

OPENING UP TO HEALING

Healing the Wounds of War

by Wes Jago



Twenty-seven combat veterans sat in a circle at a small church in Virginia Beach, and I thought I had no business being there. I kept telling people I was going just to learn how to minister to veterans in my future ministry and that “maybe I’ll get something out of it myself.” God

physically protected me from harm in Afghanistan, and I truly believe He protected me from the serious and obvious effects of combat trauma that many combat veterans face. After deployment I kept telling myself that I was unaffected by it all. Even more, I believed that the experiences that my Marines and I faced were insignificant compared to other combat veterans, therefore none of us “rated” to have any sort of problems. That was a lie. It wasn’t until one of my Marines took his own life that I actually began to really think about our experiences differently. Over time, I started to see that what we went through, even by Marine Corps standards, was not insignificant and that nothing is too insignificant to God.

My platoon and I had been in Afghanistan for 3 months by the time we entered the Helmand Province town of Marjah in what would be the largest battle since the start of the Afghan Campaign. Our first few months in-country were “relatively” uneventful, but Marjah was a different story. On February 13, I led my platoon of 36 Marines into the Taliban-held town as

part of a force of over 15,000 coalition troops. Other than some enemy rocket fire and IED (improvised explosive device) finds, the first few days were quiet in my corner of the city. On the third day we were pinned down by enemy rifle and machine gun fire for about an hour, with bullets snapping inches from my head, our first direct engagement with the Taliban.



Day 4 started fairly quietly. My Commanding Officer and Commanding General came for a visit. As I gave them a tour of the area, my Marines on the front line began to take heavy fire. The Special Forces we worked with decided to assault forward to the Taliban-held intersection, with my Marines in support. I could hear the constant crack of machine guns and explosions, but I was stuck with my VIPs down the road. By the time I dropped them off at the landing zone, the fighting had stopped and the intersection was secured. Around dusk we heard a giant explosion from that direction. My staff sergeant radioed me and said, “I don’t know what happened, but it is bad.” I kept the General informed. My staff sergeant eventually told me that there were two “angels” (code for fallen Marines) and five wounded Marines, all of which belonged to the engineer platoon we worked with. The General was furious. As the medical evacuation helicopters took over our position two enemy rocket propelled grenades zipped passed them and exploded in the air and a crewman was shot in the protective vest by a rifle. My boss said “Wes, if you need to go, go.” So I jumped in my truck and quickly joined my Marines at the intersection.



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That night, I stayed with about a dozen Marines and a few Afghan soldiers at the small intersection. It was one of the darkest nights of the year. We were surrounded by Taliban-held territory. On three sides of us were engineer markings warning not to cross due to IEDs. On the side of the road lay two dead Taliban fighters. Next to them lay a pile of blood-stained rubble from the blast that killed and wounded the Marines. Behind my truck was a shop door we suspected was booby-trapped. We could see and hear the sights and sounds of fighting all across the city. And the Afghan soldiers with us said they were scared we would be attacked. Not a good situation to be in.

I took a 2-hour watch on my truck's machine gun. As I sat in the turret, out of nowhere four artillery illumination flares lit up overhead. I didn't request them, but they were surely welcome. Under their eerie glow, in the bone-chilling cold air, I began to process everything. The real possibility of my Marines and me being killed really hit me hard. I felt the enormous stress of the weighty responsibility I had, to make decisions with life-or-death consequences for my guys. Alone in the turret, I began to cry. It was a moment of absolute

spiritual, physical, and emotional exhaustion. I prayed for God's protection; I prayed for God to make it quick and painless if and when I got hit; I prayed for two straight hours.

In the following days, we dealt with dead children, snipers, more rocket and rifle fire, and dozens of IED blasts; including the horrific scene of a blast that killed nine civilians. My most regretted decision came when I decided, based on many factors, not to go to the aid of an Afghan unit struck by an IED, resulting in the death of two soldiers bleeding to death on the medical evacuation helicopter. Though another unit helped, we were the closest unit. A fellow officer told me, "We could have saved their lives had we got to them first." Knowing that my Marines were all well trained in First Aid, I knew that we very well could have. His statement was like a knife stuck into my heart. The guilt plagued me for years.

When we returned home, like most people, I jumped at the sound of fireworks, had nightmares, and was a bit unsettled. However, I soon adjusted and didn't show any of the traditional signs of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), praise the Lord. However, I was blind to the deep wounds I bore from the trauma and stress of deployment. I brushed it off as "no big deal" and something I would just live with. I tried to avoid videos, movies, or news stories about Afghanistan because I knew it would send me on a path of nonstop thinking about it. Once I started down that path, I would be up all night long binge-watching combat videos, looking at photos, and racing through memories. I longed to be back there with my Marines reliving the excitement and brotherhood.

I also suffered from what some call "moral injury." There were several situations that held me in the chains of guilt and regret, such as the instance where I "let" the two Afghan soldiers die. I replayed these events in my head, wishing I had done things differently. Further, I also felt shame that I had no remorse or empathy for all the death I saw. These "moral injuries" affected me much worse than the traumatic combat events I experienced.

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Along with memories, I also had a lot of anxiety problems. And every single night, without fail, I imagined a 107mm rocket coming into my bedroom window.

I decided to go to Father Nigel Mumford's "Welcome Home Initiative" veterans' retreat after nearly breaking down in tears watching a video on his website in early 2015. It had taken years, but I realized I truly was in need of some healing. However, I still felt that my experiences were insignificant and so I didn't really have any business taking a free spot at the retreat. Fr. Nigel, a British Royal Marine, turned Anglican priest, was the leader of the weekend. One of the first things he taught us was that PTSD, moral injury, and combat stress were "normal reactions to abnormal circumstances." He also told us that God was offering His healing; all we had to do was take and accept it. Something I hadn't really been willing to do.

So as I sat quietly in that circle of veterans, I began to see the Holy Spirit move. As people shared their stories, Fr. Nigel and the other ministers identified indicators of deep wounds and helped work them out and ultimately pray for them. I wanted this to happen to me—I wanted my moment of healing. One soldier began to speak of his frustrations and deep hurts from his platoon commander in Iraq. In him I heard the voices of my own Marines, as if it were something they might have felt about me. Recalling the deep love I felt for my guys and remembering the tremendous weight and stress I felt as a leader, I just wanted to yell out, "I'm sure your lieutenant loved you and would have never done anything that would have needlessly put you in harm's way!" Fr. Nigel then had all the officers in the room come and pray for the soldier. He had him look in each one of our eyes. Mine were filled with tears. Fr. Nigel pointed to me and said, "look at him, he is a Marine, and

Marines don't cry!" Moments later, he walked to another young veteran and said quietly "the Spirit told me to come and stand next to you." Not knowing what his problem was, Fr. Nigel asked the officers to pray for him, too. As we did, he broke down in tears and grieved over the deep anger he had towards his officers. This really struck a cord deep within me.

Later in the weekend, we had prayer times with small groups. I was ready to be the supportive strong one for others in the room. I was ready to hear stories that were much more "legitimate" than mine.

I didn't expect that I would feel like I was the most broken in the group. Unlike the others, I couldn't put my finger on one particular event. I just told them everything. When I recalled the night sitting in the turret, the prayer minister asked if I could look around in that memory and see Christ in it. Fr. Nigel had told us that our memories will not go away, but if we can see where Christ was with us in those memories, it could help heal them. His own healing came when he had a vision of Christ physically standing on the street in the midst of the memory of a bloody incident in Northern Ireland. I deeply wanted to see Christ standing next to me in my memory like that, but I couldn't. "I don't see Him," I told the group. While deeply searching my in my mind, I kept thinking about those illumination flares. I realized that they represented Christ with me, a light in the darkness. I couldn't physically see Him, but I knew He was with me. Then they prayed for me. "That was it? That was my healing moment?" I thought to myself. Before we broke for dinner, I asked everyone to stay a bit longer. I knew what I had to do.

In my pocket I had a letter that I had written to my family "just in case." It had been sealed and sitting in my safe for six years. I had never opened it because I was afraid of the wave of emotions and memories it would bring back. I decided to open it and read it to my prayer group. The letter started off in the way I remembered it. Reassuring my family of my faith and that I was now with Christ. Telling my brother and sister how much I loved them. Reaffirming that I believed in what we were doing. Telling them about how much I have grown in the Lord, especially since being there. It was tough to read. Then I got to the last part, the part written to my Marines. I'd forgotten that I wrote it. A river of tears began to stream down my face; I had to fight to get out every word. One of the

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prayer ministers came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders as I read out loud:

“Please tell my Marines that I love every single one of them. Each and every one of them was my brother, and I love them. I want them to know the one thing that will bring them greater joy than being a Marine could ever bring, and this is being a follower of Jesus Christ.”



Opening up that sealed letter was like opening feelings and emotions I had sealed up in my heart 6 years ago. All the memories of the stress and the residual anxiety from responsibility for the lives of my Marines whom I deeply loved—emotions that began to surface when other veterans spoke about their leaders—came out full force when I read those words. My search for Christ in those memories came to an end. All my writings in that letter that spoke of Christ’s work in my life and my desire for others to know Him reminded me that Christ was truly with me in those times. My heart was oriented towards Him; I was able to operate and function in the midst of death and destruction because of the peace I had in my faith in Him, and the love He has for me was manifest in the way I loved my Marines.

Healing is a lifelong journey, but I know God did something special that weekend. I have control over my anxiety, I have been able to surrender any guilt over to Him, the intrusive thoughts of rockets are gone, and I don’t let memories keep me up at night. God was offering His healing, but my pride kept me from admitting I needed it. He cares for the tiniest of sparrows, and He knows every hair on our head (*Matthew 10:29-31*). There is no problem too insignificant for God. He wants us to be healed. In fact, he cares so much for us that He sent his Son to be pierced and afflicted for us. And it is by His wounds that we are healed (*Isaiah 53:3*). †