

SECONDARY STRESS

When Love Can Hurt



**How Combat Related Post Traumatic Stress
Can Affect the Caregiver and Loved Ones**

Making it to the next level of recovery from combat related post traumatic stress

This is written to help those that suffer from, and those that stand beside them that suffer, the silent wounds of war that deserve honor and recognition for standing strong and having the courage to go forward with their lives.

Whether they suffer with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury, or any other invisible wound from war.

It does not matter which war they served, what matters is the fact that they are seen through the rough spots they face when they return home, those already home, and those that have been home waiting for them.



picture by Deb E.

We compiled this information to help provide those who are interested in PTSD with useful ideas to move forward at an easier pace. This should never be used as a substitute for a consultation with a qualified medical or mental health professional. We hope through what we have learnt you will find an easier way that helps you make decisions that are needed and helps ease your mind showing you are not alone. You, as a caregiver may also run into some difficulties along the path, which nobody ever told us about.

Please remember you should always obtain a qualified medical or mental health professional's opinion.

We are here, we stand beside you.

Merinda, Nancy, & Sunshine

Combat Post Traumatic Stress How I can Help My Loved One Through It? How Can It Affect Me As The Caregiver?

For those working with someone that suffers with combat related PTSD, the caregiver needs support from others because it is not an easy task. You are working with a person that may lose their temper when least expected, act uncaring, non-responsive, and they may even seem mean and hateful while you are just trying to help them get through things.

You can feel hurt as you attempt to help your loved one that suffers as things proceed. By accepting this role to help someone, you deserve a lot of credit, as it may not be an easy task. You may become the one person that the afflicted person feels comfortable to talk with, besides their counselor. If they are going through difficult times handling certain issues, they may seem to take things out on you because they don't know what to do for themselves. This can become a very strenuous time for both of you as you proceed and you need to understand that.

You may feel like you are alone, that they are not listening when you suggest ideas to help make things easier for them. You may also think there is no one else better that can handle the job...because you know the person the best...or just because you feel you need to do it yourself.

As time goes on and you continually work with your loved one you may start to feel stressed off and on. This can be a perfectly normal reaction because the tension builds up as time wears on. You may feel your loved one does not care what you are trying to do. That they may not be progressing as you feel they should be. But, you still feel that you are the one that needs to be there for them, and you also feel that you can handle things no matter how hard it gets.

When someone suffers with combat related post traumatic stress, they have trouble handling their own needs, never mind the needs of whoever is helping them. You both need, and the complete family needs, to understand about post traumatic stress and ask for support, especially if things start to get tough. This is a necessary measure that must be taken or you both will suffer as more time goes on. There may be times that you become overwhelmed as you attempt to get through things on your own. If you cannot find other family support then maybe you and the sufferer should speak to a counselor. The loved one may object to go so you may want to go yourself to speak to someone. There are also support groups that work with these issues that you can receive support and suggestions from. Another great support team player may be your religious leader. Believe it or not, there are many families that are helping a member of their family that suffers with post traumatic stress. You need to know yours is not the only one.

There are some things you can do with or for your loved one to make things easier, some of them include:

1. **Be someone they can talk with:** listen to them without giving your opinion, without putting the person down, you are someone they can completely open up with, without being laughed at or yelled at for what they are feeling. They must feel safe with the person they are talking with or they may stop talking. As you talk with your loved try to keep the atmosphere calm, if it is not then they may become agitated and stop talking about their difficulties they may even start to seclude themselves, instead of working on things to help them move on. Be honest with the person, but do not be brutal, do not say don't worry, and do not say it will be okay. If they start to discuss what they went through while deployed, do not say I understand, because you do not and you never will totally understand what they have experienced.
2. **Realize your loved one is hurting:** they may hear comments from people that do not understand what is going on with themselves, so they need someone that will not torment them about reactions they have that come out of the clear blue sky.
One minute they may be fine and the next they fall apart or they may suffer an anger problem. They need someone they can talk with that understands this fact. They cannot just get over it, move on past it, get their mind off of it, push it to the back of their mind, or any of the other remarks they may hear or you may hear. They are suffering, they want to improve, they want their old life back, but they do not know how to get that far. They need someone to understand all this and more without putting them down because of what they are going through.
3. **Try to keep the family life normal:** when a loved one returns home affected by the war there are certain things they wish to stay away from. These items may include crowds, specific types of TV programs, driving at night, driving on highways, they may not feel safe being in the center of a room, and there maybe other items that they just do not feel they are capable of handling. You should attempt to keep your normal routines taking place, but be sensitive to their insecurities with certain bothersome issues and attempt to make the person comfortable while doing those things. In other words, if you want to go to a specific restaurant ask if reservations can be made at a table near a wall, do not just cancel going. If they have problems driving on certain roads or at certain times ask someone else to drive. Try to keep a normal life continuing as much as possible or this may add to the problems they are going through.
4. **Realizing that you both may be scared:** PTSD can come across as a scary situation and injury. Many things are taking place within the person's thoughts that they do not understand, and that they do not know how to control. You may feel your relationship has changed in some manner because of their symptoms, and through their actions, and wonder if the loveable person you

knew will ever return. You may think of many different things that may scare you because of their personal behavior or you may think how they act differently from how they acted before being deployed. The person that is affected may also think that they have not changed at all or they may think that you are the one that has changed.

5. **Do not expect too much from them at certain times or events:** certain holidays or events can really affect a person suffering with post traumatic stress. They now want to be alone, not in crowds, and often they are not in a happy mode very often. They may not want all the hugs that accompany the holidays or events because that means their comfort zone is being intruded. Listen to them, they are not comfortable, but you can make small changes so they can still enjoy the day or at least attempt to enjoy it. They may make promises that they will be able to handle an event, but then realize they cannot after arriving at it. Don't stop them from trying, let them try, but do not make them feel bad if they cannot get through it and have to leave.
6. **Stay calm and try to be patient:** post traumatic stress follows its own course, it may take a short timeframe to put some issues under control, or it may take a long time. No matter how much you or your loved one wish to move forward you cannot control it to with a planned agenda. You can only take one day at a time and try not to get upset when things are not accomplished immediately. This also goes for you as the caregiver. You need to focus on the issues that come up on that particular day or you too will find yourself falling into turmoil, you may feel let down, and you may start into your own drowning process.
7. **Take care of yourself:** You are strong! However, as you go through day-by-day issues with your loved one you may start caring for them and not pay any attention to yourself. You need to keep yourself together to make it through each issue or your loved one will fall apart, but if you continue with everything, every single day the stress can catch up with you too. You must eat correctly, get rest, and exercise so you can stay strong. Take care of your own physical and mental needs. Do not let yourself get caught up so bad that you suffer yourself without realizing it has happening.

The most important thing you can do for your loved one is support them by being there for them. They may feel alone and you may also, but they need to know someone is there for them if they want or need help with no communication problems.

I am sorry; there is no magic cure for combat related post traumatic stress. It has survived throughout the history of all wars. You did not cause your loved one to suffer with it, nor can you fix it, no matter how much you want to help your loved one. All you can do is walk beside them and let them know you are there and that you will remain there.

What Happens If I Become So Involved That It Starts Affecting My Own Life?

While you are busy caring for your loved one you may start ignoring what your own body is telling you. You may realize you are tired and worn out, but decide that you can rest later; you have to take care of things for your loved one first. Then time goes by and you are still taking care of your loved one and still no rest comes, no time for yourself.

When this takes place your own body may start wearing down, your mind may start thinking of ways to make things easier so you can both make it to the next day, and the next, and the next. Each day may bring on new issues for your own body to handle. Some things may cause emotional difficulties or they may even cause physical difficulties. Either way just as we say the combat sufferer needs help, if you are starting to have difficulties you may also need to stop and decide if you yourself may need some help or at least slow down. What you could possibly be facing, if you do not ask for help or take time out to help yourself, is called secondary traumatization or secondary stress.

Secondary Traumatization

**Also known as Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder (STSD),
Compassion Fatigue (CF), and Vicarious Stress**

Though secondary trauma is common and normal, it is just like post traumatic stress because it cannot be avoided or eliminated. Though it is a normal part of helping someone that has been through a traumatic event, it can be reduced & modified. Every parent or loved one of a deployed or redeployed member will most likely have some problems. Many may have mild symptoms and then move on. Others will suffer through many symptoms as they care for their loved one. With combat related stress as a deployed member returns with few changes, their loved one might not recognize any problems of any kind. Though we understand no one returns home unscathed totally from a warzone, that there will be some changes, what level of severity is the main question.

Combat traumatic stress is caused from one being involved or witnessing a horrendous trauma while at a warzone. The number of events that were witnessed or that they took part in may very well have an affect on how strong the symptoms may be or may become.

Someone facing secondary stress has not been directly exposed to any trauma. This occurs as you care for a person that has been exposed to it directly and you hear their horrifying stories or you see the pain written on their faces and you become connected more than you ever have been with this person before.

Secondary is not the same thing as burnout. Burnout takes place as you go through every day hassles and stress that usually builds up and usually can be fixed with a vacation or a break. Secondary is where there is stressful tension built up because you are so busy helping a person get through a highly stressful re-experience of a traumatic event, that it can numb your own feelings. You may get to the point that you are actually feeling and seeing what you think they have been through in your own mind. In other words, you are absorbing everything your loved one went through. If you care for a combat veteran that suffers on a day-to-day basis, you may start to struggle to keep functioning as a caregiver.

Secondary traumatization is a slow building process and usually the person that is going through it, or is showing signs, does not see them advancing nor do they see it becoming an issue. This is because this stress builds up at a very slow steady pace. It is hard to help those who suffer through post traumatic stress daily. You feel because it is your loved one, which you are helping, that you can control everything else. After awhile you may start loosing that control.

All of these items cause stress on and within, mentally & physically, your own body and these start to take their toll. It is very difficult to hear what your loved one has gone through or witnessed. You can start loosing control of yourself by experiencing their dreams, their fears, and start suffering with them. After awhile you may think you are being hit from all sides as you hear about the events, you may start to feel the events, you speak of the events, and you start to live with the events. You may also start witnessing hard-core reenactments or reliving of the events. All these items may take place even though you yourself never actually witnessed any of it in person. This stress is then added with the every day stress the caregiver is handling. It can become a complicated issue knowing where the sufferer stops and the caregiver begins.

If you think you are having a problem, you probably are. However, do not despair, as there are ways to keep, or get, things under control again. With the right guidance, care, and support you can bring your own life back into view. Understanding and taking these steps will help you, but you must accept the fact that you are having problems handling all the stress first. This does not mean you have to stop caring for your loved one that is suffering, it means if you can help yourself stay fit, you can continue giving care. When you decide you have possibly gotten to this point it is time you give yourself some compassion so you can continue.

Caring for your loved one as they work through all types of mental anguish is an honorable thing to do. You should feel gratification, blessed, and rewarded as you help them get through their issues related to combat post traumatic stress. However, you must watch out for your own well-being. The only way not to be affected in any manner from what you are witnessing from your loved one and what they experience is to block everything out...and that is not the solution.

Some of the Symptoms of Secondary Stress

There is no single symptom that can describe what someone that has secondary stress feels or goes through. These symptoms can range from mild to severe levels. Keeping control of your life will take time and sometimes-hard work.

The symptom list can become endless, but the following are some that are the most common.

The symptom list can become endless, but the following are some that may come up.

Feeling worried	Ashamed
Helpless	Depressed
Anger	Decrease in appetite
Resentful	Confused
Tired: mentally and/or physically	Isolated
Anxious	Sensitive over things
Grief	Feel like no one understands
Difficulty concentrating	Medical issues: headache, joint pain, abdominal discomfort
Under pressure	Having bottled up emotions
Emotional drained	Compulsive spending, eating, gambling
Drinking, drugs issues	Hypertension
Alone	Work holism
Fearful	Hopelessness
Betrayed	High self-expectations
Stressed	

Occupied with the PTSD sufferer's pain & memories of their stories
To much caring for the PTSD sufferer and not enough self care
One can become very resentful
You are in denial about having a problem or that you need help

Some symptoms that can be classified as a type of survivor guilt:

Why is my loved one suffering?
Will he ever be happy again?
Am I helping in the right manner?
What can I do differently to get him over this?
Why is not thankful for the help I am giving him?

These symptoms could mean there are or could be issues that are more serious:

You dream of what you are told about
You loose your fun loving side of life
You are preoccupied with PTSD sufferer's safety
You can feel guilt & pain because you cannot control things for your loved one

You withdraw from activities—especially ones the PTSD sufferer cannot feel comfortable with
You feel you are dysfunctional
You are mentally and physically exhausted
You can lose your own hopes, secure feelings, personality, and thoughts
You can develop a cynical attitude as a defense against yourself (doubting, scornful, and lack of respect)

Putting it bluntly, you are not yourself.

What can you do to manage your stress?

If you are showing signs of stress then you need to be aware that it can lead to further issues if you do not take control. Remember, it is the simple things that can multiply without you recognizing the fact any of it is taking place.

A person must attempt to keep things under control for themselves and when signs are showing there is a problem there are ways to regain that control. If you continue and ignore the signs, eventually your emotions may take over and you can no longer ignore the fact that there is a problem. Often by this point psychological and physical issues are occurring.

To start helping yourself you need to see everything you are juggling at that time, mentally and physically, while getting through the days. Being a caregiver of a loved one is time consuming and can make you run yourself down....now how do you move forward? How do you make a change so both you and your loved one can keep moving forward?

- 1) Be Aware: be able to identify symptoms. Are there changes noticed by yourself or someone else?
- 2) Balance: put balance into your life, no matter how unrealistic it sounds. Relax, take a break, rest, have fun, laugh, take care of yourself, eat correctly.
- 3) Connect: find someone to talk with and talk freely with. Talk of your inner thoughts on what is taking place with your loved one and yourself. Is there a support group you can attend? Communication can help.

But How?

Twelve Steps to Help You Regain Control of Your Own Life:

1. accept where you are on your own path
2. be kind to yourself
3. attempt to have a positive outlook
4. Understand that the pain you feel is normal
5. Find someone to talk with: a friend, clergy person, counselor
6. Continue to learn about combat related post traumatic stress
7. Eat balanced meals, sit down to eat and do not eat on the run.
8. Start exercising: go for a walk, go bike riding
9. have some quiet time, meditate, read a book, listen to calm music
10. develop a hobby
11. take some time off
12. get some rest

How Stress Can Affect Children

(When a Child is Close to a Combat Sufferer)

Stress also affects children of all ages. As they witness someone affected with flashbacks, dreams, anger problems, or any other issues that may come up it hurts them also. To them this person they love and care about is supposed to be strong, they are supposed to be able to teach the child and protect them.

They do not understand what is taking place, but know something is wrong.

Sometimes you will notice the child start to withdraw, school grades start to drop, they can't sleep, their eating habits change, they become aggressive with other children, they may regress in their development skills such as toilet training, or they may seem afraid of the person that is suffering. They may also seem confused....because they are, they may experience nightmares, or they may claim to be ill.

These children may also attempt to take care of the sufferer. They also need to learn that it is not their fault the person is acting the way they are, and they need to understand this person has some problems they need help with. The child's life may seem to be turned upside down; and they need to be able to understand what is happening.

How Can You Help A Child Understand?

1. The first thing you may want to do is try to explain, depending on the child's age, what Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is. This can be a challenge depending on their age.

Post means the person is feeling bad after something really bad happened

Traumatic means it was very scary and this can make them have dreams or feel sick

Stress means it makes your heart beat fast, like if they were running really fast, but they weren't running at all and this can give them headaches

Disorder means something isn't right, it's messed up somehow

This injury can make someone really grumpy and not always nice. Even the person may not understand why they act this way

2. Try to keep a calm atmosphere, bring them for a walk
3. Listen to the child's concerns, they too may feel scared. Ask what they are afraid of, what their dreams are about but explain dreams are pretend, let them speak of their own concerns and really listen to them
4. Try to keep a normal routine going
5. Keep an eye open for school related issues
6. If they will not speak with you, or you feel they need to speak with someone besides you, ask if they would like to speak to another adult. The adult could be a relative, a religious leader or you may feel the need to contact a professional
7. Most of all make sure they know you love them and let them know their feelings do matter

Those That Never Knew They Weren't Alone

Combat Related Post Traumatic Stress has been around as long as wars have been fought. You have heard this statement many times I imagine. It was called many names like Soldier's Heart, Combat or Battle Fatigue, Shell Shock, Gross Stress Reaction, Post-Vietnam Syndrome, and Combat Operational Stress Reaction are just some of the names.

PTS has always been a wound that was seen as being swept under the rug throughout the years. It was, and still is, one that people are afraid to admit that it exists. In fact, the given name is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but a disorder is an illness. These veterans are not ill, they have interior wounds, but that is another discussion and it is of my own opinion that many might disagree on. With this new name came more attention to what was happening to those that had served in warzones, but the treatment for them was just starting.

As PTS came out to the "outside world" many of the family members came forward asking for help also. After all, until the veteran was accepted, how would others ever accept a family member suffering while they attempted to maintain a strong household? They were the ones that had suffered not knowing how to help their loved ones while nothing was offered to help them move forward. Throughout the years, they too started suffering with no idea of how to improve the situation unless they, themselves, were fully involved. They didn't understand what was happening within their relationship, but they wanted it to work out...but how? They had no outside help, no internet existed which means no chat lines, no information available at their fingertips as we have now. Putting it nicely, they were on their own with no one to talk with and not realizing they were not the only one going through the same experiences.

These family members were the forgotten sufferers. Even when treatment was started with their loved one nobody took under consideration that the family has suffered with them. Nobody knew they were in pain, they wondered how to go on, many afraid of their loved one but they didn't know how to "fix it", let alone how to help themselves.

Every war has had family members in this type situation...living this life. Through history into the Korean War time their husbands were recognized within the civilian world as someone to be honored because they served their country. Is this why we did not hear as much about those suffering? They did suffer and many still do from those wars. Then the Vietnam War/Conflict took place. As the military members returned home they were spit at, slandered, disgracefully put down by citizens of their own country. It was a new world, a new era, one with the world of television that showed what happened during a war and people did not like what they heard or saw. They took their frustrations out on those that served that war. These actions added more stress on those that were already suffering from PTS. In return, the family members tried to cope with what was going on. Many people couldn't continue and divorced, while many others struggled to stay together while they themselves were in pain.

A Vietnam Veteran's spouse wrote the following story. She is one that never realized things could improve as time went on. She also never realized that she was suffering herself, she thought it was the way it was supposed to be, the way it would always be.

Vietnam Wives and a Little Help From Their Friends

By: Sunshine

Some wives who have followed a path of the unknown have managed to make their marriages survive, even though they didn't have a name for this invisible wound that their spouse suffered with. Because of this fact, the wives have suffered in silence, as they watched their husbands go from job to job, move from house to house, while watching and listening all these years to their husbands sleeping and hearing their nightmares.

I have been married to a Vietnam Veteran for 35 years. I feel that women who live with Vietnam Veterans seem to be the most forgotten or unmentioned group handling wartime ptsd issues. We did not have the support channels that are now available as they returned home. We also did not know others suffered in the same manners our husbands did or as we did.

Throughout most of our marriage I maintained the same job. My husband was moving from one job to another, this added burden on myself as well as our children. With the job changes came the relocations of our living quarters often. We almost felt as though we were on the run at times. Though I now understand this is part of his post traumatic stress, at that time as a young mother and wife, I did not understand what was happening in our lives.

While we watched what our loved one suffered from and with, we did not understand things and if we did understand, we did not know how to handle it. Since ptsd came to surface the children, who are now grown, and extended family members don't believe or understand what the wife goes through. Many of those suffering with ptsd from previous wars began having more symptoms following the attack on our nation on Sept. 11, 2001 and again when we went to war.

Most Vietnam Veterans do not speak of the war, the one they fought or the ones taking place now. But, their symptoms tell the immediate family members, especially the wives, that things are not always good. We work very hard to keep them calm and focused at times and it has been a long hard road to get this far.

We find that it can be difficult to discuss family problems or any problems with our husbands for many different reasons. Yet, it is only in recent years that we have learned that there was a title, for describing what we as wives, and other family members, are possibly affected with. As wives, we have been going to war all these years beside our husbands...and many of us suffer with Secondary Stress. I never associated my actions to have anything to do with my husband's ptsd until the past few years when it has been brought to my attention.

We suffer from lack of sleep, depression, anxiety and panic attacks, and even paranoia. While there are medications to ease the situation for the spouse, the secondary stress never goes away. We need to make sure we keep it, or attempt to keep it, under control. We need to be there for our spouse, our loved one, but keep our lives together at the same time. Because we have worked through issues for so long, with no knowledge or help,

this is a challenging course that we now try to handle.

As with many of the current war spouses, our family and friends have said things such as tell him to get over it and get on with life, or isn't there a different drug that they can take to make it go away. Life can feel empty and lonely for a wife, because friends don't want to be around to hear the complaining or paranoia and they sometimes even consider it to be an act.

So, the wife has been left to deal with this by herself until the past few years when support groups have formed. To be able to discuss with another wife what you are going through and for someone to actually understand can make one ecstatic with joy. It is a relief to know, unfortunately, that someone else out there is going through the same thing and that you are not alone. Most of what I have learned about PTSD and Vietnam Veterans is through support groups. We have to help each other, and we are each other's best support that is out there because we are the only ones to understand what it is like to live with a person with PTSD.

As I now work through secondary stress, I find it hard to have family and friends understand what that term means, after all, they still don't understand what post traumatic stress is. I find that I have trouble with normal daily tasks such as sleeping, because I am busy making sure my husband sleeps and I must be there if he needs me. Friends are lost because they can't understand why we don't go out into crowds or new places. It can be stressful and emotional going to grocery stores. Sometimes it seems I am almost housebound because of built up anxiety, as I fear leaving my husband alone. I find myself walking on eggshells, because I never know when this person (my husband) might experience a flashback from something as simple as hearing a certain song on the radio. Nighttime seems to be the worse and I can feel my heart start to race wondering what the night will bring.

I find that I volunteer more, as if I were superwoman, trying to over compensate for what I am feeling. I can't concentrate and I feel I am letting myself down. I get angry because we should be enjoying our life; instead, we live with medical issues, despair, and fear. I allow my own health to suffer and yet I worry about him being okay without me.

There is one thing that I have to mention, my husband has and is the very best of fathers. His children have always come before everything else. He hid his suffering from them, and until the last few years, they knew nothing about their father's illness. They only knew that daddy would have bad dreams and didn't like fireworks, or helicopters, or sirens. But, as far as a father being the best, my children were not shortchanged in that respect. I needed to state this fact because I feel that the positive sides must be told also. My husband never used drugs or alcohol and he never treated me badly. Yes, I walk on eggshells, but that is because I fear for him when he is having issues.

I love my husband today more than I did yesterday, and tomorrow I will love him more than I do today. We are lucky because we are best friends. Best friends that are managing to deal with his PTSD. Not an easy task, but we do the best we can with a little help from our support group friends.

The Hurting Mom

By: Nancy

How can mom stand so relaxed and at bay
Knowing he served proudly, returning injured this way
Her son transforms preparing for missions and on guard
As she watches him suffer crying, "Why is it so hard"?

At times, she could scream, "take away all the dreams,
All the memories, the fears he goes through every day!"
But, on deaf ears is where her screams fall it seems.
As her mind and her heart want to take it away.

She sees fear in his eyes; his hopes seem to be gone
Take away his hurt and to mom put it all on
Knowing the pain that's inside, she wants to stop all the harm!
With pain in her heart, she needs to scream in alarm!

As time goes by, it seems to stay all the same
Let him learn the control so his life he'll reclaim
One day there are no problems, but how about the next?
The flashbacks, the dreams will leave him perplexed

So mom's heart races on, the sleep she does lose
His combat time left him in confusion and bruised
Worried and wanting this darkness to leave
This mom will always worry and wear her heart on her sleeve.

So as you travel this road full of sorrow and pain
Keep your mind focused, relax, and try not to complain
This pain may continue through months or just days
Still, your loved one will treasure you today and always.

From the Heart

By: Merinda

Six years ago we watched as a boy of 17 left for basic training, even though that he knew that the world was a different place after 9-11 he still wanted to serve his country, follow in family tradition and make a difference and he did.

When Dan left we also knew that he could face some difficult times, but we knew that it was his time and we had to let go. This was difficult because I was watching my first born head off into this world that I knew was hard and dark at times, but as I watched I witnessed the miracle life hands to us and that is watching a boy become a man, accepting the responsibility of service to his country and the people who live here.

While Dan was stationed in Germany they got orders for Iraq. I remember that call like it was yesterday because there is no fear greater than hearing that your child is going off to war. I also remember Dan telling me "It's ok momma, I am going to go and do my job, but I will be back" the words of a man, a soldier, but in my mind all I could hear was my child, my son who was going to a place that most of us will never comprehend.

The call I got the night he was leaving still rings in my ears, though there were words exchanged between us it was the silence that was the hardest, because in that silence I know we both knew that fear was there, a fear that I knew nothing about, something so deep that you could not put words to it but it was something so real. As we talked and cried it was time to say good-bye and as we hung up we told each other we loved them and the words hung in my ears like a song that sticks in your head and then there was silence and our world changed in that brief moment.

They say war changes you, well it changes everything. I have never experienced combat but I did go off to war. When Dan left that night my heart and soul went with him. As minutes turned into hours and everything I knew was mixed in with every emotion I could feel I sat down and had a talk with God, some may call it bargaining and some may call it prayer but all I knew is if there was a God out there he was going to listen because this mom had a lot to say and him and I were going to come to an agreement and I was going to see my son again... and you know the Man up there came through.

Not long after Dan returned from Iraq and came back to the states the nightmare came again, he got orders for Iraq, they were going to take him back over there and we were going to have to relive all of this again, but something was different.... we both had grown from that first tour and we knew what we were facing or so we thought.

Day after day and week after week things we spinning, I had become a walking shell of a person, life was something that just was. All I could think about was my son and if he was ok. Every time I turned on the TV I was hearing things no one should hear, especially a mom. I would hear about the same area Dan was in and how bad it was. Days would go by and no word then I would hear something, a brief email saying he was out on a mission and as soon as he could he would get word to me.... weeks turned into months and it was finally over, he was safe and back on US soil, mission complete.

Dan has served his country, he is now a veteran and I know I can not say how proud I am of him and how much he means to so many. There are not enough words to say what an honor it is to be not only his mother, but to just know him as a person, a soldier and a Hero.

The definition of Hero is: a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities: one that shows great courage. I think this says it all.

Dan, you are my life and my soul, my son and my friend. I can never repay you for the things you have sacrificed. I will be forever grateful to you because of you and others like you have protected me and give me the freedom to be able to stand here and tell you I Love You and Welcome home.

forever loved

