those who lose their lives are from other countries because we outsource the fighting to them, and our military does the rest. To the general public, war is costly, but only monetarily. What they know is that the military industrial complex is fed. Jobs are created. Communities, towns, and cities create entire economies that depend on perpetual war, and so everyone turns the other way as a sort of gentleman's agreement, with the wager being a nominal slice of America's sons and daughters. We carry this agreement into our churches, for we rarely discuss or even pray for the wars in which we are still engaged.

Just so you know, I don't wear the black hat. I'm extremely pale and redheaded, so as a rule I rarely wear black. "It washes you out," my grandmother used to say. I also don't wear what has become my generation's version of the black hat—the camo trucker hat with the subdued flag on the front. I call it the combat operators' look. I figure those high-speed guys can wear it if they want. I didn't kick in any doors on my deployment. I don't see any sense in dressing like I did.

Despite it all, well-intentioned souls still ask me, "What was Iraq like?" Even now, several years later, I still don't know how to answer the question, but maybe some of the stories that follow might help bridge a divide I fear is becoming larger and larger every day. Veterans like telling stories, especially if we are allowed to defy your preconceived notions of battle or disappoint your desire to be acquainted with a war hero. I reckon this book of memories is an attempt at that pursuit. The eleven-month-and-ten-day combat tour was one of the most difficult seasons of my life, but it was and continues to be one of the great blessings of my life. I like sharing memories from my time there. I think most of us do. We just need the right bridge.

I pray that these memories will help create bridges between you, the military, the black hats, \$5 buckets of beer, and a nation stuck in perpetual war. May they give you insights into the lives of millions of Americans who wear the uniform. Ultimately, may this collection of stories be for you a prayer from Babylon.

Author's Note: Please Read This

I am comfortable with irony. Kentucky distills it daily. Theology is ripe with it. War perpetuates irony, and I try to capture this in the stories you are about to read.

Since coming home, I have been intrigued (mostly), amused (sometimes), and perplexed (constantly) by people's responses to the profanity of war, specifically around language and sex. For example, consider the following story:

The doctor was tired. His movements were languid. I didn't know how he and his staff kept everything clean in the moon dust of this distant province in Iraq. As we were talking over the details of the last combat mission of the Iraqis against ISIS, he carried a small stainless bowl over to me. It looked like the kind of cookie tin that arrives at Christmas. I love those butter cookies. They're the perfect metaphor for the holidays: more tissue paper than actual cookie!

Inside the bowl there rattled a mix of twisted metal and small and broken metal mushroom caps. It was a collection of carnage. Each piece had its own story. Each came from the body of a US soldier, or an Iraqi, ISIS combatant, or local bystander—collateral damage. Some of these souls lived, and some died. Their stories on the operating table were all gruesome and gory. The contents of that metal bowl represented some of the worst of what people do to each other. These pieces of shrapnel had come out of men and women and even children.

As I listened to the stories about each of them, my heart ached. As I watched the forlorn eyes of the doctors, I saw pain. In my mind, it was here that I was experiencing the true profanity of war.

But that is the irony ...

In these pages I could recount the most violent and bloody war stories imaginable and you, the reader, would likely permit every detail—every bone crushed, every blood splatter, every brain fragment—to be told without question. Actually, I imagine you would think it would enhance my account. Think about it. These details of war destroy the soul not only of the victim but also of the hearer. Yet, you probably do not consider such details to be profane.

You would be in good company if you thought only of sex and certain kinds of language as being profane. And there's the rub. In this book I have a section on sex, intimacy, and loneliness. I use blunt language and vivid accounts of it all. Undoubtedly, some readers will consider this to be profane and thus inappropriate for a religious audience.

Allow me to suggest that it would be shortsighted to dismiss these details of war. The loneliness, the lack of intimacy, and the destructive sexual habits of military men and women destroy the soul more pervasively and as lastingly as bodily harm. That is the irony of war.

So, I extend grace and an invitation to any of you readers uncomfortable with this specific reality of irony: If you cannot handle conversations on relationships, intimacy, and sexual desire, skip past chapter nine.