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Horrors of war silenced soldier's life

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Jim Stingl

[E-MAIL](#)

Greg Braun believed in the Iraq war and in his abilities as a warrior.

Even the license plates on his Chevy truck reflect that: AIR ASLT.

Twice he served his country in combat, first in Kosovo and then in Iraq as an elite Army Ranger.

He was a sniper, a highly trained killer, although *kill* was not the word the military uses. Instead, his duty was to "reduce the target" or "neutralize" it. He once told his father, "We lit them up, Dad."

But those who knew him said that behind the tough talk, Greg had a soft heart. The horror he saw all around him, whether it was American soldiers blown to pieces by roadside bombs or the lives of the enemy that he himself ended with a bullet, came back from the wars with him.

He couldn't make it go away, especially after Iraq. He couldn't sleep. He pushed away the people he loved and hopelessly turned inward. He accepted some mental health treatment but struggled to avoid showing signs of weakness.

Greg went back to his job as a Milwaukee police officer shortly after returning home from 11 months in Iraq in November. He seemed to crave the level of danger and action that he left behind in Iraq, so he applied to join the police tactical enforcement unit.

One day before the roster of officers who made the squad came out - a list he would have made - Greg typed a suicide note on his computer and left two copies in his home in the 3400 block of N. 92nd St. He apologized for not being strong enough to go on living.

The final line states: "Well just leave it as war being one hell of a bitch no matter how big or small its found."

Greg died March 6, two days before he would have turned 27. He shot himself in the head with his police gun in the basement of his home.

He won't be listed among the nearly 2,400 American soldiers who died so far in Iraq, but people he loved and even those he served with in combat consider his death a casualty of war.

What Greg's family wants now is for other soldiers who are suffering from their war experience to learn from his story and reach out for help to ease the adjustment from combat to civilian life.

"Two wars were too much," said his father, Greg Braun, a school maintenance engineer in Milwaukee. "The horror of war he went through killed him. There's no two ways about it."

'Something I don't want to be'

Even in high school, Greg showed the intensity that would shape him into a soldier and police officer.

His football coach at Dominican High School, Dave Richardson, remembers that Greg would ride on the team bus to the away games with his helmet chin-strapped to his head and his mouth guard in for the entire trip. Often players are more laid back, even napping or listening to music on their headphones.

"That was how he got prepared for what he considered at that time to be war," Richardson said.

Greg met Daniel Heger in high school, and they would remain close friends after graduation. Greg joined the Army and went off to Ranger training.

Then he was deployed to Kosovo to be part of a peacekeeping force. Don't be misled by the name. He saw intense action in the chaotic, war-torn region and learned the bitter taste of killing for his country.

Heger, now a designer at a Milwaukee construction firm, first sensed trouble after Greg returned to the U.S. in 2000 and some of his buddies took him out to a bar on Water St. to celebrate his 21st birthday.

"He pulled out his military ID and just stared at it. He said, 'They're making me into something I don't want to be,' " Heger said.

The gloom that settled on their table never lifted.

"What do you say to that? How do you change the subject?" Heger said.

Greg took a job as a security guard at Northridge Mall and later joined the Milwaukee Police Department. He requested to be assigned to busy District 5 on the north side.

Greg, who had the rank of sergeant, volunteered to go to Iraq with the 1st Battalion, 128th Infantry of the Wisconsin Army National Guard. He told people he believed America was making a positive difference in that faraway country.

But another disturbing episode happened right after Greg came home from Iraq. He and Heger were at a theater seeing "Jarhead," a movie featuring a Marine sniper and his buddies in the 1991 Gulf War.

"He would yell at the screen," Heger recalled. "I said, 'Are you OK?' And he said, 'It wouldn't happen like that.' "

That night is the first time Greg talked to Heger about his post-traumatic stress disorder. They sat in Heger's driveway. Greg's hands were shaking.

Greg's father and mother, Greg and Linda Braun, said their son did not like to talk about war.

"Don't go there," he would say.

But he did open up to Autumn O'Malley, an Athens, Ga., woman he met just before leaving for Iraq. Much of what we know about what Greg was thinking, especially his trepidation about coming home, comes from letters and videotapes that he sent her from Iraq.

The two quickly fell in love. Greg devotes many of the letters and tapes to expressing his affection for her and imagining their future together.

"In a couple of hours here, I'm going to be going out on a nice little mission," he shares with her and his family on a video. "It's been kind of preying on my mind a little bit here, as I'm sure you all can imagine and expect. Oh, Lord. But it's all for a good cause, God and country."

Greg spent two weeks of leave in May with O'Malley in Georgia. When he returned to Iraq, she said she was pregnant with his baby. She later told him she had a miscarriage. They made plans to marry this June.

Choice to return to Iraq

Last summer, Greg's appendix burst while he was in Iraq, and he was sent to Germany for treatment. While he was there, he had a reaction to his medication, which he admitted mixing with alcohol even though he wasn't much of a drinker. The combination made him disoriented, and he wound up in a psychiatric ward, his family said. Given a choice of returning to the U.S. or to Iraq, he chose Iraq. He felt guilty being away from his platoon.

He also injured his back on a mission to disarm improvised explosive devices when his Humvee was blown up. More traumatic for him were the deaths of four American soldiers in his convoy.

"He literally picked up the pieces of his friends. He said, 'Dad, you wouldn't believe what lungs look like on the road,' " his father said.

Two soldiers who served alongside Greg in an area north of Baghdad said warriors are expected to put horror like that out of their minds and go on.

Mick Chemlick, who not only fought in Greg's unit but also works as an officer in the same police district, said he keeps all the terrible images from the war in what he calls the Iraq file of his mind. "I'm in Milwaukee now," he said. That's a different file.

Chemlick and Greg were both trained as snipers.

"We did a lot of overwatching, waiting for bad guys to come out and plant bombs. We worked mostly at night," he said.

Armed with rifles fitted with night-vision scopes, they hid in bushes and rocks 100 yards or more from the people who came into their sights. They would shoot anyone planting a bomb.

"It's all matter of fact," said Chad Hollenbeck, captain of Greg's platoon. Afterward, there was a bit of paperwork to fill out and then you would "go to bed just like any other night."

Chemlick said he thinks Greg never got over an incident in Kosovo in which he killed a boy who approached and was deemed in that split second to be a possible threat.

"We had long talks about it. You try to rationalize what happened," Chemlick said. "Bad things happen during war. There's always guilt involved. You get sent to do something. You've got to do your job."

Back in Milwaukee, Greg told Chemlick he had been to the VA hospital. "They think I've got unresolved issues," he told him, gesturing with his fingers to put quote marks around "unresolved issues."

"Traditionally, cops don't go see counselors. Soldiers don't see counselors," Chemlick said. It's seen as weakness.

Chemlick said he and other officers felt guilty they didn't detect Greg's suffering after he returned to the job.

"We get paid to be observant," he said.

Hollenbeck, who returned home to Eleva, Wis., to sell insurance, said, "I'm not saying we were knee-deep in grenade pins every day, but we were always at a very high state of alert. I heard that's the problem. Over there, your body produces a chemical to keep you at a heightened state of alert. And your body is not made to produce that all the time, and then you come home and you kind of crash," he said. "He may not be dead over there from a bomb, but he still died over there in a way."

'Back to peaceful Wisconsin'

Greg's unit left Iraq around Nov. 1 and went to Fort McCoy for processing of paperwork, medical checkups and briefings on many topics related to being home again.

"They had just come from the most dangerous place on earth back to peaceful Wisconsin," said Lt. Col. Tim Donovan, who works in public affairs for the National Guard here.

During his final days in Iraq, Greg was feeling mounting anxiety about returning home. In a letter he wrote:

"To shut oneself down from actions and a state of mind where you no longer do those nameless and unspeakable acts that one does for survivability. I had to do it after Kosovo, shut off those tools and instincts and countless other things, things I never thought I would have to draw on or need again, and it's one helluva process. It's certainly easier to turn it back on than off, which in a way is frightening in itself."

Two days after leaving Fort McCoy, Greg showed up at Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Milwaukee to be treated for back pain.

But he also reported difficulty sleeping, nightmares, disturbing memories, anxiety and depression. He was diagnosed with moderate to severe post-traumatic stress disorder and prescribed medication to manage the symptoms, along with pain meds for his back.

But, VA doctors said, Greg declined an important aspect of treatment - psychotherapy. What he needed was to talk out the things that bothered him.

"The plan was to keep encouraging him and exploring with him at every opportunity to have him re-evaluate that decision," said Richard Gibson, a physician and manager of mental health at Zablocki. With permission from Greg's family, Gibson and others at the VA spoke openly about Greg's treatment for this story.

"He saw things way beyond those any human being should be exposed to," Gibson said.

The first word in psychotherapy is *psycho*, and Greg couldn't stand the idea that he was going crazy, his parents said.

"He put on such a good show because he didn't want to let people down," Greg's mother, Linda, said.

Fiancée Autumn O'Malley said Greg began to say he was feeling worthless and hopeless. He feared he might harm someone else or himself, and he could not be fixed.

He cut O'Malley out of his life altogether within three weeks of getting home from Iraq. She and his parents, who remain in close contact, believe he was shutting down emotionally and could not face the woman to whom he had opened his heart.

But Heger and Chemlick both said Greg told them he was ending everything with O'Malley because he believed she was not completely truthful with him. She says she is a lawyer, but the State Bar of Georgia told the Journal Sentinel there is no one practicing law with that name. She said she practices under a different name but would not elaborate.

Greg's parents said they didn't feel the VA was being aggressive enough in its treatment of Greg or pursuing him when he missed appointments.

"You can't force mental health treatment on a person unless they're considered an imminent danger to themselves or others. He was never assessed to be that way," Gibson said.

"We made many attempts to get him more involved," said Andy Hendrickson, a nurse and education specialist with the VA's outreach program for soldiers returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Greg's assignment as a sniper made it particularly important that he get help, said Hendrickson, a combat veteran himself. They get a clear view of another human just before ending that person's life. You don't have to wonder whether you hit your target. A sniper has a huge burden to bear, he said.

Hendrickson said he also knew that Greg had returned to his job as a police officer, a risky occupation for someone who is not handling stress well. He invited Greg to group sessions to help his adjustment, but Greg told him he wasn't quite ready.

"He indicated to me that things were going pretty good," Hendrickson said. "He appeared to be guarded about what he told me. I was trying to build trust with him."

Returning soldiers often think that if they don't talk about what's wrong, it will go away, said Karen Berte, a physician and specialist

on post-traumatic stress disorder at Zablocki. "Unfortunately," she said, "it's really the reverse that's true."

Greg's family thinks he might have stopped taking his medicine at some point, possibly because he was concerned about how the drugs affected his work performance. Doctors at the VA said they saw no evidence of that. An autopsy found a fairly high level of pain-deadening morphine in Greg's blood.

Greg's last visit to the Zablocki center was Feb. 21, about two weeks before his death.

'Everybody needs help'

Near the end, Greg avoided seeing even close friends such as Daniel Heger, who found himself hoping that Greg would "crack" just enough to get serious inpatient treatment.

But Greg kept up a strong front. He began taking martial arts training.





















"He never wanted to come across as a person who needed help from anybody. That's sad because at some point in your life, everybody needs help. It's not a bad thing," Heger said.

Even in his pain, Greg agreed in January to be the guest speaker at St. Alphonsus Church in Greendale, which had assembled care packages for him and other soldiers in Iraq. It was the church Ruth Shully attended. She is the sister of Greg's late grandmother, and he was very close to Shully.

Shully noticed that Greg seemed different after Iraq, more sullen. But on this day, he put on his full dress uniform and proudly stood in front of the congregation to thank them for their support.

People stood and applauded. Tears filled Greg's eyes. At that moment, Shully said, he looked beautiful and graceful.

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