

## An Afghanistan veteran's jagged path from war to peace



Shannon Stapleton/Reuters

Staff Sgt. Keith Fidler kisses his wife, Cynthia, as their son, Kolin, looks around during a homecoming ceremony in New York, April 8, 2011. For many soldiers, returning to U.S. soil is just the first step in the journey home.

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**I'll return to the Air Force Academy next month for a reunion. I'll laugh with friends, retrace steps on campus, get quiet at the cemetery. I'll experience it from a distance of 25 years since I began there.**

For four years, the academy did its best to prepare us for some future conflict. What it did not and could not do was prepare us for an endless return journey home from 9/11's "forever wars." **My path home will now include a second deployment overseas to assist the Afghan people. I'll be volunteering at a U.S. government agency to process Afghan refugees.**

There is no neat arc from war to peace – for our nation or for me. There's no surefire guide to reintegration. Dr. Elizabeth Samet, an English professor at WestPoint, prepares cadets through works of literature. They illustrate, as she states in her book "No Man's Land," "the final irony of the warrior's repeated betrayal by the homecoming that is supposed to bring him peace but instead launches him into a second no man's land."

Vietnam veterans know this well. I began to learn it myself after returning from Afghanistan, where I'd been a counter-IED (roadside bomb) officer from 2007 to 2008. I lost, saved, and took lives in ways that only ground combat can precipitate. I required intensive treatment when I got back, logging countless hours of group therapy and peer support with other veterans.

# Anguish and opportunity

**Watching America's emergency evacuation from Afghanistan, I recalled a valuable lesson that Vietnam veterans had taught me. A war's outcome can be horrific, they said. It can cause ongoing harm, and the climate of the nation may cause you to feel separated from society. But you can heal. Returning to your humanity can heal the dehumanizing effects of combat.**

In "Taking Chance," a Marine officer accompanies the body of a young soldier killed in Iraq. In one scene, airplane passengers are glued to their windows as the escort officer salutes the casket coming down off the plane. I, too, had escorted the casket of my best friend, Alan "Cap" Hook, from Dover Air Force Base to his family in California in 1998. When I saluted Alan's casket, I hadn't felt so removed from civilian society since my commissioning two years prior. Earlier on that trip, Alan's brother and I had to ask an airline manager to remove the luggage placed atop Alan's coffin as it was pulled out to the plane.

Back then, America was somewhere between confronting Vietnam veterans at the airport and the heroes' welcome for "war on terror" warriors. Between 2008 and 2012, I shrank my social circle, excluding even fellow veterans. I wanted little to do with others. If they knew the origin of my moral injuries from combat, I felt they'd want little to do with me.

Combat had imprinted me with despicable and beautiful truths about humanity. Withholding that knowledge from others was, as I saw it, my part of an implied social contract. But that withholding, and my new “veteran” label, grew toxic.

Unsure what was expected of me and missing the person I’d been in combat, I kept my distance. I became an island. I was lonely, vulnerable, and physically sick more often than I’d ever been.

Society seemed to have two labels for veterans: “heroes” or “broken.” We were on a pedestal or at arm’s length. Either way, we were distant. I was OK being separate. Separation helped me recover my physical health and mental wholeness.

The war on terror cast a spotlight on what’s termed post-traumatic stress disorder, in which someone has difficulty recovering after experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event. Those wars on terror have also spurred conversations about moral injury, moral trauma. Even less well known is post-traumatic growth, in which someone who grapples with a horrifying event progresses past it, finds peace, and makes meaning of their experience.

# Things shared only in prayer

Thanks to Josh Mantz, my good friend and fellow vet, I understand that I owe much of my post-traumatic growth to periods of isolation as well as connection. Josh reminds me that nondisclosure can be healthy, even necessary, and that some things can only be shared in prayer, meditation, and contemplation. This is where one can seek self-discovery, atonement, and the inspiration to move forward. What's missing, still, are some of the ancient ceremonies that provided a measure of solace and connectedness for those emerging from the cauldron of war.

In the absence of such ceremonies, however, is the summons to respond to the fallout from Afghanistan. Vietnam veterans reunited with the Vietnamese long after that war ended, modeling a way to heal. Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans began reparations with those countries by evacuating and receiving their refugees in the United States.

I will still be coming home at my 25th academy reunion. I am grateful for, and looking forward to, the opportunity to extend humanity to Afghans 20 years after 9/11.

I invite you to join me.

## WHY WE WROTE THIS

As this veteran learned – and is proving – the journey home from war isn't a straight line. But you can reach the destination: healing.

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