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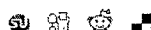


Stan Goff | BIO

### KIA in Alabama

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"All is not okay or right for those of us who return home alive and supposedly well. What looks like normalcy and readjustment is only an illusion to be revealed by time and torment. Some soldiers come home missing limbs and other parts of their bodies. Still others will live with permanent scars from horrific events that no one other than those who served will ever understand."

- [Douglas Barber](#), 2005

On January 16th, after having talked quite normally on the phone with at least two other people that same day, Douglas Barber, a member of [Iraq Veterans Against the War \(IVAW\)](#) living in Lee County, Alabama, changed the answer-message on his telephone.

"If you're looking for Doug," it said in his Alabama drawl, "I'm checking out of this world. I'll see you on the other side."

He then called the police, collected his shotgun, and went out onto his porch to meet them. From the sketchy reports we have now, it seems the police wouldn't oblige him with a "suicide by cop" and tried to talk him down. When it became apparent he wasn't able to commit cop-suicide, 37-year-old Douglas Barber did an about face, rotated the shotgun and killed himself.

There is a hell of a lot that we just don't know about how this happened. I talked to Doug on the phone earlier this month, and he described how excited he was to have joined IVAW, how he looked forward to taking up the pen and speaking out. Others had spoken with him only days and hours before he permanently quieted the chaos in his head. None of the "classic" signs of suicidal thinking were manifest. He was gregarious and upbeat, playful.

We know he had been prescribed medication. When he came back from Iraq, having served with the 1485th Transportation Company, a National Guard unit federalized to compensate for the extreme combat overstretch in Iraq, he was diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress (PTSD), and the Veterans Administration medical system leans toward drugs. In fact, they frequently shazam PTSD into something called "personality disorder," which can be treated with drugs. One veteran I know was prescribed Paxil which made him feel suicidal, and when the VA insisted that it worked, this kid switched to his own anti-depressant -- marijuana, which he says works better than the Paxil and doesn't make him feel like killing himself.

If one has a personality disorder, you see, then the "pathology" has no relation to one's job, like participating in the occupation of Iraq. The etiology exists somewhere within the individual, like a genetic disorder... that was missed during induction, missed by one's units, and missed during medical pre-screening for deployment into Mesopotamia.

We don't know if Doug was taking medication, or had stopped taking medication, or even what medication he had been prescribed.

We do know that he was a truck driver, and that his job in Iraq was driving supply convoys along the shooting gallery between Baghdad Airport and LSA Anaconda in Balad -- a giant military base -- a veritable city -- that is subject to so many mortar and rocket attacks that the troops have renamed it Mortarville. We do know, from Doug's interviews, that the stress of those convoys -- each confronting its participants with the possibility that this could be one's last road trip -- were hard on Doug. In July 2003, his convoy was hit with an improvised explosive device, and the mortar attacks at Anaconda were so regular that they were almost a weather pattern. But Doug said there was something else that was even harder on him. When the grunts came in, they would describe how many civilians they'd killed.

When Doug was in a traffic jam one day, feeling very vulnerable, and the US units dismounted to clear the traffic jam -- angry and afraid and waving weapons at the civilians -- a woman in a bus held up her baby for them to see... like that window-sign we see in cars on American highways -- "Baby on Board." Only she wasn't cautioning other drivers to be careful. She was trying to prevent an armed attack that could kill her child.

Doug may have decomped from medication, I don't know. That could have contributed to his suicide. It's possible. He fought with the defunded, Bush-administration VA for two years trying to get counselling, and trying to get authorization for his disability. It's very difficult to be a "productive member of society" when one fears sleep, and when one has lost meaning.

I read a book on post-traumatic stress once. Rape is the most common cause, then combat. It said that trauma disrupts one's sense that the world is a safe place, that trauma destabilizes our sense of meaning.

Let me explain something, as a veteran myself of eight conflict areas, and something that Doug discovered in Balad. The sense that the world is not a safe place is not a "disorder." It is an accurate perception. And the sense of meaning many of us enjoy is an illusion, a cruel construction that normalizes the orderly activity of the suburb and nurses our children on simple-minded, Disney-fied optimism pumped through television sets in a relentless datastream.

Post-traumatic stress is not a disorder. Calling it that earns it a place in the DSM IV, professionalizes and medicalizes this very accurate perception that the world is not safe, and that life is not a comforting film convention. Calling it an individual "disorder" cloaks the social systems responsible

for experiences like Vietnam and Iraq. And it renders invisible the fact that Douglas Barber was not merely a suicide.

Douglas Barber was nurtured on the illusions that secure our obedience, but when the real system needed to demonstrate to the rest of the world just how unsafe our nation could make them as the price of disobedience, the vile carnival barkers of the Bush administration, like administrations before them, did not recruit the children of Martha's Vineyard or Georgetown. They went, as they have always done, to places like Lee County, Alabama, where simple people have formed powerful affective attachments to the myth of our national moral superiority.

When that worldview, that architecture of meaning, collapses in the face of realities like convoy Russian roulette, and women holding babies up to prevent being shot, and daily stories of slaughter by the people one sleeps with, the profound betrayal of it is not experienced as some quiet, somber sadness. It is experienced like bees swarming out of a hive that has been broken, as a howling chaos. So we quiet it with marijuana, alcohol, heroin, and even shotguns.

The most fortunate of these survivors find one another. Doug had recently joined IVAW, where our veterans not only establish mutual support networks of plain love and care with one another, but where they can engage in the most "therapeutic" activity of all -- fighting back against the criminality that sent them there in the first place. We arrived too late for Doug. We were going to meet him in Birmingham later this month to involve him in the planning for a [veteran-led march](#) from Mobile, Alabama to New Orleans, and serve as the conscience of a nation that will spend trillions to drop bombs on Iraqis, and use a hurricane in the Black Belt as a pretext to accelerate gentification.

So when we launch out of Mobile in March on this 135-mile trek, we will carry Douglas Barber with us.

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