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E-MAIL TO A FRIEND

For one Marine, torture came home

By Ann Louise Bardach

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02/14/06 "Los Angeles Times" -- -- ABOUT A YEAR and a half ago, a 40-year-old former Marine sergeant named Jeffrey Lehner, recently returned from Afghanistan, phoned and asked to meet with me. Since his return he had been living with his father, a retired pharmacist, in the Santa Barbara home where he was raised. I first heard about Jeff from an acquaintance of mine who was dating him and who told me that he was deeply distressed about what he had seen on his tours in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East.

We met for lunch at a restaurant on Canon Perdido in downtown Santa Barbara. Jeff was focused, articulate and as handsome as a movie star. He was quite wound-up, but utterly lucid.

There was no way I could have known that day the depths of Jeff's unhappiness, no way I could have predicted the tragedy that would follow. I listened closely to his story and, while I was surprised by what I heard, I had no particular reason to disbelieve him.

He had joined the Marines enthusiastically, he told me, and served as a flight mechanic for eight years. Not long after 9/11, he began helping to fly materials into Afghanistan with the first wave of U.S. troops.

In the beginning, Jeff supported the administration's policies in the region. But over time, that began to change. As we talked, Jeff brought out an album of photos from Afghanistan. He pointed to a series of photographs of a trailer and several huts behind a barbed-wire fence; these were taken, he said, outside a U.S. military camp not far from the Kandahar airport. He told me that young Afghans — some visible in blue jumpsuits in his photos — had been rounded up and brought to the site by a CIA special operations team. The CIA officers made no great secret of what they were doing, he said, but were dismissive of the Marines and pulled rank when challenged.

Jeff said he had been told by soldiers who had been present that the detainees were being interrogated and tortured, and that they were sometimes given psychotropic drugs. Some, he believed, had died in custody. What disturbed him most, he said, was that the detainees were not Taliban fighters or associates of Osama bin Laden. "By the time we got there," Jeff said, "the serious fighters were long gone."

Jeff had other stories to tell as well. He said the CIA team had put detainees in cargo containers aboard planes and interrogated them while circling in the air. He'd been on board some of these flights, he said, and was deeply disturbed by what he'd seen.

Was Jeff telling me the truth? As a reporter who writes investigative articles, I get calls frequently from people with unusual stories — sometimes spot-on accurate ones, sometimes personal vendettas and sometimes paranoid, crazy stories. Jeff seemed truthful, and he had told the same stories almost verbatim to several friends and family members. But I was worried because at the time, I hadn't heard about such abuses in Afghanistan, and Jeff's stories were hard to verify.

More worrisome, Jeff was seeking treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, and I wondered whether he could withstand the scrutiny his allegations would generate.

PTSD's symptoms can include anxiety, deeply frightening thoughts, a sense of helplessness or flashbacks. Jeff's case apparently stemmed, according to Jim Nolan, a fellow veteran and a friend from Jeff's PTSD support group, from witnessing the "unspeakable," and from his inability to stop what he knew to be morally wrong.

His case was compounded, his friends said, by strong feelings of "survivor's guilt" involving the crash of a KC-130 transport plane into a mountain in January 2002 — killing eight men in his unit. He'd been scheduled to be on the flight and had been reassigned at the last minute. As part of the ground crew that attended to the plane's maintenance, he blamed himself. Afterward, he went to the debris site to recover remains. He found his fellow soldiers' bodies unrecognizable. He also told me he was deeply shaken by the collateral damage he saw to civilians from U.S. air attacks — especially the shrapnel wounding of so many Afghan children.

Jeff told me that he often couldn't sleep at night, thinking about what he had seen and heard. He had gone to Afghanistan a social drinker but came home, like so many veterans, a problem drinker. And he admitted self-medicating with drugs. He was seeking help — and just days after we met, he drove 100 miles to enter a treatment program in Los Angeles. But the Veterans Affairs hospital's PTSD ward was full, he told me, so he was placed in a lockdown ward for schizophrenics, which only aggravated his isolation and despair.

Jeff left the hospital after a day. He got in touch with Dr. Sharon Rapp, who is the only psychologist trained in treating post-traumatic stress for all returning veterans who live between L.A. and San Francisco, according to the Santa Barbara VA office. Rapp, who is by all accounts a gifted and dedicated therapist, placed him in a PTSD group with about 10 Vietnam veterans who took Jeff under their wing. But it became increasingly clear that he, like so many veterans, needed far more than outpatient and group therapy.

At the time Jeff told me his story, I didn't quite know what to do with it. Such allegations were not yet being reported — and many Americans would probably have found his accusations unimaginable. For multiple reasons, I put his story on the back burner. I continued to stay in touch with Jeff — and occasionally spoke with his father, Ed, who invariably answered the phone — as I ruminated on his troubling tale.

However, late last year, details about secret prisons began to appear. Human Rights Watch, for instance, reported that a number of men being held at the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, had given their lawyers "consistent accounts" of being held and tortured at a secret American-run prison in Afghanistan. I decided it was time to call Jeff and meet again.

It was early December. Jeff was still living in his father's home off Old San Marcos Road. He'd broken up with my friend and another woman to whom he had been briefly engaged, and he was struggling to stay sober.

But by the time I called, it was too late. The day I phoned, Jeff had quarreled with his father. That afternoon, they held an unscheduled counseling session with Rapp. According to the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department, Rapp was so concerned after their meeting that she phoned the Lehner house about 6 p.m. Ed answered, spoke with her and then called his son to take the phone. At that point, the line suddenly turned to static. Fearing the worst, Rapp called the police.

The worst proved to be the case. The police found two bodies, and quickly labeled the case a murder-suicide. Ed Lehner, they said, had died from multiple gunshot wounds, and Jeff from a single, self-inflicted wound to the head.

The irony was that after eight years in the military, the first and only person Jeff Lehner killed was his father.

Nolan, who said he returned from Vietnam in emotional tatters, was not entirely surprised by the turn of events. According to Nolan, Jeff's relationship with his father, a soft-spoken man with diabetes, had strains predating his Marine years, and it had deteriorated as Jeff's dependency on him deepened. "He had talked about suicide a couple of times during our meetings," Nolan said, "as all of us had at one time or another. It's about a loss of respect. When you lose respect between family members, there's nothing but anger left, and that's how the rage works in you."

There are ways to deal with the rage, of course, but treatment of returning veterans is woefully inadequate, owing to a lack of funding. Although the VA acknowledges PTSD as a serious problem for returning veterans, VA hospitals around the country have sharply reduced their inpatient psychiatric beds, according to the Los Angeles Times.

Suicide, meanwhile, is an enormous and growing concern. Statistics are hard to come by, but some estimate that although 58,000 veterans died in combat in Vietnam, more than that took their own lives after returning home. In a 1987 CDC study, the suicide rate for Vietnam vets was 65% higher than that of civilians. The Army estimates that the suicide rate among Iraq veterans is one-third higher than the historical wartime average, owing to the psychological strains of no-holds-barred insurgency warfare. That means we're looking at a future blizzard of suicides without an adequate VA program in place to address the crisis.

Without Jeff and the further details he could have provided, I doubt I will ever know for certain whether all his Afghanistan stories are true. But no matter what you believe when you read this, the story of Jeff's life and death raises issues we

must grapple with if we're going to continue sending troops into insurgencies and guerrilla war zones. Thirty years after Vietnam, we seem to have learned very little.

Of course, I feel badly now that I didn't spend more time with Jeff or try harder to get his story published while he was alive.

He had such a dazzling smile — the type you knew was destined for great things.

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