

DOING THE WORK
DTW
ENGAGED
CHALLENGED · PURPOSEFUL

A Father Son Memoir

BRAIN PAIN

OUR INVISIBLE WOUNDS



Fighting Traumatic Brain Injury, Post Traumatic Stress and Suicide
Anthony E. Jones, Major, Ret. USAF

“22 A DAY”
Supporting Suicide Awareness.

BRAIN PAIN

Our “Invisible Wounds.”

Traumatic Brain Injuries and Post Traumatic
Stress

Father
Khe Sanh

Son
Baghdad

Anthony E. Jones, Major, USAF Ret.



“Brain Pain is an absolutely fantastic book and needs to be read by
all, especially medical and mental health personnel.”

*Rear Admiral Joan M. Engel, 18th Director of the United States
Navy Nurse Corps*

*** FREE CHAPTER 14 ***
**The complete book is available on
Amazon Books and Kindle.**

Praise for *Brain Pain*

“Brain Pain is the personal, first-hand account of U.S. Airman, Tony Jones, who was ‘blasted’ multiple times in Iraq by exploding rockets. He survived the near fatal hits, but the injuries he suffered to his brain forever altered his career, future, and mind. Depression, suicidal thoughts, addictive pills and excruciating pain became his new enemies in a battle that few can see, except those who have suffered similar injuries and their loved ones. In his book, Brain Pain, Jones reveals what it took to live through those attacks and rebuild a meaningful life. Training taught him how to be a warrior on the battlefield, but fighting for his mind required new weapons of war. Drawing on his faith, family, and the example set by his father, a Vietnam vet with similar war wounds, Jones shares his experiences in hopes other brain injury survivors will also find healing and the will to live a purposeful life.”

Mollye Barrows - Journalist

“You may know that traumatic brain injury (TBI) has been a huge issue affecting not only pro NFL players but also the more than 2.4 million veterans who’ve served in the “Global War on Terror.” Tony Jones, whom I feel lucky to call a friend and mentor, has written an outstanding biography detailing just how much sacrifice is entailed in “taking one for the team” by sustaining such an injury...and also the kind of drive, passion, and determination it takes to turn such a challenge into a strength. Tony also honors his parents by telling the parallel story of his father in Vietnam, and of how his parents met, which I found touching. Highly recommended whether you want to understand TBI or you’re just interested in a unique veteran’s life.”

Bryce Rogow – U.S. Marine Combat Medic.

DEDICATION

To my father, who led by example, and showed me courage.

To my mother, who is an unsung hero and wife of a warrior.

*To all my family, friends and advocates who
have helped me navigate the new me.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

Walter "WK" Jones spent 22 years in the US Marine Corps before retiring. He joined the Marine Corps in 1953, served in Korea and 2 tours in Vietnam. He started off enlisted, being commissioned as an officer prior to deploying to Vietnam and retiring as a Captain. He then went on to join the US Capitol Police for 2 years before joining the US Border Patrol. Capt. Jones spent another 20 years as a Federal Agent, ultimately becoming a Pilot, flying over 10,000 hours in both fixed wing and helicopters. Service; Korea & Vietnam. Awards; Navy Achievement medal with "V" Device, Purple Heart, Combat Action Ribbon and Presidential Unit Citation.

Anthony "Tony" Jones, graduated from George Mason University, then joined the US Air Force in 1980, was commissioned as an officer, and then graduated from flight school earning his Navigator wings. He then served with the 8th Special Operations Squadron as an Electronic Warfare Officer, flying MC-130's. He served in Desert Storm / Desert Shield and Operation Iraqi Freedom. During Iraqi Freedom, he was the Director of the Personnel Recovery Cell in Baghdad.

He now owns Core Group Security which conducts investigations, operations and training in Executive Protection and Technical Surveillance Countermeasures. Service: Desert Storm & Iraqi Freedom. Awards: 2 Purple Hearts, Army Combat Action Badge, Defense Meritorious Service, Meritorious Service and the Joint Service Commendation medals. He lives in Las Vegas, NV.

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CHAPTER 1

DEFECTIVE

In high school I did a report on Ernest Hemingway's short story, "Soldiers Home." It was also an attempt to understand my father's post-Vietnam experience. (He'd been hit several times during the siege of Khe Sanh.) The story follows a young World War I soldier home after the war. He returns to a home and community where he no longer fits in or is understood. Society keeps on churning, yet he can't see his place in it. He's lost his ability to love and feel compassion, and his irritability dispatches those close to him. He's survived; being the best soldier he could, yet he longs for the sense of clarity he once had.

Finally, I get it. When the uniform comes off, you hang up a piece of your soul, right next to that box everything else goes in. Dad and I had survived similar combat experiences. We had both survived multiple explosions. Mine in Baghdad, his in Vietnam.

I survived, but I didn't return with my old brain. I left it "over there." When your mind starts to go, your abilities diminish. The time it takes you to process and calculate thought swells. Time slows as your memory catches up. Your brain betrays you with convoluted and incorrect memories, if any at all. There's a certain discomfort those around you feel. They can't see it, but they know it. Just by interacting with you, they realize you're slower. Even more so, because they can't see, they fear it. It's the "Invisible Wound."

Acquaintances start to disappear, friends tread lightly and colleagues try to understand what you've become.

Socially, I'm now a different person. While everyone around me is sharp and quick-witted, I stumble trying to make a point. I call this, "Access Dyslexia." Meaning, it's harder for me to access the information in my brain. When I'm trying to make a point or argue a position, I can't hold my own in any conversation, discussion or argument, especially a debate. I think that I know in my head what I want to say, but I'm unable to access it quickly and retort, or I just lose the thoughts altogether. The harder I think, the more it hurts. Then the smoldering firestorm of pain in my brain intensifies, overwhelming me into mental retreat. Agh! Agh!

Then, *frustration* sets in. The more frustrated I get, the worse the direction my mind takes. *Chaos* just noticed its opportunity; sliding into my brain through the cracks. My mind explodes with hypervigilant thoughts, like a stuck record, sparking out of control. Frustration is at the heart of *Chaos*. It starts with a simple brain fart, then intensifies when my memories hide out. Frustration grows to anger; my heart rate increases, my blood pressure rises then a firestorm of electrical shocks manifests into an explosion of Brain Pain. Peripherals disappear and the focus tightens as the anger bursts forth exponentially. With me, there are the constant mini-explosions of pain, churning and spiking, enabling my *Chaos*, confusion and disarray. *Suicide?* Yep, he's visited me too.

I call my nemesis, *Chaos*. Dad calls himself *Defective*. To look at us, and the hundreds of thousands like us, you wouldn't know. The shrapnel scars have long healed, but it's an on-going battle.

For a long time I chose not to engage. I second-guessed myself constantly, trying to figure out if my memories and decisions were correct, because so often they're not. Until the gift of clear thought, learning, processing and predicting, is taken away, you don't appreciate it. You take it for granted. I did. My best friend Richie told me that for the first few years afterward, "I seemed to think I had TBI written on my forehead." My self-doubt was leading me down a path to complete social isolation. After a lifetime of living with the results of my fathers' Vietnam experiences, I was now living with the results of Baghdad. My father lives with his Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress (PTS,) as do I.

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Chaos is the sum of TBI and PTS, i.e. headaches, anxiety, lethargy, irritability, anger, memory loss, frustration, depression, alcohol and drug abuse and bad choices. *This leads to weakening links in what I call our mental health “Chain,” or our newly damaged mind. Chaos* eats away at these links. A healthy “Mental Health Chain” is the result of having proper morals, values and ethics, reinforced by well thought out choices.

The links in our Chain are constantly assaulted by headaches, depression and anxiety, which leads to anger, irritability, memory loss and frustration, which leads to loss of trust and feelings of betrayal, which leads to poor decisions, which lead to a dissolution of family and friends, which leads to bad financial decisions, which leads to personal destitution, which leads to overwhelming disappointment, which then leads to their perceived last choice, suicide. *Chaos attacks this Chain until a damaged link snaps; 22 veterans a day.* This process has been repeated over and over with way too many NFL concussion veterans as well.

Most can relate and understand the ramifications of the recent NFL concussion crisis, because the of the lawsuit played out in the media, and because of the movie “Concussion.” The ***next concussion crisis*** will come from the aging Vietnam veterans who were not diagnosed and forgotten, and the Iraq / Afghanistan combat blast-induced veterans. Remember, many of the injured are A-Type personalities, having experienced prior concussions growing up in high school, college and military training. Multiple concussions can lead to a higher probability of Alzheimer’s, Dementia and ***Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE)***.

CTE has been found in nearly every former NFL player’s brain that has been examined posthumously by autopsy. ***Recently published reports have shown that CTE was also found in 4 of 4 deceased US military combat veterans exposed to a blast or multiple blasts in combat.*** *This is literally just the tip of the iceberg.* The first concussion crisis was sports related; the next will be our warfighters. It’s catching up with us.

My father was blown up 4 times in Vietnam. He and hundreds of thousands of blast exposed veterans were forgotten, left out in the cold. *I parallel this with what was done in the past with many NFL veterans.* They were denied and left on their own. We never tracked

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blast victims from Vietnam, but they did track NFL players and their concussions. *Through my research, what I’ve noticed,* with concussion experienced athletes, is the slow deterioration throughout their careers and afterwards, mostly leading to deteriorating marriages and businesses, sometimes ending in suicide. More than likely, the same occurred with Vietnam blast exposed veterans.

What’s occurring in the NFL and other sports, regarding final recognition of concussion injuries, is just now being looked at with those grouped from the Vietnam War, 40 years ago.

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars have ***birthed a new group*** of blast related TBI recipients, who over the next 40 years will have to be dealt with. As many as 320,000 war veterans are estimated to have some form of TBI, and upwards of 60% of those were combat and blast related. This is the next “Combat Concussion Crisis.”

I’ve learned it’s not getting better, but with treatment, it’s not yet getting worse. I fight my fight, “**Doing The Work (DTW)**,” wondering if and when I’ll deteriorate? Some estimates are that TBI victims are 50% more vulnerable to the onset of neurodegenerative diseases such as Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, Dementia, Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s.

I’ve also learned I have a voice, something I can share with others about moving through this. I had no desire to write this. No desire at all. Although I’ve always enjoyed writing, all my passions have dissolved. In-depth thinking manifests pain, which can bring me to my knees. *Putting this on paper was physically painful, redundantly painful.* But the pain is going to be there anyway. Might as well get the most out of it. There are lessons here. *My story relates how I “Do The Work” to strengthen our mental health “Chain.”*

Two people stood out as I wrote this. The first, legendary Chicago Bears football player Dave Duerson, 50, who called his headaches “Starburst Headaches.” The other, Lt. Col. Raymond Rivas, 51, who was my age when first blown up in an explosion. His headaches took over his life. My neurologists called mine Migraines, Post Concussion Syndrome, then Cluster Headaches, but since first being hit, I’ve called it “Brain Pain.” I’ve never called them “Headaches,” because they weren’t, they were pain. “Headache” just seemed to minimize them.

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Everyday, as thoughts get jammed in my head, hundreds of electrical shock-like explosions occur in my brain. It's 24/7. Literally hundreds of thousands since being hit; first thing in the morning until I finally make it to sleep. Nine years out, they are still there. Whether they're smoldering in the background, or sending bolts of lightning through my skull, there's not a day that goes by that I don't endure them. Like an electric fly zapper, snapping and tasing my brain, scattering and dismissing any coherent thoughts I might have at that time.

My memory fails me on a regular basis. I can't remember significant events, days or weeks in my life. I have the photos, but it's like there's a stranger in them; not me. I just can't remember. I'm lost inside my brain, trying to find my way out.

Having just turned 60, I want what I can remember; my memories, thoughts, values; where I've been, what I've done, to be preserved for the future. Five, ten, fifteen years from now, this journal, which turned into a manuscript, is my way of preserving the stories of my life. Maybe someday, in my old age, somebody will read them back to me.

No "woe is me" here. I made the decisions that got me here. My soul told me that this was the table I wanted to play at. They're offering you Baghdad. Hell yeah! That's my table. There's my chair. Let's play! My soul also knew the consequences. I've known them my whole life. I learned them early on. I learned them while my father was at Khe Sanh, Vietnam in 1968. I learned them the day the Green Sedan full of Military Officers in their full dress uniforms pulled into our cul-de-sac. The "Notification Team." When that officer stepped out of that car and stared directly into my eyes, the game was real.

There are lessons here of understanding and coping with this "Invisible Wound." I grew up in the same house with these wounds, and then they moved into mine. Everything here is my story, true and the best recollection of my memories. I wanted to tell this story from my perspective. In other words I had to "do the work." MY defective brain translating MY thoughts into MY words. *I will end up repeating myself, but this is my new brain's voice and I appreciate the readers' understanding of this.* Putting these words down has been a cathartic and healing process, reinforcing and strengthening my

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resolve. It has also been painful, both emotionally and physically.

I'll discuss my blast related deployment events. This isn't a combat story; it's more of a "back here" story. *This is my perspective of how I fight what I call Chaos.* It's the nemesis that may one day kill me. It has tried. It's a fight for my life. As with any fight that's worth fighting, you've got to come up with a plan: a plan of how to train, prepare, adapt and survive. *Chaos* is always there, lurking and waiting for an opening. This is my management plan. No simple "One, two, three and you're good." It's a continuous new lifestyle of "doing the work."

I'd grown up the son of a Marine, a combat veteran of Korea and Vietnam. I had already seen and lived under the umbrella of Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress. My dad's nightmares are still vivid in my mind and seared into my character. The lessons of my childhood motivated me to *"nip this in the bud."* I had no desire to be *Defective* too.

We are just now acknowledging TBI, but much like football concussions, the real manifestations are yet to be realized; ten, twenty, thirty, forty years from now. There are thousands of professional athletes, hundreds of thousands of military warfighters, and millions of civilians, fighting this injury. This is my journey, but it could easily be the journey of so many others, civilians and military, who suffer with TBI and PTS... *Chaos* has found cracks in my armor.



Volunteering at a local school during Nevada reading week. Keeping engaged is so important with a damaged mind. Moving through and moving forward, facing my anxieties.



CHAPTER 14

22 A DAY

Simultaneously, Chaos attacked my dad and me. Dad yelled, I yelled, back and forth until he threw me out of his house. Two bulls pitted face to face. I grew up under his anger and spontaneous outbursts and the father / son relationship I so cherished was now edging on domestic violence. The love of my father had been pushed out the door. I got out of there. “*Screw it, I’ll show him,*” is all I could think.

Driving home, in the rain, the anger skyrocketed, like a volcano boiling to an eruption. I’d already lost my peripherals. My focus tightened. More and more I thought, “I’m done with this shit. *I can’t do this shit! I don’t want to do this shit! Screw this pain!*” The explosions in my brain had me seizing and shaking. Vertigo was rocking me back and forth. The screeching voice of *Chaos* told me it would be over quick; just turn the wheel, a quick tug on the wheel. Turn it left. To the left! Just hit that column over there. It’d be quick. It’d look like an accident. The rain was now pouring as my column approached. I changed lanes on a line to my death. The loud startling claxon alert of a “flash flood” came through the radio. *Pattern interrupt.* I was back.

Move through, move through, move through. Breathe. I’m alive. Straight down the road. Never the smoker, I stopped, bought a pack of smokes and had a cigarette, reminding myself that I was worthy. That my life had purpose, had meaning; that we should live a life worthy of those who didn’t make it. *I can make it!*”

I can’t even remember what that particular fight was about. I had been on the front lines of this man’s anger most of my life. *My mom was on the front lines daily.* I don’t know how she’s done it. I don’t know how they’re not divorced. When I moved back to Las Vegas full time back in 1998, I had to assimilate to being around my parents, mostly my dad’s ticking time bomb personality, again. You are tiptoeing around everything based on how Dad’s doing. *He can go into a full-blown rage in a split second.* When I’m around them, I try to mediate and calm him down. Mostly, when he loses something, or watches politics, his frustration will exponentially burst out and anyone in range will catch his wrath. Usually my mom.

As an example, my brother once got into a politics discussion with Dad over the phone and it got a little heated. Well, when Marcos hangs up, he doesn’t have to deal with the consequences. Dad took it out on Mom, just because she’s in the *proximity.* I call it “*Being in the proximity of.*” If you’re in the proximity of my dad when he’s in a rage, or if you’re in the proximity of me, when I’m in a rage, you’re going to be the recipient of my tirade. My brother Marcos wasn’t in the proximity of my father, but on the phone, so he just got hung up on. My dad ends up taking it out on the nearest recipient. Usually Mom. I had to call Marcos up and remind him, that Mom’s the one taking the brunt of Dad’s anger when he does stuff like that. *We live here. We’re on the front lines.*

It was 1969; Dad had made it back from Vietnam and we were living in Quantico, Virginia. We were out as a family, everyone in a good mood, and a car swerved in front of us. A few minutes later Dad pulled the driver out through his window and tossed him to the ground. Fast forward to 2009; a driver cut me off, flipped me off then again, cut me off. I followed him, boxed him in, jumped out of the car intending for someone to get hurt. When I saw him crawling into his back seat in fear, I snapped back to reality. I turned around and left. *Was I following in someone’s footsteps?*

My first experience with suicide was a young **Marine Officer** and survivor of the Vietnam War. It happened during my senior year, while we were stationed at Quantico Marine Corps Base, VA, headquarters of the United States Marine Corps. He had a wife and children and lived in the Officers’ apartments on top of the hill, close

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to the Officers Club. It was where most of the married Junior Officers lived. *He'd hung himself.*

Although the news spread like wildfire, no one really talked about it. Our parents were warriors, with their wars still going on. We (children) were silently afraid this could happen to our family, and when you're young and don't understand something, silence makes it go away. The peace talks were in play and the war was almost over, but his suicide hung heavy amongst us. We were all the children of war survivors. We couldn't understand their demons.

In the earlier chapter on TBI, I talked about Lt. Col. Ray Rivas, and how his situation mirrored mine. Finally, there was someone taking up our cause and taking it before Congress. Here was another warrior with whom I shared similar experiences. I saved his papers, book-marked articles on him, and planned on contacting him. It was mid August of that year - 2009, and I was working my way through the medical retirement process. Since he had braved those waters, I wanted to contact him for advice. It didn't take me long and what I found kicked me in the gut. ***On July 15th, 2009, Lt. Col. Ray Rivas committed suicide.***

Only a year younger than me, he had been diagnosed with rapidly emerging Dementia after being hit. This American hero, who had served his country and survived combat zones around the world, was found dead in his car in the parking lot of Brooke Army Medical Center, in San Antonio. There was a note written to his family, along with an empty bottle of prescription medication.

According to his wife Colleen, *"He did leave us a note that said that he just couldn't take the headaches and pain any longer. Earlier that afternoon he had driven to BAMC and had gone to the family clinic and gotten a prescription for Ambien from a PA because he couldn't sleep. (He probably averaged about three hours a night at the most.) I believe he was given a prescription for somewhere around 36 pills. He went out to his car and took the whole bottle of pills with a diet coke. The temperature outside that day was over 100 degrees and he fell asleep in his car."*

Just two months earlier he and his wife had testified before Congress, continuing his battle and fighting the fight. Unfortunately, as many Veterans know, the fight is not always won. In death, we remember him for fighting and advocating for wounded warriors and

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our needs. The cumulative impact of all those explosions and blasts had taken their final toll. ***Chaos had killed another host.*** Clarity to *Chaos* to suicide.

Countless people have committed suicide over their headaches, their, "Brain Pain." Lt. Col. Rivas and NFL football player Dave Duerson, who suffered "Starburst headaches," couldn't take them anymore either. As I worked my way through writing this book, Lt. Col. Rivas' wife, Colleen Rivas saw the movie "**Concussion**," and according to her, immediately stated, *"Oh my God, that was Ray!"*

Can I make it? Chaos? Defective? Move through, Move through, Move through. Breathe.

When you don't have the tools to understand and deal with what's going on, it's easy to fall susceptible to the dark side. So many of us don't have the tools, or even the desire to go get the toolbox. *Defective? Can't be fixed?* Suicide has affected most of us. One that affected me personally and deeply involved a good friend of mine. I mentioned that I spend Sundays with my parents. They live on the other side of town and on the drive over there I pass the Las Vegas Mini Grand Prix Go Kart Track. Every time I pass it, I think of Angelo. He passed away in 1997. Angelo's last birthday party was at this track. He was the son of a good friend of mine.

I had known Angelo's father, Tony, many years since we met in flight school. He and his wife were living in Southern California when job opportunities called them to Las Vegas. In 1990, I was deployed to Desert Storm so I let him stay at my condo. We were that close. As with many friends, we started out in a social environment and then become part of each other's support system. I was a groomsman at his wedding. He was always there for me as I was for him. His wife had a great job offer here in Las Vegas and the couple eventually moved into a nice home in Summerlin, a beautiful suburb in the Northwest. When their son, Angelo was born, they were both so excited and happy for their future.

In the spring of 1997, Tony's marriage was in trouble. We had more than a few discussions about what was going on in his life. He had what would most likely today be diagnosed as fibromyalgia and wasn't able to hold down a job. This guy was no slacker. He was a

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former Staff Sgt. in the United States Air Force and a very hard worker. *Another veteran suicide.*

A divorce seemed imminent for them. Yes, he was sad and hurt, but Tony seemed to have a plan, which meant to me, that he still saw a future for himself. Although somewhat disappointed, he never actually acted distraught or depressed. I remember spending an evening out, sharing beers and he discussed the plan. He did need a place to stay, since they were separating and I again gave him the keys to my condo. I told him he could stay there until he got on his feet. *He never made it to my condo.*

What happened next was a terrible tragedy. Tony attacked his wife, shot his son and then himself. At his son's funeral, I was angry, stricken with grief and completely filled with loss and despair. Mostly for his son, Angelo, and his wife, who had lost her son. *Diseased? Defective? Chaos?* Maybe I should have felt sorry for my friend as well. I still can't reconcile this one but I can try to empathize with him. I started to wonder if I could've done something to prevent this. *How did I not see this coming?* He was a close friend. I was in his wedding party. What I did see was how it was over for him, but for everyone else in his world, the nightmare and despair was just beginning. They had to deal with the aftermath.

It's one thing to look at depression on paper, but to know the costs in real-life, jolts you like a taser. I've reviewed it in my mind a thousand times. I just didn't see it coming. Although Tony didn't have a TBI, his *Chain* was weakened due to many issues, including his condition, fibromyalgia. The result was the same. WHY?

The "**Cluster Headache,**" also called "*Suicide Headache,*" is known for the excruciating pain that goes along with it. I can't count the times the pains been so intense that I wanted to put my head through the drywall. Although I've learned to contain it, when the "*Spikes*" occur, *I can't help but TAP hard on my skull,* trying to distribute it's explosions. *Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap. Shocks in my brain, then tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, shakes and tap some more.* The rational part of your brain steps to the side, as your need for relief takes over.

If you understand how a bruise on your leg happens, tiny capillaries under the skin burst and blood is trapped and pools up. This creates an obstacle in the regular flow of blood so therefore; you

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can then see how the same methodology can apply to the fragile and sensitive brain. The brain is an extremely delicate organ compared to leg muscles underneath our skin. *Once concussed, the normal thought signals sent down our damaged neural pathways are forced to detour around, causing pain and a slower and more befuddled thought process.*

Concussions can lead to depression and untreated depression is the number one cause of suicide. ***Remember my thoughts on TBI being a cause for PTS.*** *The JAMA Neurology study?* When you review the numerous case studies of brain injured / concussed athletes I've discussed here, I hope you can see the clear emotional disarray their lives took.

Defective? Can't be fixed? Where's my toolbox? I'm too tired to go get my tools. Hope is leaving the building to go find Elvis.

Multiple concussions are cumulative, leaving the recipient at a greater risk for long-term side effects. Multiple concussions, just like being exposed to multiple explosive blasts, lead to depression and anxiety, which lead to anger and irritability, which leads to feelings of betrayal, which lead to poor decisions, which lead to a dissolution of family and friends, which leads to poor financial decisions, which leads to personal destitution, which then leads to their perceived last choice, which is often suicide.

When Lt. Col. Rivas was transferred from Walter Reed to BAMC (Brooke Army Medical Center), according to his wife, "*He was sent to the Emergency Department, and I got a call to come and get him. When I arrived, he was sitting there in a room with a huge bag of narcotics in his hand. He recognized me, but he kept getting our children mixed up and calling them by the wrong names. I remember shaking my head and looking at the doctor and asking, 'How could they give a man with a brain injury that has no short-term memory, a gallon size Ziploc bag full of narcotics and expect him to self-medicate?'* There was every type of painkiller you could imagine in that bag. I was amazed that he hadn't overdosed before I got him home. The doctor just said 'Ma'am, I don't have an answer to that question. He came in with the medication.' I couldn't believe that

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they were going to release him to me, but they did, so I took him home with his bag of narcotics.

His head was killing him, but even with all of the drugs in his possession, there was nothing that would alleviate the pain. He kept going back to the emergency room and finally they did check him in to the guesthouse across the street from the hospital, and that is where he stayed for well over a year. They continued to just treat the symptoms.”

After several years of going through my own journey, I’ve come to the conclusion that I need to take **personal responsibility** for the medications that I take. Inevitably they are entering my body and the risk and reward is mine. *Oh yeah, I’m not thinking correctly.* This is where a *good advocate* can be so very important to back us up. But, as with Lt. Col. Rivas and others like him, how do you take that responsibility when your brain’s constantly in pain and deceiving you, moment by moment? When you can’t trust your own decisions and the doctors are telling you this handful of pills will work, you more often than not, default to the doctors’ advice.

More Pills? 22 a day?

When it comes to TBI and PTS, we have become a “talk the talk” society, not a “walk the talk” one. In other words, we place too much money into bureaucracy, research and development studies, awareness programs and medications, instead of **taking action** and using off label protocols that have already shown some success, such as **holistic** and **alternative treatments**, but are not yet approved by the FDA, to those in danger. Off label medications are prescribed *every day* for maladies that are not FDA approved. Kind of hypocritical, right? *Those with TBI and PTS are in danger now!* They should be given those options that may not be FDA approved. Let them make the choice for themselves if the risk is worth the reward!

¹**Daniel Summers** was an energetic, intelligent and vivacious young man who played guitar in a band, loved computers, was a car mechanic, who married the woman of his dreams. He was also an Army Intelligence Sergeant who deployed to Iraq twice. He completed 400 combat missions as machine gunner, in the turret of a Humvee. He was also diagnosed with TBI, PTS and fibromyalgia.

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When he committed suicide, his family placed his suicide note on the Internet, where it went viral.

Summers wrote, ¹*“My body has become nothing but a cage, source of pain and constant problems. The illness I have has caused me pain that not even the strongest medicines could dull, and there is no cure.”* (This is just an excerpt and you can read it in its entirety on-line.) **The system failed this young man.** When I say this, I mean the medical support system in place for our warfighters and the Department of Veterans Affairs, which was never brought up to speed in time to help thousands of returning combat veterans. I mean **the leadership.**

Like many young combat veterans, Daniel was trying to do the right thing; he was “Doing The Work.” He was keeping busy, playing in a rock band, working on a documentary related to his time in Iraq and he was trying to seek help from the Department of Veterans Affairs in Phoenix, Arizona. He was also put on hold at the VA, lost in the arteries of paperwork, appointments, and humans who never scheduled his follow-ups.

¹**Jeffrey Lucey** was a young Marine who had participated in the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003. By his own admission, he had done immoral things. In a letter to his girlfriend he wrote, *“I have done so much immoral shit during the last month that life is never going to seem the same, and all I want is to erase the past month, pretend it didn’t happen.”* He returned home, transitioning to civilian life, trying college, then to dull his pain turned to alcohol. Finally, his family had him involuntarily committed to the VA because of his drinking, nightmares, violence and threats of suicide. The VA released him after alcohol detox, deciding he was not a threat to himself. *Two weeks later he hung himself.*

We have failed our warfighters. There are literally thousands of these stories. Our military medical system and our Department of Veterans Affairs were ill prepared for the onset of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Once more, we have not learned the lessons from our past, which have repeated with war every 10 and 20 years. We finish one conflict, and then decide to downsize the military; then another conflict comes up and we are unprepared for the costs.

When we go to war there are *operational orders* that are put into place to ensure the success of the missions. Hundreds of them, pre-

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planned and developed, to logistically support our ships, airplanes and boots on the ground as they deploy to the hostile zone. In the same manner, we should add to our checklist a *Spin Up Plan*, or contingency plan, for the support medical systems and VA staff, to support those wounded warriors, who will be coming back with the same wounds of war we have seen for hundreds of years.

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 22 veterans take their lives every day. Over half the troops who have committed suicide, have at one time or another sought some form of treatment or help. At the onset of these wars the VA was already overburdened with veterans from past wars and now the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are the longest wars in US history.

Every warfighter is promised the best medical care available during their commitment. The combat veteran returns and becomes lost in the system. One of the major components of his lost trust becomes what's known as, "**betrayal trauma**." This is the social component of PTS and manifests quickly when returning warfighters feel as if they're not getting the appropriate treatment or feeling lost and betrayed by the VA system. The trust they had placed in the US military and the government has been mishandled. In the same way that *finances* are at the top of the list of worries that injured warfighters have, so is the "*loss of trust*" that they have placed in their government. *This betrayal is another link on the path to suicide. I can speak to this myself!*

There are no statistics I can find, but there is a method of suicide that often occurs in individuals who cannot come to grips with their combat experience. Much like "suicide by cop," which is something we all understand, "suicide by crime" is when returning combat veterans find themselves back and feel the need for adrenaline fueled activities and engage in various high-risk crimes.

The most prominent story came out of Fort Carson, Colorado. It stems from the difficulty combat veterans find adjusting to civilian life after being professional killers in combat. The adrenaline high is hard to match. ¹A *group of soldiers* from Ft. Carson, from the 2nd Battalion, 12th infantry Regiment had fought in some of the war's bloodiest battles. From this unit, amongst a laundry list of other violent crimes, ten of these infantry soldiers had been arrested for either murder, attempted murder or manslaughter. They had thrown

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their lives away for the adrenaline high, and in their own way committed suicide.

We failed in our re-integration process. When you send somebody to war, you know there are going to be consequences when they return. You need to plan for re-integration to society. In these cases, it not only cost the lives of our warfighters, but also the lives of numerous civilians.

There are no statistics for family members of combat veterans who commit suicide. How many wives and children have been lost to suicide because they could not deal with their returning combat veteran loved one?

¹**Bill and Christine Koch** lost their son in Afghanistan, and then their daughter, Lynne committed suicide over the despair of losing her brother. She became a casualty as well. Cpl. Steve Koch was killed at the hands of a suicide bomber. There are many different casualties of war. *Chaos* attacks your loved ones as well.

Since my return home, I had been working with **Crisis Response International**, or **CRI Training** as Director of Training and an Instructor. I was still seeking the adrenaline high. It was my personal method of exposure therapy. This therapy targets learned behavior of avoidance response to memories of past events that were either traumatic or frightening. It is used to treat PTS by putting patients into a simulated combat environment to face their fears. At CRI Training we naturally did all this. Our school trained up Private Security Contractors heading overseas to high-risk zones to provide security and personal protection. We taught hand-to-hand fighting, pistol and rifle shooting, enemy contact drills, tactical medical training, counter kidnapping techniques, tactical offensive driving, etc. You get the idea. I was constantly immersed in my own exposure therapy. For me the constant adrenaline worked well, moving me through my anxieties, or so I thought.

It was May of 2010; I was in Palm Springs, California. As a matter of continuing education for my work, I was attending the **International School of Tactical Medicine**. This is one of the top-notch schools for paramedics and doctors who work as part of either SWAT teams or SRTs, Special Response Teams, across the nation. They are POST (Peace Officer and Standards Training) certified and it's far from a gentleman's course. The school is a classroom and

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practical skills based program that offers an extensive tactical medical curriculum, which integrates both medical and technical education, hands-on training, scenario-based teaching as well as both pistol and machine gun training. Since I taught our Tactical Medicine class, it was a great refresher. Also, kept me busy.

The training was top notch, as were the instructors. Passing the exams was exciting. It validated that my cognitive ability was improving. *Then came graduation.* Now, in my military career I've been through dozens and dozens of graduations. Some were my own, but most were from the Combat Aircrew Training School, where I was an instructor. Also, at CRI Training, I had overseen dozens more graduation ceremonies.

Out of nowhere, when I walked up to get my certificate, ***I started to cry***, having to step away. What just happened? This would occasionally happen in private, but I had never become this emotional amongst colleagues. It caught me completely off guard. After leaving the hotel, out of nowhere the waterworks started again and I cried for the next ten minutes, then spent the next hour trying again to figure out what happened. During the drive home I began to have intrusive negative thoughts. I couldn't stop focusing on the weakness I had just shown and why it happened. *Why? Weak? Defective?*

A storm was building, searching out more fuel.

I was in the middle of the Mojave Desert and finally just pulled over and turned off the truck. I walked over to a nearby rock and watched the sunset. *Pattern Interrupt.*

Having been gone a couple of weeks, I decided to stop by my parents' before heading home. As we were chatting, I was going through my mail and I opened a letter from the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS). I read through it, and then read it again. I couldn't believe my eyes. *It was a letter stating that I owed the government \$74,000 and they were taking it out of my pay starting immediately. WTF? Remember Finances? Betrayal trauma?*

The "**Perfect Storm**" was evolving. How could this be possible? My mind went into overload, spiraling. ***Chaos*** was watching, looking to seize an opportunity. I talked it out with my family and came to the initial conclusion, I couldn't fix it now, so I had to just move

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through, head home and get some rest. It didn't work out that way. My mind was on overload, especially after a day of so many unexplained emotional mood swings.

Earlier I mentioned that at the top of the list for wounded warriors is their *financial future*. My mind had just exploded, the rusty links in my chain were weakening and my perceived future was just thrown in the trash. *I felt my government had betrayed me!*

Arriving home, I unloaded my gear and tossed back my *first shot* of Patron. The more the intrusive thoughts swirled around in my head, the more intense my Brain Pain became. I must have paced around for twenty minutes before I realized I needed to call someone. My first call was to one of my best friends and I received the answer machine. Anger had locked its fingernails into me. They were digging into my skin, manifesting with dozens upon dozens of mini-explosions of pain, bursting forth in my head.

Second shot of Patron and my next call was to another friend and again, I received an answering machine, then with my mind racing still, I called another friend and got voicemail again. *Shit, come on! Somebody answer the damned phone!* Finally, I called the VA help line and was put on hold. *Screw it!*

Earlier, I had unloaded my AR-15 and my Glock and brought them inside. I hadn't gotten around to locking them up. They were sitting on the chair next to the safe, magazines lying next to them.

At first, the Glock whispered over to me, getting my attention. Then it began to speak louder and louder. It seemed to be slowly slithering closer as well. The magazine even seemed to be sliding closer to the gun, like being drawn over magnetically.

"This one's easy. You've seen it on TV hundreds of time. Pick me up, point and pull the trigger. Come on, come on, it'll be quick." *Chaos* was again going in for the kill and the *mosquitoes* were swarming for my blood. My peripherals were gone. In my mind, danger was close. The closest I'd ever been. My focus was on the gun.

Instinctually, somewhere down deep, where clarity resides, I needed to interrupt the stream of intrusive negative and dangerous thoughts going through my mind. I needed to get away from the pain exploding in my head.

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I was dwelling on the anger I felt towards the system and the phenomenal feelings of betrayal. *It was overwhelming!*

I knew I needed a Pattern Interrupt, so as quickly as I could, while clarity tried fighting off *Chaos*, I locked up the guns, popped in an adult video tape, changed my mindset, then popped a sleeping pill and passed out.

Masturbation just saved my life.

The stigma in the military is that any weakness in combat is a failing. Warfighters who seek counseling for stress are often looked at as being feeble and weak. Most famously in 1943, Gen. George Patton struck and berated soldiers at a medical evacuation facility. He did so because they showed no obvious physical injuries. They were being pounded by artillery. Come on? Dad's generation called it battle fatigue or shell shock.

Today we know it as TBI and PTS. **The invisible wounds of war.**

¹ Since 2001, more than 2.4 million warfighters have served. Approximately 6,800 warfighters have been Killed In Action (KIA,) 52,000 Wounded In Action, (WIA,) over 100,000 who deployed diagnosed with PTS, 200,000 plus with combat related blast TBI's, and over 1,700 warfighters have experienced dramatic combat related amputations. There were also over 330 suicides while deployed. The suicide rate in the military is at an all time high. *22 veterans per day.*

Being raised a Catholic, most of my life I believed, if you commit suicide you would be damned to hell. But that was before my brain injury and this quest to arm myself against my demons. I often wonder, what if one day my brain turns on me? What if I am on a path towards Dementia, Alzheimer's and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy? What if I become suddenly overloaded, and that tight rope I walk on, snaps? Will I break?

The death of Lt. Col. Rivas affected me more than I can say. We were practically the same age, involved in multiple explosions, had a loss of our old self, Brain Pain, memory loss, financial interdiction, loss of emotions and passion. Like other millions, I walk that tightrope.

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Whether you believe we've been here thousands of years or millions, I think we can all agree that *our time here is miniscule* in the larger scheme of mankind. When you're caught up in depression and pain you begin to contemplate your existence, your purpose, your worthiness and your place in this world.

It becomes *overwhelming* as we grapple with the "*why*" of it all. Then because we're in the grips of our injury, our disease, we seek comfort, we seek relief from the stranglehold of "why." Why do I care? Why do you care? Why am I here? Why should I stay? Why, why, why? The quick and easy answer is to let go. To end it.

I believe in our purpose, our worth, ourselves. In the great scheme of humanity, our time here is minuscule. It's only a short distance to our natural death. *I can make it.*

The majority of us have faith, in one form or another. We want to believe we will endure after this physical world. I do. And if I do, what's my rush? Heaven's not going anywhere. I know where the love's at. For me, I know what's waiting. I'm just reminding you. In the depths of my despair, my friend Rick reminded me. No rush. Take the ride. Enjoy the ride. Ride your line. It's not far. Smiles, sneers and frowns. Keep saying to yourself. "*I can make it that far.*"

That's exactly what *Chaos* doesn't want to hear. He's waiting outside in a Limousine filled with your favorite vices and champagne. His ride's free. Take on the simple challenge of making it, the short distance to death. No hurry, no rush. Breathe, move through, and contemplate. We were born fighters. Screw *Chaos'* Limo. I don't need his ride. I can make it that far. *You can make it too.*

Suicide affects us all. Millions of us battle these demons. Our own personal *Chaos*. We have to turn to each other and share the lessons of survival and self worth. Share and care? In an instant, the links in the chain can snap. *22 a day.*

We need to recognize that hope's right there in front of us, just grab some and ride your line. Keep engaged, challenged and purposeful. Remind yourself you're worthy; that your life has purpose. It has meaning.

We should live a life worthy of, and for, those who didn't make it. *I can make it. I can make it. I can make it!*

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This was the **Wounded Warrior Project's** outing called "Project Odyssey" in Lake Tahoe in 2012. It's designed to help warfighters overcome combat stress through outdoor, rehabilitative retreats.



That's me on the left. This was taken in 2010, the last day of the course at the School. Later that night I came as close as I ever had to committing suicide. **I made it again! But, the struggle never stops!**

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CLOSE

AFTER ACTION

I believe the meaning of life is rooted in lessons learned. Lessons learned in the name of good and righteousness, strengthens our endeavor to persevere. We've been given this gift from our parents and ancestors. The propagation of our species. Lessons learned are the core of who we are, and the spine of our evolutionary process.

Exercising your body and brain is huge. It's easy to fall prey to sloth, lethargy, smoking, drinking and drugs. Exercise enhances your cardiac performance, leading to better oxygen flow, leading to more oxygen feeding your brain, leading to more natural endorphins. Looking back, this is what Dad did. **He exercised, ate healthy and kept busy.**

Now, I include exercising my brain as part of my daily routine. The gym, biking, hiking and music. One hour a day, practicing my guitar, exercises my brain. **Music** has helped me more than I can say. Re-learning songs and getting back on stage is a great form of therapy. Use it or lose it.

Keeping myself in shape, exercising my brain and body, maintaining and even enhancing my skill sets keeps me ready for when everything goes bad. *Chaos* can take me there in a split second, not to mention the other maladies that come along naturally in life. Continually doing the work **prepares me for the inevitable setbacks** to come. It's like a savings account. When those dark days come, you're stronger and more capable of taking them on.

Remember, moving through is not always moving forward, but staying the course is. It's all part of the journey. Sometimes the plan doesn't work. The "flow system" is all about working around the obstacles and adjusting to the friction. It doesn't get better by following a single path. There will always be paths and crossroads. Some things will work and some things won't work. Things that once worked may not work again. Keep searching! This journey will trigger frustration, anger and hypervigilance, all which can spiral out of control. These only occur *because* you're doing the work.

Life throws so much at us that we need to be able to understand what's really important, so we can make smarter decisions. My goal is to be to be happy, to once again enjoy my life. To smile, laugh and connect. When everything goes to black, what really mattered? Don't wait to find out. **I prioritized what's most important.**

Being honest with my brother Marcos led me to admitting; I was ebbing and flowing through peaks and troughs, and needed to slowdown and **find the middle road**. This was one of my biggest discoveries. After years of still thinking I was still my old self, I came to realize I wasn't. I may never be. The peaks and troughs of hypervigilance and depression were taking their toll. Once I found that I needed to operate the middle road and managed my life accordingly, my pain became more controllable. Slowing down is hard to do, but it's all part of doing the work. Just like running a race, I learned to pace myself.

I am losing some memories. Not just the short term ones, but the "life event" ones. Memories like dinners with friends, family visits, the special days. Last week my mom showed me photos of us at a dinner and I had no recollection; empty, gone. What I've seen through the years is that when my dad forgets something, he gets angry. I'm not going to be that person. I'm injured, not stupid. It's not my fault. I'm going to **embrace my injuries, and the memories I still have! Embrace yours!**

This is my new standard. I'm not the same person I once was. Just like nothing will bring back lost limbs, our brain and emotions have changed. To this day, my dad still fights those demons of Khe Sanh, but he's made them part of who he is and stayed the course.

Keeping busy and engaged is at the heart of our fight against *Chaos*. On one of those Wounded Warrior Project getaways I was re-

introduced to mountain biking. I took the challenge and found it to be one of my new daily hobbies and smiles. **I'm living my new standard.**

Retraining your brain means learning to accept, adapt and adjust. Multitasking is problematical with a damaged brain. Don't spread yourself thin. Focus on the task at hand. I have specific daily routines that help me move through to the next steps. Simple things like going to bed at a specific time and getting up at a specific time; meds at night, meds in the morning, etc. Focused protocols in the morning give my brain time to warm up. In my case, my routine gives me the best chance for minimal pain and anxiety throughout the day. **Find your confidence** and stay the course. *Don't worry about the feeling stupid; just think about the being alive!*

How do you even describe loss of passion. Passion is almost synonymous with smiles, enthusiasm, excitement and infatuation. It takes over your soul and shines outward for everyone to see. Without passion the world can seem black and white, boring, lack-luster, dull and un-interesting. One of the traits that have always defined me was **my passion**. I was a musician, college athlete, military officer, entrepreneur, writer, restaurateur and security consultant. Post-injury, I lost all passion.

For a long time, my emotional connection to family, friends and the things that I love, were fogged over. Everything seemed dull and un-interesting. A large part of writing this was to try and re-acquire my passions and emotions.

"Doing the work" for me, started with Spirit Therpaies program "Horses Healing Heros" and my horse "Buddy." I started to feel the connection and love. That led to me taking up snowboarding, mountain biking, camping and finding my guitar again; all in attempt to re-ignite my passions. Biking, skiing and guitar playing were all things I loved as a kid. Those days of innocence and bliss, sans the adult responsibilities, put smiles back on my face. I'm trying to find mine, try finding yours.

Do the work, (DTW.) It's so simple, yet so hard. You woke up this morning; you're walking and talking. You're alive, so get your ass going! Only you can turn the keys and put it in drive. Only you can "do the work." ***"Do The Work" to strengthen your mental health "Chain."*** Otherwise *Chaos* will slip in and bite your ass with

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his razor sharp teeth. He'll shake you back and forth, ripping out your soul. All the while, you're lying on the couch watching cable, saying you'll get to it tomorrow.

Writing this has strengthened my hope of staving off a future of neuro-degenerative disease. Although hard, exercising my brain to access information, formulate the thoughts, positions and opinions has helped me believe that my brain is "working around" its deficiencies and that my memories are still intact, somewhere.

Keep engaged, challenged purposeful! (ECP) Of course, life will continue to throw challenges and obstacles at us. I hope to continue my resolve of doing the work, pedaling as fast as necessary to ride my line, to keep my balance and leave *Chaos* behind. I'm staying the course, chasing my clarity, seeking my comfort, finding my clam, hoping for many more smiles along the way. *Pedal. Bleed. Repeat!*

Will you do the work? Up to you!

DTW



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Team Jones.



Me, my dad "WK," my mom "Anna," my brother "Marcos" and my sister "Pamela." Walking, Talking, Happy to be here!!!

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Taken during a followup visit to the Baghdad ER, (28th CSH). This is the natural light that showed up. I call this my Angel Photo.

Faith moves me forward, doing the work.

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FREE Chapter
"22 A DAY"
Supporting
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"Brain Pain is an absolutely fantastic book and needs to be read by all, especially medical and mental health personnel."

Rear Admiral Joan M. Engel,
18th Director of the U.S. Navy Nurse Corps

"An astonishing account of one mans journey into the deepest recesses of a mind wounded by war. A personal yet scientific look at the effects of Traumatic Brain Injury."

Special Forces Major
David Messer, Vietnam Veteran



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