A Soldier's Tale: 'Everything Changed, Including Me'

After Afghanistan, Sean Loucks still faced a battle within to fight. First in a series on veterans coping with war's invisible wounds.

By Britney Dennison, 8 Nov 2014, TheTyee.ca


[Editor's note: On March 12, 2014 the Canadian flag was lowered in Kabul, marking the end of the longest-running combat mission in Canadian history. More than 40,000 men and women served, 158 died. The number injured depends on how you define the term. This three-part series starting today profiles three veterans seeking, in their own ways, healing from war's invisible wounds.]

It was Valentine's Day and Sean Loucks wanted to be alone. He needed peace, some quiet, a space of his own. He hadn't been alone in six months. And hadn't been home in more than that.

As he pulled up to his dark empty house he couldn't help but notice the cold. The ground was covered in snow, and his front walkway hadn't been shovelled all
winter. He walked inside -- finally the quiet space he'd been waiting for. But as Sean began to settle in he noticed the cupboards were bare and the fridge was empty.

"Shit," Sean thought. "There's no friggin food."

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been grocery shopping. He'd got used to not having to think about things like that. He'd got used to not having to think about anything except his job. "You're focused on doing one thing and that's it. And you come back and it's just everything, all these choices come rushing back."

Now, standing in the grocery aisle on that day in 2007, staring at rows of Cheerios and Fruit Loops, Sean felt panicked. "I was like, 'Fuck, what cereals did they have over there?' And I was buying the same food I'd been eating for six months because that's what I wanted. I didn't want to be in the grocery store any longer." Sean scanned the aisle. He was confused. Overwhelmed.

Twenty-three hours. That was all that stood between the desert sands, the bullet-ridden walls and Sean's empty house in Petawawa.

"Everyone just has a little fairy tale of how perfect it's going to be when they get home," Sean says. "But it's not perfect. Everything had changed -- including me."

**Dreams of war**

Sean's father spent three years as an officer in the Navy; growing up, Sean remembers soaking up war movies -- although back then the bad guys were the Nazis and Russian communists. Afghanistan wasn't on Hollywood's radar yet, and it wasn't on Sean's either.

As a teenager he watched with admiring fascination as the Army swept into his hometown of Winnipeg during the Red River flood. After graduating from high school Sean found a job at a local bar near the base. "I got to know a lot of the guys there," Sean says. "Got to hear all of the cool stories of throwing grenades and shooting bazookas and stuff."
Sean wanted to be a police officer, but figured joining the Army might help him qualify. He and a friend went down to the recruiting office and applied for the Canadian Infantry. Sean was hired. His friend was not.

"It was just like, Shit! Now I've got to go through with this." He was sworn in on Sept. 13, 2000. "I thought that was pretty cool. I get to carry a gun and maybe shoot people." Sean looks up and laughs, "Kids right?"

During his first year in the military it seemed to Sean they were always training for some fictitious faraway enemy. It didn't seem real. Then Sept. 11, 2001, happened and, as Sean puts it, "shit got real" pretty quick.

"Every base across Canada was locked down because nobody knew what the hell was going on. We slept at work for about a week. All the trucks were packed and lined up. We were ready to go."

Nearly two years later, Sean and his battalion shipped out for Kabul, arriving at a base with watchtowers and tall grey walls meant to separate the troops from the rest of Afghanistan. Sean looked around at what he would come to call a prison for soldiers. He thought, "Shit. We're not in Kansas anymore."

After two tours in Kabul, and four years from his first days in Afghanistan, Sean left the military.

His childhood dream of being a hero with a gun was gone. It had eroded over time, leaving nothing but nightmares and anxiety.

'Boys don't cry'

The nightmares kept coming. Even just a year ago, what did Sean still see when he closed his eyes at night?

"It's always the same. I'm standing in the desert. The sand goes on forever. My buddies are there. We are together, and then shit hits the fan. By the time the smoke clears, I am the only one left alive."
Guns, the stuff of dreams and nightmares. Sean Loucks in Afghanistan with the Canadian Infantry. Photo provided by Sean Loucks.

This long after leaving Afghanistan, Sean still struggled to fall asleep. He was terrified. The dream was so real he could smell a pungent mix of gunpowder and blood.

"If I had a good night's sleep one night, I knew the next night was going to be hell. I've known a lot of guys that were killed over there," he says.

Some nights, he would close his eyes, the images of dying soldiers would rush in, and he would wake up. "Then the second I'd close my eyes again I was belt-fed one after another. Every time I went back to sleep I'd have to lose everyone all over again."

According to a 2011 Canadian Forces study, 14 per cent of soldiers deployed to Afghanistan have since been diagnosed with a mental illness, the most common being post-traumatic stress disorder, which afflicts eight per cent of Canadian soldiers from the Afghanistan mission. Although those are the official numbers, other sources estimate that nearly one out of three returning soldiers suffers some form of trauma-related symptoms. But even this estimate may be low. Stoicism is part of the military ethos -- you don't admit to weakness.

"In the man's world there's no time to be sensitive," explains Sean. "You can't cry. Boys don't cry. You just carry on."
Sean operated under these rules his first few years back in Canada, but started to realize he wasn't okay. Still, he didn't know how to talk about it.

"You want to say it, but you don't know how to broach the subject," he says. "I'm fucked up. You know? How do you get on that subject?"

Trauma doesn't get stored in the brain in the same way as other memories. It skips all the regular pathways and instead becomes seared into the middle of the brain, where it lives in the present -- in a constant state of timelessness. Images remain vivid and details sharp. They are called flashbulb memories. They preoccupy the mind and come forward in bursts triggered by anything from sound to smell.

'What day is it?'

Sean's flashbulb burst on Jan. 27, 2004. He was almost at the end of his tour -- there was less than a month before Valentine's Day.

During his six months in Kabul, Sean had settled into a routine. Every Tuesday his section would join with another group to go to a mayor's meeting or tribal meeting to gather information. Sean had also been working with the Civilian Military Cooperation doing work like building wells and bringing supplies to orphanages.

But Jan. 27 was different. Sean and his superior weren't doing anything that day. They were at camp. "We were just kind of puttering around," he says.

What neither of them realized was that Jan. 27 was a Tuesday.
While he and his superior were at camp, the Tuesday patrol went out without them. This wasn't the first time Sean had forgotten what day it was, but it was the first time he'd ever forgotten about the meeting. He had been on that patrol more than 20 times. But this day things went terribly wrong.

"The second vehicle, which was always my vehicle, got hit," Sean says. A suicide bomber jumped onto the hood of the car and the driver, Cpl. Jamie*, was killed. If Sean had been on that patrol he would have been the driver, not Jamie. "That was my position," Sean says. "I was always the driver. It had been like that for months."

After it happened, Sean's superior asked, "Hey, what day is it?" Sean didn't know. He thinks he might have said Sunday. His superior answered, "Nah, it's Tuesday." Sean's immediate reaction was, "Fuck! The meeting." His superior replied, "Yeah they just got hit. A guy died." And then he walked away. "The way he told me was brutal," Sean says.

That night Sean got drunk. The next morning he woke with a pounding headache. As he pulled himself out of bed, he pushed the memory of the Jamie's death as far back into his mind as he could.

"I never really talked about it for years until it started rearing its ugly head," Sean says. "I kept it suppressed for so long and then I started drinking more and partying harder. I loved drinking because I was starting to get nightmares, but the nights that I partied I'd get a full night's sleep. I can understand why guys turn to booze and drugs all the time because it's going to kill whatever thoughts are there."

**Baggage**

Lots of veterans look for ways to dull the memories, the pain and the trauma. PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injuries are common. They are the invisible wounds of modern war. PTSD and TBI can cause, over a soldier's or veteran's lifetime, flashbacks, emotional numbness, anxiety, insomnia, irritability, headaches, fatigue, poor concentration, depression -- the list goes on.

And those are just symptoms society has a name for. What about the cool shiver that goes down a veteran's spine as she drives by a white Toyota Corolla? Or that
moment of panic when he accidentally steps off the pathway onto the grass? Or when a sudden noise has him scrambling for a gun that he no longer has?

Counselling psychologist Marvin Westwood: After a deadly event they've survived, former soldiers can 'forever feel morally bankrupt.'

Counselling psychologist Marvin Westwood says when a soldier has a limb blown off, people understand why they are having a hard time -- they can see the injury. But when soldiers come home appearing healthy, people don't understand their struggle.

"People don't really have any understanding of the tormented nature of the person inside," Westwood says. When soldiers and veterans come home and act out, drive off the road, get into a fight, overdose on drugs, or try to kill themselves, people really don't know why.

Westwood, who teaches at the University of British Columbia, has been working with soldiers and veterans for over 15 years. He started by collecting the stories of 85 and 90-year-old Second World War veterans. His subjects made him promise that in the future younger veterans would never have to wait to tell their story.

Storytelling is one way to promote healing, or as Westwood calls it "drop baggage." Baggage is a military term for war-related traumas and dropping baggage is a grieving process.

"We don't realize, but the military works on having high bonding. They need each other to survive," Westwood says. So if they lose one of the company they often
feel, because of their ethic in the military, that they should have been the one that died."

'I'm done'

Sean says there were so many times when it should have been him.

After his second tour, he began training soldiers who were being sent to the base in Kandahar. Sometimes they would ask him if he wanted to go, Sean says, "And I still had that 'I don't give a shit' attitude, so they'd offer it to me and I'm like, 'I don't care.' But then they'd choose to send the other guy, who really wanted to go, so I'd tell him goodbye and that we'll have a beer when he gets back. And it happened a few times where he never came back."

"That was the shittiest part," Sean says. "The loss of friends. You always think, could I have done something? Or I was supposed to be there. Why wasn't I there? I don't know why I kept lucking out like that, but at the same time it wasn't really luck. I mean, you feel like shit. It was offered to me, I should have taken it."

Sean started protecting himself. He started to withdraw. He didn't want to lose anyone else he cared about.

Men he was training would go over and come back a casualty. "I really didn't want to make friends in the military anymore because everybody I made friends with, well, good chance they were going to die," he says.

Westwood says the worst traumas are caused by moral injury. "There's shame and guilt. They did something that they feel terrible about, or didn't act to save someone when they could. And they would say, 'I've done a terrible thing.' Then they forever feel morally bankrupt."

The number of casualties grew as the Canadian military made their push into Kandahar, the frontline of the Taliban stronghold. "Guys were just dying left, right and centre," Sean says. And Sean was tired of death.
"Everybody deals with loss on their own, in their own way," he says. When they offered him a promotion and a new contract, he said, "You know what? I'm done. I'm tired of putting my family through this stress. I'm tired of meeting people that are dying. So it's time for me to move on."

'A signature on your soul'

After retiring from the Army, Sean moved to British Columbia. But moving away didn't mean moving on. As the years went by he started to feel worse, and he still didn't know how to talk about it. "I don't know if things have changed, because I got out in 2007, but when I was in, if someone said they had PTSD it was career suicide," Sean says. "A lot of guys were afraid to talk about their problems. A lot of guys have committed suicide because of that."

Westwood says soldiers won't admit they need help even if they desperately do. "Masculine socialization dictates that they should never appear weak," Westwood says.

Sean has never been diagnosed. But for years his baggage from the war would not let him move on. It wasn't until he joined a motorcycle group for veterans that Sean realized he didn't have to live his life in the shadow of war. A friend and fellow rider saw he was "not right" and recommended he enter the Veterans
Transition Program at the University of British Columbia, run by Westwood and Dr. David Kuhl.

Westwood says the program is action-based group therapy -- meaning they don't just sit around and talk about what happened, they actually do re-enactments that help soldiers and veterans identify what they have lost and work through those losses.

Sean says he realized he had some problems and needed help. "It was nice to be in an environment where you can just go, 'Here's everything.' And not worry about being judged."

The program gave Sean a chance to step back from his trauma and experience the emotion of it. "It's giving your mind the time to actually address what has happened and file it away properly," he says. "It's helped tremendously, and I mean it was so nice just to get it off the chest and be able to deal with it, because the booze was a way of not dealing with it. It was my way of dealing with it, by not dealing with it."

During Sean's enactment, he shared the events of Jan. 27 with the group.

Enactments allow veterans to put themselves back into the moment of their trauma, pain and loss. They put the past into the present, so they can acknowledge their anger and grief. Sean sits in a chair and looks at the soldier across from him. It's not Jamie, but somehow it is. Sean's mind is convinced that looking back at him is the man whose death he feels responsible for. Sean is finally able to tell him what he has been carrying around for years, "I was supposed to be there," he says. "I feel like shit that I forgot what day it was."

It's a terrifying experience -- revealing your deepest regrets, your pain, your loss, your guilt. Westwood says only other soldiers can help absolve that guilt. It could have happened to any of them. They'll say, "You're here. And yeah it shouldn't have happened to you. And yes it was a terrible thing. What you're experiencing is normal."

Sean says in those moments he was finally able to find some closure. He wasn't the only one who forgot what day it was -- his superior forgot too.
It's tough work, Westwood says. "They are so brave. They are not afraid." These losses don't go away. They'll carry them forever, he says. "It's like a signature on your soul. It's like a scar, but scars are always stronger. A scar is like a memory. There's a strengthening of self."

It has been months since Sean's last nightmare. "It's a huge weight off," he says. "We just need to talk about it. Just get it out there. Get it off our chest and have somebody just listen."