

Excerpt from *Soldier's Heart*

by Gary Paulsen

Make it stop now, Charley thought, or thought he was thinking until he realized he was screaming it: "Make it all stop now!"

Death was everywhere, nowhere. Bullets flew past him with evil little snaps and snickers as they cut the air. Next to him Massey's head suddenly left his body and disappeared, taken by a cannon round that then went through an officer's horse, end to end, before plowing into the ground.

This can't be, he thought. I can't be here. A terrible mistake. I'm not supposed to be here.

He had forgotten to fire. The officers had marched them out into a field in perfect order and told them where to aim and fire and he had raised his rifle and then the whole world had come at him. The Rebel soldiers were up a shallow grade a hundred yards away, behind some fallen trees, and they had opened on Charley and the others before anyone else could fire.

It was like a blade cutting grain. He heard the bullets hitting the men—little thunk-slaps—and saw the men falling. Some of them screamed as they fell. Most were silent. Many were dead before they hit the ground. Many were torn apart, hit ten or twelve or more times before they had time to drop.

The men left standing with Charley fired, then the survivors of that round reloaded and fired again, and Charlie aimed in the general direction of the Rebels and pulled his trigger, firing blind.

The black powder smoke clouded from the rifles and the rebel guns on the hill and it was impossible to see or understand anything.

I don't know anything, Charley thought—the words jerked through his mind before he thought them.

The New York Times

The Forever War of the Mind

November 7, 2009

By Max Cleland

War is haunting. Death. Pain. Blood. Dismemberment. A buddy dying in your arms. Imagine trying to get over the memory of a bomb splitting a Humvee apart beneath your feet and taking your leg with it. The first time I saw the stilled bodies of American soldiers dead on the battlefield is as stark and brutal a memory as the one of the grenade that ripped off my right arm and both legs.

No, the soldier never forgets. But neither should the rest of us.

When I was wounded, post-traumatic stress disorder did not officially exist. It was recognized as a legitimate illness only in 1978, during my tenure as head of the Veterans Administration under President Jimmy Carter. Today, it is not only recognized, but the Army and the V.A. know how to treat it. I can offer no better testament than my own recovery.

There are estimates that 35 percent of the soldiers who fought in Iraq will suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. I'm sure the numbers for Afghanistan are similar. Researchers have found that nearly half of those returning with

the disorder have suicidal thoughts. Suicide among active-duty soldiers is on pace to hit a record total this year. More than 1.7 million soldiers have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Imagine that some 600,000 of them will have crippling memories, trapped in a vivid and horrible past from which they can't seem to escape.

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We have a family Army today, unlike the Army seen in any generation before. We have fought these wars with the Reserves and the National Guard. Fathers, mothers, soccer coaches and teachers are the soldiers coming home. Whether they like it or not, they will bring their war experiences home to their families and communities.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is a condition that can develop after you have gone through a life-threatening event. If you have PTSD, you may have trouble keeping yourself from thinking over and over about what happened to you. You may try to avoid people and places that remind you of the trauma. You may feel numb. You may startle easily and you may feel on guard most of the time. Other symptoms may include:

Depression: Depression involves feeling down or sad more days than not. If you are depressed, you may lose interest in activities that used to be enjoyable or fun. You may feel low in energy and be overly tired. You may feel hopeless or in despair, and you may think that things will never get better. Depression is more likely when you have had losses such as the death of close friends. If you are depressed, at times you might think about hurting or killing yourself. For this reason, getting help for depression is very important.

Self-blame, guilt, and shame: Sometimes in trying to make sense of a traumatic event, you may blame yourself in some way. You may think you are responsible for bad things that happened, or for surviving when others didn't. You may feel guilty for what you did or did not do. Most of the time, that guilt, shame, or self-blame is not justified.

Anger or aggressive behavior: Trauma can be connected with anger in many ways. After a trauma, you might think that what happened to you was unfair or unjust. You might not understand why the event happened and why it happened to you. These thoughts can result in intense anger. Although anger is a natural and healthy emotion, intense feelings of anger and aggressive behavior can cause problems with family, friends, or co-workers. If you become violent when angry, you just make the situation worse.

Alcohol/drug abuse: Drinking or "self-medicating" with drugs is a common, and unhealthy, way of coping with upsetting events. You may drink too much or use drugs to numb yourself and to try to deal with difficult thoughts, feelings, and memories related to the trauma. While using alcohol or drugs may offer a quick solution, it can actually lead to more problems. If someone close begins to lose control of drinking or drug use, you should try to get them to see a health care provider about managing their drinking or drug use.

Daddy's Home

by Heather Hummert, wife of an Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran and Purple Heart recipient

Daddy's home. Daddy's gone. Daddy's home. Daddy's gone. Daddy's home.
Daddy's gone.

This is the life your child has known up until now. There have been piles of upheaval and adjustments they make with a relative ease even you can't fathom. Despite the "here today, gone tomorrow" father of military homes, our children build connections with him and love him and crave for him to be near.

Then he comes home and everything seems beautiful. But Daddy is different. He doesn't want to play trains and tea party anymore. He doesn't take them to the park or tickle them to make them laugh. And while this is breaking your heart, it's bewildering to your children.

And they think:

What did I do? Daddy doesn't love me anymore. I'm not "good enough" for Daddy. I'm scared of Daddy. Things will NEVER be good again. Sound familiar? Like the soundtrack running in your own brain? Guess what, they need reassurance too.

Will Daddy be okay again? They worry about things getting "normal" again just like you. They need reassurance that if Daddy gets the help he needs, he will be okay.

It's all YOUR fault. Daddy's angry. I didn't do anything wrong. It's MOM's fault. It's not your fault. You didn't do it. PTSD did it.

It's all MY fault. Daddy is always angry at me and I don't know what I did wrong, but him being angry MUST be my fault. It's not their fault. It's PTSD.

But how do you describe this to your teenager?

Your children definitely know what is going on and they might be angry at how your spouse treats you. Let them know how you feel gently. Explain that yes, it makes you angry too but you know Daddy can get better when he gets help. Encourage them to participate in activities that are important to them. Do not take these away as a punishment. This is the age when they really need to be learning self-discipline. Many children, when given the choice, will punish themselves harsher than you would have and the punishment will seem fairer to everyone.

Encourage children who want to do something about this to get active in politics. There may be a debate team at school or a local political campaign they want to participate in. Encourage them to be solid thinkers and to explain to the world clearly and concisely what the needs of the veteran community are. They might even do a paper in school on the subject.