P.T.S.D. A Short Story

I feel like this is my chance to tell the world about the things that I have seen. If you truly listen then maybe your life too can change, just like mine. I used to live for things that I never really understood. I used to take for granted things that every one of us is guilty of forgetting about. Am I better for realizing this, no, but I feel obligated to share some things with you that I know will affect your heart and your soul. There are many people that have discovered the things that I know, but there are too many that can't and won't and that is truly saddening.

As I held my friend's hand as he passed, parts of me died with him. I was in a strange place, surrounded by faces that I just only recently recognized. The shock of what was happening truly stabbed into my soul and killed my inner child. How can this happen? Only just this morning I had joked with Warren about his wife and newborn child. Only this morning had he told me he was finally getting his wish, to go outside the wire and do a real mission. I gave him no advice that morning and to this day I feel if I had said anything, he could still be alive. His death and the manner of his passing have forever changed everything that I used to hold true to my heart.

I am going to attempt to recall the final minutes of my friends life so that maybe someone out there will realize that life is too short to be angry or scared or to hate. If one person realizes all this, his death wouldn't be in vain.

"Shawhan" yelled Sgt Colburn. "We got to get up!"

I knew what that meant. I looked at my watch and it was 2130, 930pm for you civilians. My team was the quick response team that night and if we were getting a call that meant something had happened. Some poor bastard had gotten hurt or was dying. This wasn't our first
call since we had been in country, it happens every day it seemed. I got up and threw my uniform on and ran to my truck where I met the rest of our team.

"This one is bad guys," explained Colburn "we have KIA and wounded dying up in the Green Zone, and we have to get there ASAP."

This meant that someone was alive and alone. We were going to probably be the last faces this soldier would ever see before he met his maker. We pulled out our weapons and did our last checks before mounting and rolling outside into the craziness. I led this convoy just like everyone before, I sat as lead gunner and with my weapon locked and loaded we sped to the Green Zone with hopes of seeing our brothers before their passing.

"Veer Right!" I screamed, "Keep your eyes open! Dammit we almost hit that!"

Traveling to and from our FOB (forward operating base) was never a joy ride. It was one of the most heavily attacked routes in all of Iraq. Being the lead gunner required that I keep my body out of the turret most of the time, keeping my eyes on the traffic and making sure the path was clear for the trucks behind us. A responsibility that I now enjoyed, taking care of my guys was more important to me than even my own life.

As we often did, we reached the Green Zone in such speed that we hardly ever came under contact. The nature of our mission this night was of the up most importance and when it came to reaching soldiers, nothing was more important to me personally.

I remember pulling up and parking our truck, just like we had numerous times before. I always stayed down with the trucks, I could never make myself see the faces of my brothers that were gone and going. I could never bring myself to give it that reality, to give it the power to affect me. So just like so many times before I stayed down with the
trucks as most everyone else raced into the hospital. I already carried with me the names of all my "family" that had sacrificed themselves for this god forsaken place; I couldn't bear to place their faces next to the names.

Then it happened.
"Shawhan!" yelled Colburn over a crackling radio, "Brother, you had better get up here quick!"
"What's going on?" I barked back.
"Shut the fuck up and hurry up, you don't have much time left" He responded.

My heart sank. My mind refused to force my legs to move and I spent what seemed an eternity trying to convince myself to move. Before I could understand, my legs began to pound the pavement and the hospital grew in my sight before me. I was breathing so fast that I am not sure if you could separate my inhale from the exhale, my heart pumping to give my legs power to move faster. I darted past the security as they yelled for me to slow down, but my mind was past them already and racing itself up the stairs and down the hall to the emergency room.

I ran so fast that by the time I realized I had moved at all I was already where I needed to be. So strange how your mind takes over in times like that and the awesome power that it holds. I reached the door to the room and I froze. My lungs inhaled so deeply and when I exhaled I felt tears racing down my cheeks, had I cried the whole sprint? I peered into the now overflowing room to see what I can only describe as a tent made of plastic in the center, an indescribable figure laying underneath.

"What's going on?" I asked the nearest soldier "Why do you guys need me up here?"
"Shawhan, over here" said Colburn.

I darted across the room to where my team leader was standing and
he placed a hand on my shoulder. Instantly I felt my knees buckle under the weight of what that simple gesture meant.

"It's SSgt Warren." He explained.
"What?" I whispered in disbelief.

Less than 12 hours ago I was shaving for the new day and doing the routine that suited me; showering, shaving, and talking crap to everyone like we had done for a month or so. It was our way of making sense to each other when the world outside had little sense in it to give a place that we felt relaxed and at home with each other.

"I get to finally go outside the wire today!" Glees SSgt Warren.
"Yeah, well, they had to let you some time or another, besides we all know you've been kissing serious ass for this to happen!" I ribbed him gingerly.

"Well I have to say my wife doesn't like the idea, but hell I am so tired of sitting here and watching you guys go out every day and put your lives on the line, I want to be apart." He explained.
"You are a part of this craziness, besides; your wife isn't really scared about you going outside the wire as much as she is you finding out the baby isn't yours!"
"Shut the fuck up Shawhan!"
"Now that I think of it, he kinda takes after me." I winked and ran out of the bathroom. He gave chase, but with just a towel and shower shoes on, he didn't make it far.

That was the last time I saw him. But just like every other day for so long, it was normal and I had not given it much thought till that hand came crashing down on my shoulder, destroying my heart and soul in an instant.
"Shawhan, did you hear me?" asked Colburn.

I snapped back from my day dream and stared straight into the eyes of a man that I knew all too well, the gravity of the situation pressing hard against my temples. I saw strength and pain wrapped all into one. Feeling my legs gripping the ground once more I turned to face the tent and the figure underneath. I slowly walked to it and as each step brought me closer, I died a little more inside. My heart sank deeper the closer I came to what I knew to be a man that I had shared so much with. I placed my hand on the almost clear plastic hood and pulled it back slowly to reveal what was not my friend. This couldn't be the same man, burnt from head to toe and in obvious pain; I knew that this couldn't be him. My mind wouldn't register what my eyes now beheld.

"It's him." whispered Colburn in my ear as he placed his hand on my shoulder once more.

That weight pressing into my soul once again forced me to realize the shocking sight before me. I fell to my knees and grasped the now crisp palm of my friend. I wept and yelled and wept again, hoping against hope that my tears and pain would be enough to bring him back. I wished to God that I could take his place and that he be spared the fate that I be held before me. I held on to him so tightly, in hopes that my grip was strong enough to hold his soul to the earth. I remember looking into his face and watching his chest rise and fall with the machine that was now pumping oxygen into his lungs. I remember praying to God to undo this tragedy, I promised so many things right then and there. I would trade my soul for his, just for him to live. I begged and pleaded in my heart and tried so desperately to reach him through my soul to guide him back from the path of the dead. I watched him slowly struggle and fight to stay with me, like he knew I was there, I could hear his soul screaming to me in that moment to not
cry for him, but remember him always. To live my life with such vigor that life itself would be jealous of me. I wept as I knelt beside my friend and watched him leave me alone to this life. I wept at his passing and swore that one day, when I see him again I will be able to tell him that I lived my life and life was jealous of me.

I have no advice to give you. I can't possibly explain why things happen or why we can't change them. I can tell you that we can change ourselves and I hope that you have heard the words I have written and something inside your soul wept with me. Life is worth living and living life is all that we can do, don't waste your time with the things that strive to shorten that life. Use your time wisely and maybe someday when you stand in front of my friend you too can tell him that you lived life and life itself was jealous.

By Brad Shawhan