



Veteran with PTSD says Iraq, Afghanistan wars left him scarred but unbroken

Derek R. Tope is a veteran of America's longest war — the war on terrorism that emerged from the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and led to combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Like 2.7 million other Americans who survived deployment since 2001, the 32-year-old former Army medic and infantry sergeant came home to face another battle — with PTSD, traumatic brain injury, chronic pain, substance abuse, sleep disorders, anger issues, alienation and bureaucracy.

Veterans with hidden wounds are expected to adjust, heal and merge into the mainstream, or risk becoming a data point in the suicide matrix.

Many of them, like Tope, get into trouble while still in the military. Booze, drugs and flawed decisions are collateral outcomes, often leading to discipline and discharge.

The numbers are not small. In the five years leading up to 2015, the military parted ways with more than 57,000 service members for misconduct within two years of being diagnosed with PTSD, a TBI or similar conditions.

Here Tope, who lives in Gilbert, Arizona, tells his own story, assembled from more than a dozen interview sessions over 18 months with The Arizona Republic's Dennis Wagner and Michael Chow.

The story also draws on thousands of pages of military documents, medical records, letters to Congress and other materials supplied by Tope and his greatest advocate, his mother, Sharon Grassi.

While told in Tope's words, it has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Tope served three combat tours. Then he got court-martialed and kicked out. He admits to a lapse in judgment.

Was his mistake a failure of personal responsibility? A symptom of combat damage? Or both?

Americans often refer to warriors as heroes, especially those with visible wounds. It is harder to honor and understand those who return with unseen damage to the psyche and soul.

Tope agreed to open up not as an act of self-pity or contrition, but to unveil the experience of combat-damaged veterans who are struggling to survive, perhaps even succeed.

"Derek's story could be one of hope," Grassi says. "One that says that the military is finally trying to do the right thing, after doing so much wrong."

Forgive me

PTSD from two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan has ravaged former Army Sgt. Derek Tope. Michael Chow/azcentral.com

Michael Chow, Arizona Republic

We were in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, at a remote mountain village with one road in. The place is called Combat Outpost Pirtle King, named for a couple of soldiers who got killed years earlier. Soldiers from several platoons mixed together at this camp. It was a terrible location — a valley beneath boulder-covered hills with a river behind us.

It was safe after dark because the insurgents knew we had night vision to spot them. But in the daytime, you always wore body armor because of incoming mortars and small-arms fire.

Even getting to the latrines was a gantlet, running zigzag and semi-exposed through a jumble of trenches, rock walls, sandbags and camouflage nets.

That's where I was on June 29, 2011, around 8:30 a.m., when the shooting started. I stepped out the bathroom into a hell of gunfire, explosions, everything. I ducked back inside, but could hear rounds ripping through plywood walls, so I jumped upstairs into the guard tower.

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Derek Tope at the Pirtle King outpost in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, on Nov. 11, 2011.

Courtesy of Derek Tope

You couldn't see the enemy, but they were blasting away with AKs or DShK .50s from behind rocks.

In the tower, this Pfc named Timothy Adams and another guy were firing a .50 cal and a .240. An Afghan soldier was with them. I didn't have anything, so I started spotting, going from window to window, looking for flashes and smoke puffs. I was pointing to a spot

when this RPG explosion just blew me up and over a table. I hit my head pretty good, and there was a flash of pain. I remember thinking, "OK, did I just break my neck?"

Adams was on top of me. He was, like, "Oh, it hurts ..." He turned to look at me and blood began spouting everywhere, and I'm like, "Oh, s-t!"

I'd seen similar wounds — shrapnel severing the carotid — and both soldiers had bled to death. I didn't think Adams would make it, but I stuck my hand in the hole. The neck wound was shaped like a Nike swoosh, but too small, so I had to dig with my fingers to make it big enough to reach the artery. Then I just pinched it off. The shrapnel was still in there, pretty hot, because I could feel it on the ends of my fingers, burning.

I'm right-handed, but I was using my left hand to compress the artery. The blast had done something to my right arm, and I couldn't use it. I yelled for medics and someone tossed me a packet of gauze, but I couldn't open it.

Adams was pale and just really, really calm. It was scaring me. I kept talking to him, trying to keep him conscious. His eyes would roll up toward the ceiling, and I'd slap his face and say, "No, look at me!"

I was pretty much dazed, but I was trying to hang on. A guy named Grizzle was getting video with his helmet cam. A medic arrived and took over. I started dazing off. I just remember looking down at my hand covered with congealing blood, almost like dangling snot, and thinking, "That's pretty f-king weird."

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Tope agreed to open up to The Republic not as an act of self-pity or contrition, but to unveil the experience of combat-damaged veterans.

Michael Chow/The Republic

No plan, no skills

As a kid, I lived for soccer. Youth leagues, tournaments, club teams. The dream was to go pro. At Mountain View High in Mesa, I tried out and got cut.

I didn't hang out with a clique like jocks or nerds. We just had a happy group of outcasts who partied, smoked some weed, listened to music.

My grades were average, mostly B's and C's. I liked history and mythology. Not exactly career prospects. My mom was pushing me toward medicine. I took an X-ray tech class, but it was so boring I dropped out.

I graduated in 2005 and had no plan, no special skills, no idea what I wanted to do. That's something I hate about my generation: People say, "You can be whatever you want." But what?

I got work at a burger joint where the manager snorted coke and the window girls were high on weed. I had another job as a lifeguard at a public pool.

That summer my family left on a camping trip so there was a party at the house. I woke up the next morning when my parents arrived home early. The place was full of beer cans, and I had a girl in my bed. That was a pretty big clash. A lot of yelling. I stormed out, but I didn't know what to do, so I crashed with a friend.

The next day, I was hanging out at a strip mall. There was an Army recruiting office next to the Blockbuster, with guys in uniform outside having smokes. They invited me in.

I'd never considered the military — I thought ROTC kids at school were weird — but the recruiters offered me a \$5,000 enlistment bonus. I was pretty much out of options. I figured the Army would give me time to develop a plan, plus money for college.



Tope (at right) poses with fellow soldiers in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, in November 2011. His superiors made the group take down the pirate flag, Tope says.

Courtesy of Derek Tope

I had a history teacher, a Vietnam veteran, who talked about the war and had earned a Purple Heart. It made me wonder if I'd be cowardly or courageous. I wanted infantry — the front line — because why else would you join? To become, like, a refrigerator technician in the Army?

It was Aug. 23, 2005. That afternoon, I went home and knocked on our door, which felt kind of weird. When my mom answered, I told her I'd enlisted. She was shocked and thrilled at the same time.

She hated the infantry idea and talked me into EMT school. The recruiters said I'd see plenty of combat as a health-care specialist, so it was a win-win because I could make my mom happy at the same time.

Saving lives, dodging enemy fire

In medic training, instructors try to prepare you for field ops so you don't get hysterical. We practiced in mock combat conditions, saving lifelike dummies that bled when they got cut. You were supposed to become so clinical you could treat torn flesh and guts while eating a Sloppy Joe.

My first real battle wound was an Iraqi civilian who caught a ricochet through the chin, leaving a big hole beneath his mouth. It reminded me of Predator. He's trying to talk, trying to open his mouth, no words. It was a person, ya know, but in my mind it was a mannequin.

We got mortared and rocketed a lot during that tour, especially on patrols. We were running into buildings to pull people out or working on guys beside blown-up vehicles. It became a routine: Watching out for enemy fire. Starting triage. Patching wounds. Shipping them out.

We almost never found out which ones lived or died. I'd guess I saved maybe 30 lives.

Near the end of my first deployment, a suicide bomber drove a fuel tanker up to an Iraqi police station and blew it up. Burning gasoline spewed over soldiers and locals. Just a mass casualty scenario. The third guy I worked on was severely burned over most of his body, but still conscious. He had a wedding ring on, and I got out the ring cutter because his fingers were going to swell. He grabbed my arm and said, "Do you think my wife will love me after this? Will she still want me?"

The guy's eyebrows and hair were gone, his face a mass of charred blisters. I told him, "If she really loves you, she will."

That one got to me. I could see the heartbreak in his eyes. He was a real person, not a mannequin. It made me want to keep doing my job.

I know of a handful of guys who didn't die because of me. They made it to a hospital. Yeah, I'm pretty screwed up, but I liked my job. It meant something over there. Maybe not to the war overall, but you're important to each other.

'A snap judgment'

In a war zone, you suddenly realize, "OK, now I'm on the front line. I have to *do* stuff. And doing stuff means I have to shoot people."

As a medic you've got a weapon. It's not a regular thing, but sometimes you have to use it. The first time is the hardest. It's a decision you can never take back. A snap judgment that takes someone else's life and forever changes your own.

I was on night watch near Ramadi in a Humvee. Around dawn I was trying to stay awake when this truck came down the road. It stopped. A passenger jumped out and began digging.

I'm thinking, "Doesn't he see us? What if I shoot this guy and I'm wrong? I'm in trouble ... But if I don't shoot and he does plant a bomb, it's probably going to be a lot worse."

I tapped the staff sergeant awake. "Should I shoot him?"

"Yeah, shoot him."

The Humvee had a .249 machine gun, but I pulled out my M16 and aimed. I remember imagining the target as an American soldier with a wife and kids. It was easier to think of him as an insurgent, the enemy. This was a moment of truth: Shoot, or don't shoot?

I pulled the trigger. I swear, it was like 25 pounds. But I just kept pulling and pulling.

I didn't go check him out. The guys poured me a couple of ceremonial shots later, something that tasted like rubbing alcohol mixed with mouthwash. I thought about it for quite a while and didn't sleep well. It wasn't like being wracked with guilt, just a weird feeling.

You've stepped over this invisible line. The only people on your side of it are other soldiers and what? Murderers?

I'm kind of a history buff, but war is just so different from what I imagined. I thought you could draw a line and say on this side is us and on that side is bad. That would make things much easier. Instead, it's just confusing.

In the middle of a firefight, with adrenaline pumping, you follow your instincts. But as it gets easier, and you think about why it's easy, you know there's something wrong. That usually leads to the guys you read about on the news. I don't blame them. It's not an easy thing to live with.

That's basically why I have this tattoo on my left wrist: "Forgive me." It's pretty much what I'd see every time I pulled the trigger. The more I got comfortable doing things, the harder it got to think about forgiveness.

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Derek Tope has a tattoo that says "Forgive Me" on his left wrist. He served three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and suffers from PTSD among other ailments from his service.

Michael Chow/The Republic

After that first deployment, I was in Germany and pretty screwed up with insomnia. I'd drink myself to sleep, then wake up with nightmares about combat, sometimes with my family in them.

My NCO finally had some of my buddies take me to the clinic. The doctors said I had PTSD and suggested I put in for noncombat duty. I told them that would just make me ashamed, so I'd be more stressed out. Besides, I wanted to go back because when guys got torn up I was pretty good at keeping the pieces together.

They gave me some meds, but the pills turned me into a zombie. I stopped taking them.

'She's been fighting even when I tried to give up'

I'm this paradoxical soldier: A so-called hero-warrior who became an Army medic and infantryman, saved lives, fought the enemy, won awards. Yet a soldier who used heroin, was court-martialed, failed at suicide in the brig and got drummed out of the Army.

Finally, I'm this victim of PTSD and TBI and all the hell I saw in combat — a casualty of war.

I'm also luckier than most. Without my family, especially my mom, I'm pretty sure I'd be on the street or already dead.

She has all these pictures: Derek as a kid playing soccer, at Christmas, with a girlfriend. Derek in the Army with buddies, playing with Iraqi children, showing off medals and ribbons. In the photos, I'm always bright-eyed, full of swagger.

She's pissed at what war did to her boy, and what most of America doesn't see — doesn't want to see.

She's my advocate, caregiver, alarm clock, task master. She keeps writing to Congress, pressuring Veterans Affairs doctors, filing appeals with the Army, hounding college instructors.

For a decade, she's been fighting even when I tried to give up. So how can I give up on myself?

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Sharon Grassi, Tope's mother, rubs his neck before performing oscillation therapy for lymphedema, which formed after surgery to fuse his spine.

Michael Chow/The Republic

A routine

My mom usually wakes me around 6 with a handful of prescriptions: anti-anxiety meds, amphetamines for circulation, a stabilizing cocktail, something for my stomach. I'm groggy an hour or more before those kick in, so I sit in the patio smoking until my head clears.

If the sores on my arms and legs have gotten infected, she'll help me treat them and apply compression wraps on my hands.

Most days I have doctor appointments in the morning. My mom sets things up, keeps a calendar, reminds me, sometimes goes with me.

It's the same with classes at Mesa Community College. They've got a support system for wounded warriors. The college provides a note-taker because I can't write with my hands all swollen and taped.

Last year, I missed classes because of all the medical issues. Several instructors dropped me, which meant the VA came after us to repay GI education benefits. It was a mess, and I can't deal with bureaucracies and paperwork and deadlines. My mom handles that kind of thing. She went on one of her binges — phone calls and emails — to sort it out.

I help around the house when I'm up to it, doing dishes, feeding the dogs, cleaning up. I like to work out. And I'm into archery, so I can practice in the backyard or at a target-shooting place.

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Tope lies on a tennis ball to help his back with his service dog, Echo, by his side.

Michael Chow/The Republic

I have a few friends who get me, but it's hard explaining things. Especially with girls. If I start dating pretty soon there's a conversation where I explain that it's hard for me to show affection or emotions. They say they understand, but it turns into a hassle and they're gone. I'm pretty sure it's on me because it keeps happening.

I'm mostly uncomfortable in groups. But I don't like being totally isolated, either. So, I do this thing — my mom thinks it's odd — where I'll go to a Circle K or Wal-Mart or 7-11 and buy a drink or snack. I'll stop at one store after another, not hungry or thirsty, not talking with anyone, just hanging around.

Echo can break the ice sometimes. Everybody loves this big, fluffy, Great Pyrenees. They want to know what breed she is, can they pet her? She starts a conversation. But then people want to know why I have a companion dog.

In the evening, I'll smoke in the patio. Sometimes I'll listen to music or audio books, just hanging with the dogs.

Around 8 o'clock, I'll take my night meds and start dozing on the couch. Because of the tinnitus I can't really tolerate silence, so I'll go to sleep with the TV on. A couple hours later I'll make my way to bed. Nightmares wake me up, and my mom will come out and tell me to go back to sleep.

It all starts over the next morning.

With the Iron Brigade

I was glad to deploy the second time, in 2007, but they moved me out of my unit and the mission was a mess.

I got assigned with the Iron Brigade, a tank platoon in Sadr City at a small joint-security station. The insurgents would shoot rockets at us, mostly hitting a hotel that acted as a shield.

I was responsible for the health of about 27 soldiers and also trained them in combat lifesaving. We were short of medics, so I went on just about every mission, 400 or so in a year.

The perimeter wall had only a few openings at checkpoints. Insurgents would fill coffee cans with explosives, plant them in the wall and set them off as patrols passed.

Editor's note: *The following video shows life in the combat zone and contains profanity.*

I was walking alongside a vehicle one time and I saw the dust and concussion wave before it hit us. Boom! It's just so sudden, and you're on the ground.

Another time I was in the lead vehicle when the one behind us got hit by an IED. It killed the whole crew, and I got there and it's kind of a blur, but I remember pulling open the doors and there wasn't much left to identify. The guys in there were close friends. I thought, "That could've been me ..."

A newspaper report on the Iron Brigade's tour said 22 of us didn't get out of Iraq alive.

The attacks get jumbled in my head. I climbed into exploded tanks and pulled out soldiers. I was in a Humvee hit by an RPG. I woke up to everybody poking at me, and I thought I'd just fallen asleep.

Later, they moved us to Camp Ford. There didn't seem to be a clear objective, just a clusterf-k, so we baked in the heat. I spent a lot of time scrounging for food. Mostly frozen chicken cooked over a fire, and mozzarella cheese sticks.

Snipers fired on the compound regularly, and I wound up fixing a lot of guys during a major attack. The tank unit got commendation medals with valor, but as a medic on loan I never received one.

I was able to help civilians sometimes. One village kid had birth defects — a giant growth on the back of his head and a twisted spine. I wrote up paperwork and he was flown to Jordan for surgery. I never saw him again, but I felt like I'd done something good.



Tope hands out candy to children in Sadr City, Iraq.

Courtesy of Derek Tope

Discharged and reenlisted

Somewhere along the way, going on leave just felt depressing and frustrating. I couldn't even Skype with my family.

My friends back home were getting married, working on careers, going to school. I was different. Even with family it was hard. If you go to a party, there's this gap that can't be filled by small talk. Yeah, Army. Iraq. Yeah, I saw combat. Words can't cover what you've been through — what you've done. They won't understand. So you withdraw.

Near the end of my second Iraq tour, I finished a mission about 4 a.m. and started checking out MySpace. There was a posting by a girl from Mountain View High. We had mutual friends, but I never got to know her. Anyway, she looked hot and I sent a note.

It turned into texting and emailing and talking on the phone. I went on leave a few months after deployment, meeting my family in Ireland. She came with them and then returned with me to Germany.

By the spring of 2009, I was facing the Army's stop-loss system — being pushed to reenlist or get out. If I stayed, I was going to be stuck with hospital duty rather than combat. Most of my buddies were discharging, so I joined them.

The wedding was in Arizona a year later. It was a bad idea. A lot of it was just the fear that I didn't have someone and was going to get old alone. I had nothing going as a civilian. No job. No plan.



Derek Tope is welcomed home by his family in September 2019 at Sky Harbor International Airport after his second deployment.
Courtesy of Derek Tope

I joined the Army Reserve, but weekend soldiering turned out to be a joke. So I reenlisted in June 2010, joining as a private because I insisted on infantry and had to go through another boot camp. It was a demotion, but I didn't care.

The Army put me in Hawaii, which is where we started married life.

'Made for the military'

I was thrilled to be back in uniform, and my time as an infantryman was the best of my life.

Once deployed to Afghanistan I was in my domain. Even with the fear and firefights, it was everything you could have wanted growing up — just shooting guns and stuff.

As a medic in Iraq, I found out I could handle bullets and mortars without running away. But as an infantry soldier with the Wolfhounds, I felt like I'd found my niche. I was alive. I felt invincible.

During Task Force Bronco, I got promoted to sergeant on a fast track: team leader for 3rd Platoon, Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment.

The responsibility changed my mindset. When you're thinking only about yourself in combat, it's pretty easy: "Guys shoot at me; I shoot back." But when you're leading people, you worry about them and have to tell them what to do in the middle of a firefight. Instant evaluation, decision, action.

In the heat of battle, surrounded by Alpha Team, I found my talent. I was able to say, "OK, I've got this." I knew what was allowed, what was being a jerk, what worked. I was so proud of those guys. Not one of my guys was killed or wounded.



Derek Tope at the Pirtle King outpost in Kunar Province, Afghanistan.
courtesy of Derek Tope

There was a Hispanic private, real green and extremely quiet. Some in Alpha Team thought he was a problem. I started assigning myself to guard shifts with him. We'd listen to the Killers and other bands together, and he started to open up. He turned out to be smart and tough, the kind of soldier who cleaned his .240 without being told.

This may seem weird, but my favorite memory was night duty at Combat Outpost Bari Alai in Kunar Province. This was up on a hill overlooking Pirtle King, where we'd rotate in for lookout duty.

Nobody wanted the garbage detail, but a buddy and I volunteered and turned it into a game.

The job was to incinerate everything in the outhouses and trash pit. You could only do it at night because snipers would kill you in daylight. We started improvising with fuel and mortar fuses, creating bigger and hotter fires. We'd improvise rockets using tubes and an earthen chute.

It was like kids messing with gas and firecrackers, only military style. Before we started, nobody wanted Trash & S-t Duty. By the time we finished, everybody was volunteering.

'100% disabled'

There's always pain, sometimes stabbing, other times just discomfort. You don't get used to it. On good days, you resolve to live life and ignore it. Other times, you curl up in a ball and feel like crying or dying, wondering if it'll ever go away.

Over three deployments I got concussed by maybe a dozen roadside bombs, mortars and a rocket-propelled grenade. Not bleeding wounds because the hits were mostly downrange, but some knockout punches.

I'm pretty sure the RPG hit at Pirtle King did the spinal damage, but it could have been an accumulation.

Stenosis is just this pain down my neck, shoulder, arm. VA doctors tried spinal injections, then surgery. My voice is weak and a little raspy because they went through my neck to the spine and accidentally nicked a nerve. My voice is slowly getting better.

The neurosurgeon wants to do another operation, but I've got to quit smoking first. I've tried, but it's about the only thing that really gives me any comfort.

I developed another condition after spinal surgery: lymphedema. It makes my hands, arms and legs swell with fluids. I get these lumps that sometimes erupt into infected sores. Nobody knows for sure what caused it. But there's no cure. So we do massages. I wrap my hands and wear compression socks to press the fluids out.

Concussions screwed up my balance. Roadside bombs left me with partial hearing loss. I tried to use hearing aids but hated the feeling.

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Tope is treated for lymphedema. He says, "It makes my hands, arms and legs swell with fluids. I get these lumps that sometimes erupt into infected sores."
Michael Chow/The Republic

With the sleep apnea, I can't use the breathing machine because of my damaged vocal cord. A lot of little things end up being a lot of big things.

During the opioid furor, they cut me off from painkillers. My neck and shoulder were in agony, like pliers gripping the nerve, sometimes freezing cold, but red hot when I'd cough or sneeze. They insisted I was just going through withdrawal. They wanted me to declare myself an addict. They said I needed to learn coping methods. I started talking suicide.

The PTSD is like a ball inside, mixed with depression. I went to a program at the University of Florida to learn coping skills, and it's helped me keep the anger under wraps. I don't yell anymore. But sometimes, when the pain hits 9 or 10, it all just spirals. I start thinking about how I messed up. All my symptoms compound and feed on one another.

The anxiety attacks aren't as bad. I see a shrink two or three times a month. He's got the medications right, now. For a long time, I was like a dead man walking. Now I can actually feel things.

Today, the VA has me rated 100% disabled, with more than two dozen physical and mental health disorders all getting treated at once.

The list of providers is endless: neurologist, psychiatrist, psychologist, physiatrist, endocrinologist, dermatologist, rheumatologist, podiatrist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, vestibular therapist, sleep therapist, audiologist, pain specialist, acupuncturist — even a fly-fishing therapist.

My mom assembled all the records over the past decade in a packet. It's 570 pages, not counting 2,321 pages in a VA electronic file.

Tattoos

I went through training with a guy named Nick Crombie. We shipped overseas in 2006 and spent weeks together in Germany and Kuwait. By the time we hit Iraq, we were more than just comrades or drinking buddies — just real close.

About a week after we got to Ramadi, in June of 2006, I was supposed to ride along as medic on an infantry patrol, but one of the officers ordered all the smokers to pick up cigarette butts in camp. Crombie got sent in my place, and I gave him a hug goodbye.

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After three tours of duty, Tope has many tattoos, and a story for each.

Michael Chow/The Republic

Around 4 a.m., the patrol returned to camp. One of the guys said, “Yeah, um, Crombie kind of got blown up.”

I was among those picked to identify the body. Nick had a nautical star tattoo on his elbow. Now I've got that same star in the crook of my arm as a memorial.

I got the medic symbol under my right arm when I was halfway through training. A bunch of us went to a bar, mostly older guys, and they started buying me rounds. There was a parlor next door.

I got the neck tattoo, “DNA,” in Hawaii. I told my wife it was our first initials — D and A. Truth is, I learned my family history had a lot of military going back generations, so it was in my blood. A lot of people think it says “DNR,” which is not good: Do not resuscitate.

The infinity symbol covers my heart. I was drunk on vodka and didn't realize the artist was terrible until she started jabbing me real deep. I wound up with what looks like a pair of eyeballs on my chest.

Theft and court-martial

When we got back to Hawaii from Afghanistan, around April of 2013, I stayed in this building the Japanese had bombed during the attack on Pearl Harbor. There was a big ceremony for World War II vets, and the sergeant major introduced me as a hero who saved a fellow soldier.

But around then is when things got screwed up. My marriage had fallen apart. Our money was going to lawyers because my wife had gotten busted for DUI.

The pain in my shoulder and neck was crippling. I was passing a kidney stone. I needed Ambien to sleep, and sometimes they'd prescribe Oxycontin for pain. But I had to drink beers until I crashed at night, then fight off nightmares.

Some of the guys were smoking heroin, and I got into it with them. In retrospect, a lot of bad choices. I was in a fog, and it just spiraled.

Two of my soldiers came to me and said they'd stolen a pair of Army NVGs (night-vision goggles) and traded them to a drug dealer. I was worried they'd get caught in an equipment audit, so I found the dealer. I threatened to tell the Army he had the NVGs, and we got into a fight before it was resolved.

When I returned the goggles to the arms room, I figured it was a no-harm/no-foul situation. But the soldier there reported it, command launched an inquiry and I wound up being interrogated for days by criminal investigators.

It's stupid because the dates don't match. The NVGs were stolen two weeks before I even visited the arms room.

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Tope says after he told the truth, he expected a slap on the wrist from the Army. The reality is much different.

Michael Chow/The Republic

Investigators wanted me to name the thieves. I would have died for my soldiers a few weeks earlier, so I wasn't going to flip.

But I told the truth eventually — even about using heroin. I expected a slap on the wrist. I'd gotten blown up for the Army, saved lives, earned decorations. But they just saw a thief and a liar.

The commander, a new guy who didn't know me, pressed court-martial charges for drug possession and theft. I realized, "Oh, s-t, they've used everything I said against me."

They told me I faced up to 60 years if it went to trial, or I could plead guilty and get far less time. I wanted to stay in the military. I saw it as my career. So, I took the deal and asked the judge to give me more brig time but let me remain in the Army. He agreed. No one told me I'd face administrative discharge after prison.

The plea agreement is full of lies. But I signed it thinking the judge would see the errors and throw it out. He asked what I received for the goggles, and I said nothing. But nobody cared. The conviction is dated Jan. 29, 2013.

In the brig

I was in an isolation unit at the brig in Hawaii, deprived of sleep, just pissed off.

Six years a soldier, three combat tours, no prior disciplinary history. It didn't make sense.

I kept analyzing my situation, and it began to hit me: I was a cog in the system, and I'd screwed up. I made snap decisions, like in Iraq and Afghanistan, instead of thinking things through.

Everything is stripped away: reputation, pride, friends, freedom, the Army. Sit in a cell with nothing but time and you begin to see yourself differently: "Oh, man, I'm a selfish little a-hole just thinking about me."

I realized how bad things were: broken marriage, body and future. I didn't want to deal with it. I took a lace from my boot, tied one end around my neck, tied the other end to some overhead pipes.

I spent a few days in the psych ward, and the Army finally ran some PTSD and TBI tests, which came up positive. They put me back in the brig. My mom was hounding Sen. McCain's office, pleading for me to get PTSD treatment, to no avail.

A few months later, I was shipped to the military prison at Miramar Naval Air Station in San Diego. The place was full of sex offenders and other creeps. As far as anyone was concerned, I was just another scumbag. The excellent soldier in my head wasn't a lie, but I began to think maybe I was a problem.

I'd been there a while when I noticed other inmates watching a National Geographic show on TV, a documentary about combat in Afghanistan. I didn't pay attention until the news guy mentioned Pirtle King. They were showing an RPG attack, and I sort of blurted out, "Yeah, I was there." They laughed, but a few seconds later, the video image was this soldier putting his finger into a neck wound. "Hey, that's me!"

On TV, they talked about how the instant medical care saved Adams' life. I got an Army commendation with valor. There was supposed to be a Bronze Star, but it never got processed.

Later, one of my Army lawyers visited me in the brig. He kept asking, "What's your name again?" I went out to the garden, grabbed a pick and just started pounding dirt.

'Broke, depressed, done in'

The prison sentence ended in August of 2014, and I was transferred to Fort Sill.

It may sound naive, but I expected to resume Army life. Instead, they started processing my discharge.

My mom went ballistic because they hadn't treated my combat-related health problems. She went after the Pentagon and politicians with emails saying they'd abandoned a wounded warrior and denied medical care. She compiled proof and got a bunch of military doctors and nurses to write letters corroborating her complaints.

An advocate with the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center joined the campaign, and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel finally intervened. Near the end of 2014, I was sent to the National Intrepid Center of Excellence at Walter Reed Army Hospital in D.C. I spent a month getting a full diagnosis of PTSD, TBI, spinal degeneration, sleep apnea and hearing loss.

The Army specialists wanted me placed in a transition unit for wounded warriors. They wrote, "It was our recommendation that (Derek) not be chaptered out of the Army, and he was not cleared by behavioral health ..."

At the center, we had this art therapy class where traumatized soldiers sculpted faces to express their feelings. National Geographic did an article and showed a bunch of the masks. Mine was a bronze and black wolf.

At the Intrepid Center, I finally felt like there was an explanation for my fog and pain. We thought the Army would do the right thing. But the commander at Fort Sill ignored Army medical experts. He refused to authorize spinal surgery. He gave me two choices: I could accept an honorable discharge immediately. Or I could seek what's known as a Med Board, where a panel decides whether a soldier is medically fit to remain in the military.

They told me no one coming out of the brig had ever won a medical discharge. If I requested one and it got turned down, I'd be drummed out as "other-than-honorable." That would disqualify me from VA health care. I'd even have to repay my enlistment bonus.

I was broke, depressed, done in. I couldn't risk losing VA benefits. I waived my rights to a medical review. On Feb. 3, 2015, I was discharged under honorable conditions.

A few months later, the Army surgeon general issued a finding that I "should have been referred for evaluation for a medical discharge."

Back in Arizona

Back in Arizona, I felt lost.

I was living in the room where I grew up. Couldn't find work. Ineligible for unemployment. Constant misery.

The Army decided I had mistakenly received paychecks while in prison and demanded money that my ex-wife already had spent.



Tope has dinner in March 2019 with his mom, Sharon Grassi, to whom he says he owes everything.

Michael Chow/The Republic

Cigarettes were the only comfort, and Echo.

When I was about to get out of the brig, I started researching companion dogs and settled on a Great Pyrenees. My mom went online and found puppies for sale in Tennessee. She wound up getting two of them.

My dad knew he couldn't bring a photograph into the brig, so he had pictures of the dogs printed on a T-shirt that he wore during visitation. When I saw Echo's raccoon eyes — like the tattoo over my heart — that was it.

I named her partly for an Army infantry company, but also after a mountain nymph in Greek mythology.

This was at the height of the veterans' health-care crisis, which started at the Phoenix hospital. I'd book an appointment and show up only to learn it was canceled. I'd get a referral for physical therapy from the specialist, but the VA wouldn't authorize treatment. I was always afraid I was going to blow up at them. That's what they want. Then they can call security and don't have to deal with you anymore.

Army specialists had called for a disk replacement, but VA would only do a fusion. I underwent neurosurgery in mid-2015. It did no good: My spine and shoulder were still agony, and that's when they started cutting off painkillers. They kept accusing me of being a drug addict. I wasn't faking pain; it was so horrible I couldn't even do physical therapy.

They gave me a compression pump for my lymphedema, but I couldn't use it because the sleeve didn't fit.

When my mom first took up the crusade, she wrote to the head of Phoenix VA's mental health unit, a diatribe about unethical care. It didn't do any good.

I threw some tantrums and at one point I went to the VA psych ward, talking about suicide.

My mom finally quit her job and started going to appointments with me.

We butted heads early on, especially when my meds were out of whack. I'd go into a rage and she'd get in my face. We had similar hassles when I was a kid. But now she uses that stubbornness for me. I feel bad because she's put up with so much.

Gradually, the prescriptions got regulated and she figured out where I needed help.

She's just a pit bull with all this stuff, writing letters and meeting with VA bosses, campaigning for caregivers, airing everything on her "Support Sgt. Tope" page on Facebook.

My mom became a fellow with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, and has been nominated to serve on a national VA advisory panel of caregivers.

A while back she wrote, "We build vehicle armor, tank armor, body armor to make our guys not die, and we treat them like action heroes when they survive with little to no visible bloodshed. Then we get angry at them when they can't perform ..."

'Future is fuzzy'

■

Tope enjoys working out and practicing archery, a sport his grandfather taught him.

Michael Chow/The Republic

I'm working toward a history degree, but where does that lead?

I thought about museum curator, but it would mean dealing with kid tours. Lifeguard? It's just too many people. Maybe taxidermy. Or mortician. I don't know.

I like gardening. In the brig at Mirimar, we had an area for training service dogs. A guy gave me a book on worm farming, and I started collecting scraps from the cafeteria, mixing them into a compost heap, growing red wigglers.

My grandfather got me into archery. It's tough with swollen hands, and my right arm is weak. But shooting makes me focus, takes my mind off other things. Last year, I signed up to compete in the Far West Valor Games. My mom went nuts trying to get the VA to supply meds before our trip, but no luck. So we took off for the Bay Area without enough pills for my stenosis. I almost made it, but in Modesto the pain got so bad I started throwing up. We wound up driving home with me curled up in a ball, puking.

I had this psychology class at MCC. The instructor was talking about the central nervous system and phantom feelings that amputees have where their fingers or legs used to be. He showed video of a guy with a missing arm. The dude's name was Derek.

Then he talked about brain damage, the unanticipated behavior it causes and the uncertain recovery. He mentioned Gabby Giffords getting shot in the head, and it reminded me of the Iraqi civilian with a hole in his chin. Injury just seems so random. Get hit in one lobe of the brain and you lose speech, or creativity, or vision or anger control. Chance.

Afterward, in my truck, I put on a playlist. The first song was "Dyin' to Live" by the Smallpools:

Sinkin' down just a little bit,

Now I'm climbing up the hourglass.

Here we go, and I wonder:

Have I lost my mind?

My life is pretty much down to a routine, but the future is fuzzy. I'm in a cloud. But if I go off the antidepressants and anxiety meds, it's like this wave and pretty soon I'm out of control.

It's almost better if I don't think back in time, wondering how my life would be if I had handled things differently. What if I'd just kept my mouth shut? Maybe nobody would have noticed the NVDs were missing.

I've lost touch with most of my Army friends. It just feels weird. I don't like the way I got out. I know a lot of them wouldn't give a s-t. But it's less than honorable.

I try to look forward, but nothing in the future can match my time as a soldier. If I could erase it all and go back into the Army, I'd do it in a second. I'd have to get in shape. My body's a f-king mess. But I'd limp my way back into the military. Mentally, I'm a lot stronger. I've matured.

Even if I could last just a few years, it would be worth it.

EPILOGUE: 'My injuries were ignored and my behavior deemed criminal'

Back in late 2015, I filed an appeal of my discharge with the Army Board of Corrections. It says I suffered multiple combat injuries during eight years of service and three deployments.

"Due to the need of my units during combat operations, my injuries went untreated while I continued to provide the best support I could as a medic and infantryman. When I finally broke down and needed care, my injuries were ignored and my behavior deemed criminal."

Derek R. Tope, U.S. Army veteran

I'm responsible for everything — the decisions I made. But I know the medical problems played into it. I was like a car without oil. It'll keep running until it catches fire and breaks down.

They denied the appeal. My mom went through the notification line by line and resubmitted it with documentation to refute each finding.

On June 6, the Board of Corrections issued a new ruling: My separation from the military was improperly handled, and "full relief to your request is granted." The board announced my discharge will be changed from administrative to medical.

I know it'll be impossible to get a court-martial conviction overturned. I'm responsible for everything — the decisions I made. But I know the medical problems played into it. I was like a car without oil. It'll keep running until it catches fire and breaks down.

The same thing happens to thousands of other soldiers. It could have been handled differently.

Someday, I'd like to go through life and just be normal. There's still a lot of pain. It's at 5 or 6 instead of 8 or 9 — in the background, mostly. And I'll adapt.

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