

A Talk with Jeremiah Workman

Author of **SHADOW OF THE SWORD**

Your memoir describes not only the intense battle your platoon fought against a team of insurgents in Fallujah, but also your struggle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in its aftermath. Why did you decide to tell your story now?

I decided to go public with my battle with PTSD to raise awareness of the issues to the general public. PTSD has become a major factor in the lives of almost half the veterans of the Global War on Terror who have left the military, and the struggle they face with this condition is as taxing as what they experienced in combat. I wrote **SHADOW OF THE SWORD** to help break down the wall of silence on this very personal matter in hopes that we can overcome the stigma of PTSD that keeps so many others from seeking help.

You were awarded the Navy Cross for gallantry under fire in Iraq; were subsequently praised by the media and selected as a CNN Hero. Can you briefly describe what you did in Fallujah on December 23, 2004? What was your reaction when you won the award?

I was involved in a four-hour firefight inside a house that was held by at least two dozen insurgents. We fought room to room, and floor to floor with them. We lost three exceptional Marines that day. We were later told that we had encountered a meeting of insurgent leaders who were well-protected by their personal security details. They choose the best and most dependable fighters for that job, and it showed.

As for the Navy Cross, it came as a total surprise when I was told I had received it. It took me right back to those desperate moments inside the house, trying to fight our way upstairs to rescue our fallen brothers. I wear it for them, so that I can use the bully pulpit the award has given me to tell their story. The worst thing that could happen to me is see Raleigh, James and Eric be forgotten. The award is my bulwark against that ever happening.

Describe for a lay person what it feels like to have PTSD. When did you first realize that something was wrong? How widespread do you think PTSD is for combat veterans?

Having PTSD feels like you wake up every day being controlled by something outside of you. There's an unfocused, unattached sense of despair that flails around inside you, which spawns a lot of rage and anger. Little things can trigger memory flashes—a song, a sound, a smell—and those flashes send you right back into the worst moment of your life. The most important thing to remember is that PTSD doesn't just affect the veteran. It affects everyone around him as well, and thus it has a terrible effect on families.

When I came home, I was acting erratically, and I knew something was wrong but I didn't know what it was. I was in denial. It took months for me to come to grips with the reality of PTSD.

How widespread? Statistics vary based on the service, but it is a serious issue that affects hundreds of thousands. You have the men and women who have it, and then there are those who have it and won't admit to it, so my guess is the problem is actually very widespread. Most recently, in January, 2009, the Veteran's Administration reported that 45% of veterans of the Global War on Terror who have gone to the V/A have been diagnosed with PTSD.

The high divorce rate for military families has been making headlines lately, and PTSD has been listed as a factor in many of them. How did PTSD affect your marriage?

It took our marriage to the brink several times. We fought through every issue, and have made it work because we are committed to each other and love each other. Our lives have been intertwined since we were kids. Without that intensity and depth of connection, I doubt we would have stayed together. It has not been easy, and every day is a challenge.

As the recent rise in Marine suicides attests, military men and women don't always survive their struggles with PTSD. In fact, you describe your own 2006 suicide attempt in a new Marine training video aimed at enhancing supervisors' understanding of the emotional issues their troops may face. What was the turning point for you? How did you survive?

The turning point for me came when my wife told me she was pregnant. I couldn't be selfish anymore—I had to live for my child, my son. When he was born, I got to thinking about Raleigh, Eric and James—the three Marines we lost. I realized that they'd be embarrassed at the way I was conducting myself. I had to be strong for my family.

That was the first step: living for Jess and Devon, my son. The second step came when I realized I had to live for myself as well, to find goals that could motivate me and keep me moving forward.

Your efforts to raise the public's awareness of PTSD and to improve the lives of combat veterans nationwide have gone beyond the Marine training video. They include the Heroes Tour with Marcus Luttrell, a documentary called "Perfect Valor," etc. Can you discuss these and other initiatives?

The Commandant of the Marine Corps decided we needed a new training program to help stop these suicides. The video was part of that new program. It was designed to reach NCOs and enlisted men by having their peers, not someone of a higher rank, tell their stories. It is a peer-to-peer sort of program, and hopefully there will be Marines out there who can relate to my experience.

The Heroes Tour took us all across the country, where we met with many veterans suffering from PTSD. Some were from the Vietnam era, some from Iraq and Afghanistan. It showed me that the condition is widespread.

Perfect Valor tackles the issue head-on. Much of the documentary focuses on PTSD. It gave us another opportunity to open people's eyes on the subject and show them that we need to change the national discourse on PTSD.

Tell us a bit about your recent collaboration with country star Derek Sholl for the music video of his song "When They Come Back" (audio file available upon request).

I met Derek on a golf course in Texas. We hit it off immediately. I'd heard the song before we were introduced, and I remember thinking that he nailed it perfectly. Here was music that captured what it is like to come home from war with both physical and mental wounds.

He asked me to star in his video, and how could I say no to that? Hopefully, it will be another way to raise awareness and show America that the war does not end at the Kuwaiti border. It just changes form when we come back.

You recently became a father yourself. What advice would you give to high school graduates who may be considering military service today?

First, look at all of your options. Don't set your sights on one branch without looking at the others, because once you sign the contract, there's no backing out.

Second, be sure you're signing up for the right reasons. If you're doing it just for the college money, that's not the right reason in time of war. You've got to be honest with yourself. If you want to sign up because you are a patriot and believe in the missions the military has been given in Iraq and Afghanistan, then you're making the right decision. You've got to be self-motivated and willing to be tested to your limits.

It is a life-changing moment, signing that contract. Don't enter into it lightly.

What message would you like readers and your fellow veterans to take away from SHADOW OF THE SWORD?

PTSD can affect anyone. It doesn't matter how big, tough and strong you are. If you keep it to yourself, it will continue to hurt yourself and everyone else around you. You've got to reach out and get the help you need. Tackle it head-on.

Most of all, the country needs to understand that we are not victims, we are war-fighters. We are warriors. PTSD has been politicized and has been used as a political weapon against the mission. That just diminishes our experiences and our continuing battle with PTSD.