

DEPLOYED, DECORATED AND LIVING IN A CAR

The Story of US Marine Corps Sergeant
Christopher Horman

“I was about 50 meters away when it blew up. The blast knocked me off my feet and into the side of a Humvee. I must have blacked out for a minute or two, but when I came to there was nothing left of the vehicle. No remnants; just char and a crater.”

When 28-year-old Christopher Harmon was discharged on May 26, 2006, after eight years in the Marine Corps, he had a chestful of decorations and a pile of honorable citations.

During his deployment to Iraq in 2005 Chris led an elite bomb squad patrolling the neighborhoods and alleyways of Baghdad and smaller towns like Kandari, site of Abu Ghraib Prison. During the siege of the prison on April 5, 2005, Chris and his 15-man team were the only ground troops outside the walls during the precision-timed offensive. “We were on a foot patrol at the rear of the insurgents. They didn’t know how many of us there were but we knew there were over 100 of them, so I told everyone to spread out.”

Chris sprinted from man to man during the 54-minute firefight, encouraging them to be aggressive. “My machine gunner shot 850 rounds. It was like nothing I’ve ever experienced.” Afterward, US military officers would call the siege the most sophisticated and concerted insurgent attack up to that point in the war, and would single out Chris’ leadership as critical to the attackers’ defeat. The next day, while securing a deserted car suspected of containing an IED, the vehicle exploded. “I was about 50 meters away when it blew up. The blast knocked me off my feet and into the side of a Humvee. I must have

blacked out for a minute or two, but when I came to there was nothing left of the vehicle. No remnants; just char and a crater. It scared the living shit out of me.”

While his discharge papers described compression injuries to his back, knees and ankles, and a chronically dislocated shoulder from repeatedly jumping out of vehicles while carrying heavy backpacks and equipment, as well as his two-year struggle with PTSD, Chris was not tested for Traumatic Brain Injury.

Chris returned to Seattle with his wife, Kathy, and their three boys, Austin, 9 (from a previous marriage), Zachary, 5, and Xandar, 2. Kathy was from North Carolina and she'd never been out of the state. “Except for worrying about Chris’ safety, the boys and I had been comfortable at Camp LeJeune. I didn’t see the logic of moving to Seattle but I was willing to try it if that was what Chris wanted to do. The hardest part was getting out there a month before he was discharged.” She had met his parents once. Chris and Kathy moved in with Chris’ father and stepmother, and almost immediately the situation soured. “Before I went to Iraq I was open and happy; but after I got back I started getting depressed. I was scared of going out in crowds. When Kathy and I would go to the grocery store, I’d break out in a cold sweat if I couldn’t find her. The smallest things like a pop or a bang made me jump.”

Chris’ VA benefits hadn’t kicked in yet, and he had to find a way to support his family. He started job hunting. Personable and, at the time, highly motivated, Chris overcame his lack of a college degree and mental problems and found a job at the Union Pacific Railroad as a conductor in training. During his time in Iraq Chris had been given 80mm of Prozac a day for his PTSD, an amount that shocked the physicians at the Seattle Veterans’ hospital where he went for treatment. “Why the hell are you on a major anxiety drug?” one doctor said. “I wouldn’t give this to anyone in your condition, particularly in combat.” The doctors experimented with various cocktails of medications: Zoloft, Paxil, Efferex, Cymbalta and others, singly and in combinations. Each prescription had side effects and none really worked.

Then, after just six weeks, the Union Pacific training program was suddenly dismantled and Chris was let go. He became depressed and anxious and withdrew into himself. “I tuned out. I’d stare at the tele-

vision all day and see nothing. I had headaches and ringing in my ears, but most of all I was drowning in a black hole.” His father, an Army veteran of 32 years, couldn’t understand why his son, the youngest of four brothers, two of whom were deceased, could not get his act together. They fought. “He yelled at me, ‘The way you’re acting, you’re spitting on all your dead brothers.’ I took Kathy and the kids and left the house.” Chris moved his family to Spokane to live with his birth mother, whom he had not seen since he was two, but he was unable to find work and returned to Seattle, this time moving in with his brother’s family.

He was accepted into “Hard Hats,” a program training military veterans to become sheet metal workers. “The problem was, I was out of shape and had gained weight and my body couldn’t take it. I’d try to lift or carry those heavy sheets of metal, and my back would just give out.” Two weeks into the job Chris told the foreman he couldn’t physically handle the work. A few weeks later he found another job, this time as a security guard at \$6.00 an hour. But his depression was worsening along with disturbing new symptoms such as loss of memory. He was unable to concentrate on the simplest of tasks.

“I got so paranoid. I was in a state of panic most of the time. I don’t think people understand the pain of what goes on in your head. You’ve lost yourself and it’s scary as shit. No one sympathized. I mean it wasn’t as though I’d lost a leg or gotten shot up. It was all in my head.” After ten minutes on the security guard job, Chris’ back, knees and legs would seize up, putting him in excruciating pain. He had to quit. “I had no money for gas so I spent a lot of time on the Internet trying to find a job. My brother didn’t understand what was going on. His wife got fed up with us and had the cable disconnected. We had a big argument and I said, ‘Okay, I guess we’re uninvited.’” Chris and his family were homeless.

Kathy sent her oldest son, Austin, back to North Carolina to live with his father. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life,” she says. “I’d raised him by myself, and it broke my heart to have to send him where I knew he wasn’t wanted, but we weren’t getting by and I didn’t know what else to do.” To make ends meet, Chris and Kathy sold their belongings and pawned their wedding rings. Yet a few days later they and their two sons were living out of their car. Someone told

a radio station about their plight and it broadcast their story, which raised enough money to pay for a cheap motel and food for the two boys.

“I wanted to give up so many times,” Kathy recalls, “but even at his most depressed, Chris believed we could do it.” At the end of their rope, they were rescued by the Marine Corps in the form of a final check for moving expenses for transitioning out of the military. They got their rings out of the pawnshop, packed up their few belongings and drove across country back to Raleigh, North Carolina where Kathy’s older sister lived. However, instead of improving, their lives went downhill.

“We got Austin back and moved in with Patty. But her husband was a drunk and a month after we got there he threatened me with a shotgun. That night we packed up our bags and left. It was the worst of the worst. We’d sold all our furniture, and the souvenirs I’d brought back from my deployments. Everything we owned was in three Rubber Maid tubs. By 3 a.m. we’d been driving around Raleigh for hours.” The next morning Chris called “Marine 4 Life” asking for help. Within 24 hours the Marine 4 Life team had moved the family into a motel.

It was then that Chris and his family first came to the attention of the Armed Forces Foundation. The Marine 4 Life team contacted the Foundation requesting financial assistance for Chris and his family while they helped him look for a job. The foundation immediately paid for the family’s lodging and food for the week. Chris interviewed with Norfolk Southern Railroad and there was a good possibility of employment. At the end of the week the Marines moved the family into the Warrior homes at Camp LeJeune, fully furnished on-base housing designated for injured veterans and their families. Better yet, during their two and a half months stay there Chris was able to get regular treatment for his PTSD symptoms. A number of organizations, including the AFF and the Semper Fi Fund, covered the family’s expenses. Chris’s paranoia and depression lessened, and the nightmares that awakened him three and four times each night began to dissipate. The worst was over.

The position with Norfolk Southern was still iffy, so in August when Chris was offered a job as a manager trainee with the Kangaroo

Pantry in Greenville he took it, even though the starting salary was miniscule and there was no health coverage until he spent a year with the company. The Semper Fi Fund helped move the family and paid their first and last month's rent so that they could get settled into an apartment. Austin and Zachary needed to begin school. The Armed Forces Foundation contacted Aaron's Furniture to see if they would donate furniture since the family still owned nothing but a few bundles of clothing. Aarons donated a living room suite, bunk beds and a toddler bed for the boys' room, a bed and chest for Chris and Kathy, and a washer and a dryer. By now Chris was receiving \$1,100.00 a month in Veteran's benefits but he still couldn't feed his family, get treatment for his PTSD, and pay the rent.

In early October, Norfolk Southern accepted him into their conductor training program, and Chris decided to take their offer as a second chance to find the security he and his family so desperately needed. The railroad job came with medical benefits after two weeks of work, as well as higher pay. "His optimism always won me over," Kathy says. "I remember times when we had to drop everything and leave, but I always trusted him because he never gave up. He said 'My boys deserve better and I promise I'm going to get it for them.'" The family moved into an apartment in Norfolk, enrolled the two older boys in school, and Chris started training. They had to pawn their wedding rings a second time in February 2008 to pay their electrical and heating bills, but by the end of March Chris completed his training and became a conductor for Norfolk Southern. He had made good on his promise.

MEDALS

Combat Action Ribbon (Iraq), 2 Marine Corps Good Conduct Medals, Humanitarian Service Medal, 6 Sea Service Deployment Ribbon, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal (Haiti), Iraq Campaign Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, National Defense Service Medal, 2 Navy Unit Commendations.

“The story of Mr. Woodruff’s recovery is nothing short of a miracle. He considers himself lucky to have received incredible care. Not only did he have to go through surgery and grafts to repair the physical damage to his face and head, but needed rehabilitative for the unseen damage to his memory, thought processes and speech. In addition to his initial treatment upon returning from Iraq, he needed constant follow-up therapy to recuperate his cognitive abilities.”

—“Brain Injured Newspaperman Speaks Out For Returning Iraq War Veterans,” Fern Cohen, www.ezinearticles.com
