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The Road to Recovery

One Soldier's Story about Coping with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

By Sara Graves

ON November 2, 2003, a helicopter was shot down near Fallujah, killing 18 soldiers and wounding 26. They were on their way to Baghdad International Airport to return

home for R&R. Army Infantryman Domicque Tatum, with the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment out of Fort Carson, Colo., was supposed to be on that flight. That day would change him forever.

"In one day, we lost 18 people including my section chief..." My section chief, he basically died in my seat," Tatum said on video on www.InTheirBoots.com. "I gave him the opportunity to come back stateside and I took his trip to Qatar so as to allow him to come back here and see his newborn child or whatever, and that day on the flight line they got shot down..."

"So now from all the loss I'm like, I kind of felt like I should have died there. I kind of kicked over my section chief. I obviously didn't intend that to happen, but nevertheless he died a hero.

There is very little time to mourn, so because of that, we spend the rest of our lives mourning."

When Tatum returned from Iraq, others noticed he didn't seem himself.

"When he came back,...it was not that he was cold, but he was removed from feeling," said his mother Mary Tatum Chappell.

"I didn't function in the same manner. I was different," Tatum said. "My girlfriend told me the same thing. To me, you know I was the same. I am perfectly fine. If anything I'm better than before because I have this experience that makes me, you know, untouchable. I'm a superhero," he said.

Tatum wasn't fine. He was suffering from PTSD and didn't know it. Thankfully, however, he wasn't alone in his struggle.

In fact, a study published by the *New England Journal of Medicine* indicated a very high proportion of Iraq War veterans would likely suffer from PTSD and other related health disorders.

Furthermore, in April Hon. Michael H. Michaud, Chairman, Subcommittee on Health, and a Representative in Congress from the State of Maine made this statement: "Post-traumatic stress disorder is among the most common diagnoses made by the Veterans Health Administration. Of the approximately 300,000 veterans from Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom who have accessed VA health care, nearly 20 percent –60,000 veterans– have received a preliminary diagnosis of PTSD. The VA also continues to treat veterans from Vietnam and other conflicts who have PTSD."

In addition, at that same PTSD hearing, Col. Charles W. Hoge, M.D., said, "We have conducted MHAT (Mental Health Advisory Team) evaluations every year in Iraq since the start of the war, and twice in Afghanistan. The MHATs have shown that longer deployments, multiple deployments, greater time away from base camps, and combat intensity all contribute to higher rates of PTSD, depression, and marital problems. The MHAT-V included for the first time a sizable number of Soldiers on their 3rd rotation to Iraq.

The study showed that with each deployment there is an increased risk; 27 percent of Soldiers on their third deployment reported serious combat stress or depression symptoms, compared with 19 percent on their second, and 12 percent on their first deployment.

The MHAT-V also showed that Soldiers in brigade combat teams deployed to Afghanistan are now experiencing levels of combat exposure and mental health rates equivalent to those experienced by Soldiers deployed to Iraq.

For soldiers like Tatum who suffer from the effects of PTSD, immediate help is essential, but may not always be sought right away.

In fact, RAND Corporation released the results of its study earlier this year that concluded that approximately 300,000 of the 1.6 million U.S. troops who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD or depression, but only around half have sought medical care.

For Tatum, he lived on the streets for three months before he realized he needed help.

"There wasn't a moment where it all caught up and I just, you know, was totally, you know, in tears and things of the such and relation to it. But it's an ongoing

thing...." Tatum said.

Tatum eventually sought the assistance of his local veteran center in Alexandria, Va., where he was diagnosed with PTSD and started on the road to recovery.

Today, not only has Tatum been able to better cope with his PTSD, but he now travels around and informs other service members about what the center offers in terms of assistance.

"We only like to listen to those who are

familiar with what we've been through...so I figured that I would make myself someone they could talk to....This is my calling."

Editor's note: To listen to other stories of American military personnel and their family members impacted by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, visit www.intheirboots.com. The series webcasts live every Wednesday at 7 p.m. EDT/4 p.m. PDT.

