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Some service members fight another battle at home

Sara Samora is a staff writer at the Herald-Zeitung. She served in the Marine Corps from 2009 to 2013, stationed in California and Japan.

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When I started at the *Herald-Zeitung*, I thought about having a Memorial Day section where we could have stories of people speaking about their loved ones, friends or family who served in the U.S. Armed Forces and made the ultimate sacrifice.

I wanted to know the impact they made on them, I wanted to celebrate them, and let readers understand that Memorial Day is not where you tell a veteran, "Thank you for your service," but rather, know the names, faces and stories of those who are no longer with us.

Thus, I made a Google form asking people to give me details on their loved ones, and I posted it on my social media, and Facebook groups within the area.

Only one person replied to my post, but she lived in San Antonio. Before she filled out the form, she asked if her loved one had to have died on the battlefield, because he died by suicide due to post-traumatic stress

disorder.

I said yes because I knew many who returned home fight a different battle after being in a combat zone.

Also, it hadn't hit me that sacrificing for their country included the mental, mind, and spirit — the invisible wounds.

Then life happened, and I was unable to go out and find more people. I reached out to the woman who filled out my form, named Liz. We set up a phone interview, and she spoke to me about her husband, Jeremy.

The toll of PTSD

Liz and Jeremy served four years in the Marine Corps and met on deployment. He was infantry and she was administration. He was from Michigan and she was from Texas.

They dated, had a daughter, and separated from the Marine Corps in 2009.

They got married in 2010, and their wedding day is one of her favorite memories.

"We didn't have a dance planned or anything," Liz said. One of her friends suggested that Jeremy do a little strip tease dance.

"I think that would be funny," she said.

“No, I don’t want to look like a fool,” Jeremy said.

He changed his mind.

“If it will make you happy, I’ll do it,” he said.

They lived in El Paso briefly, then moved to Michigan, where they lived for five years.

Jeremy deployed twice while he was in. The first deployment was when he lost three close friends. He had survivor’s guilt. One of his friends had a baby on the way.

However, his PTSD symptoms didn’t begin to show up until two years after their separation.

Liz said he became more aggressive and angrier, and she thought it was her fault.

“He couldn’t sleep,” she said. “He started having flashbacks.”

Jeremy sought help and utilized the skills he learned in counseling at home.

Things were okay for a little while, but then Jeremy would say, “I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to live.”

“I did have to talk him down a few times,” Liz said.

Jeremy made two attempts at suicide; the first time he ended up not pulling the trigger on the revolver.

The second time was different.

“We were arguing on Thanksgiving morning,” Liz said. “And things got bad.”

Jeremy’s last words to Liz were, “I love you, and I love the kids.”

He then got the revolver and shot himself in the head, in front of her in their bedroom.

A changed holiday

Growing up, Memorial Day was just another holiday to me. I was indifferent to it, and it only bothered me when say, I needed to go to the bank, but it was closed.

When I joined the service, my drill instructors in Parris Island had us recruits answer in unison the names of Marines who made an impact on their service.

From Opha Mae Johnson to Chesty Puller to Corporal Jason Dunham, they yelled at us the questions, and we replied, shouting in unison.

On top of that, we had classes about the Marines who came before us and who are no longer here.

We learned about the gear deployed Marines — specifically the infantry — carry and the dangers of patrolling. The reminded us of their sacrifices and their scars — really tattooed this knowledge into our brains forever.

That was where I got a better understanding of what Memorial Day is. It now irks me when people say, “Happy Memorial Day” or how businesses use the day for sales. In my head, they don’t get it. For them, I think it’s just another day off.

Nevertheless, I understand now that some people — that includes some veterans — say “Happy Memorial Day” because they chose to think of happy thoughts and memories of the fallen.

Other than a student veteran who passed during my time at the University of Houston, I never had anybody close to me pass. I have friends who have been diagnosed with PTSD, and I had to drive them to the VA when things started getting bad.

But not a day goes by that I do not see a veteran post about another death on my social media feed. The ages and ranks vary. Some made a career out of serving, and others only served an average of four years.

The PTSD question

When I was an administrator in the Marine Corps, I dealt with separation packages. The majority of those packages listed PTSD as one of their diagnoses, and one of their reasons on why they should be separated.

In many of those cases, they will not have “honorable discharge” on their separation documents. Instead, their discharges could be “general,” “other than honorable,” or “bad conduct.”

This could affect their VA benefits and employment. Some veterans are appealing this decision due to their PTSD or traumatic brain injury.

Then there are the cases where one commits a felony like murder or a war crime, and we question whether or not PTSD was what caused them to do it.

California Representative and Marine veteran Duncan Hunter said on Zero Blog Thirty’s podcast that he thinks it is necessary for service members who returned from combat zones to have a one-month amnesty window,

Task and Purpose reported Hunter admitted to taking a photo with a dead enemy combatant while serving as a Marine Corps officer.

The New York Times had an article on a retired Marine veteran who attacked people in an Iraqi restaurant in Portland, Ore., begging the question whether it was hate or PTSD.

Then there are various treatments like medication and therapy. Some of the other treatments are controversial. Yes, there is medical marijuana, but there is also eye movement desensitization and reprocessing and most recently, there’s ecstasy.

For Memorial Day, Liz flew to California to meet up with her husband's Marine buddies. Some of them are still in, and others are free with their DD-214s, or their golden ticket of separation. They drank Jack Daniels, drank to Jeremy, and talked about the good times they had with him.

The Greek philosopher Plato once said, "Only the dead see the end of war."

Here's to Jeremy, and others like him. May we find the answers, and remember the sacrifices they made.



Veterans unite to help in battle against PTSD

