Taking Flight

A Hero Story

By Maryanne Peters

They said that Jimmy was a changed man after he got home from the war. They said he was a hero, but that he might never be the man he used to be. And he wasn't. He was discharged quietly.

We all assumed that we knew wat it was. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – PTSD. We have all heard of it. People seem to claim it if they fall off their bike swerving to avoid traffic. They are traumatized. They can’t get over it. They wake up in the night with the memory of the moment a week later. It must be a permanent scar on the psyche? What do they know?

Combat is true stress. I am not talking about fear of death. Driving a car at speed on a country road puts you only a couple of feet away from death, and you can live with that, and even push down harder on the gas. The driver ignores the fear of death, and so does the soldier. The difference is that in battle every oncoming car is trying to kill you.

There is that and the noise and the blood and the smell of death – constantly. The toughest man with no regard for his own safety will crumble when the brains of the man beside him splatters across his face. It is not adding to the fear of death, it is the taking away of a comrade in arms – maybe even a true friend. It is cancelling his future and all that he might have achieved, or that his children might have achieved. It is not fear, it is tragedy. And in battle it seems like tragedy without end.

And through all of that, Jimmy showed no sign of fear. That is not completely correct. If he feared, it was that he feared for our safety. Never for his own. Some said that he was like a lioness protecting her young. They had no idea how close they came to understanding Jimmy.

He was our platoon commander. Most of the ranks dislike officers – the educated ones who give orders from the back and are always dressing down the grunts. But Jimmy was not like that. We had a sergeant who had seen plenty of action and told us that he had never had a CO like him.

“That kid is the bravest man I have ever known,” he said – more than once.

We had to agree. We all knew it. When we were under heavy fire and taking cover he would be seeking a place to spot the enemy from and calling out targets.

No bawling us out either. He might say – “I saw you trip. You were right to stay down. Just get us down first next time, all right? You don’t want the guys to think badly of you -do you?”

For some of us, we were only concerned about what he might think of us. He was like a God, where a nod of approval in our direction was like a life-giving elixir in a video game. You just felt your strength and your courage build.

PTSD? Not Jimmy. Nobody believed that.

I could tell so many stories, but when it boils down to it, the plot is the same. Attack by insurgents leads to confusion and injury, Jimmy takes charge, we fight back, insurgents disappear. It turns out that it how they always fight. On the body count we win, but really, they are winning, in the long term.

And through it all, there was Jimmy. Not a big guy physically but with a presence that made him a champion. He seemed like a man’s man. I had never heard of “hypermasculinity” but if you had explained it to me, I would have said – “Yep, that’s Jimmy”.

People had told me that he cried in his sleep. I never believed it, but why wouldn’t he? It is just the tear ducts keeping the eyeballs from drying out. It means nothing when you are asleep.

He was close with all of us. He never wanted to leave. He said it too – “As long as you guys are staying, I am staying.” We believed him. We believed in him.

Then one day he was gone. The C.O. called us in to address us. He knew how much it meant to us. He said it was a medical thing. A discharge on medical grounds with the old “I can’t go into details. It is a matter of privacy” stuff.

We were all in shock. Everyone said that he must have cracked in front of the medical examiner, like a severe case of PTSD – something that warranted immediate discharge. What else could it be?

Nobody wanted to stay after Jimmy was gone. We all counted down the days. We wanted to get the hell out of that place. Somehow it was no longer an adventure – it was just about avoiding death. Injury was okay if it was serious enough to get you out. And to think that when I got that shrapnel in my thigh when Jimmy was running things, I said – “Patch me up and send me back to my unit”. And I meant it.

But that was the injury that took me to the VA hospital when I finally did leave the service. A piece of shrapnel had been left in my thigh and while I had barely noticed it since the injury it was moving, and the judgement was that it needed to be extracted. I went into the hospital for an operation to remove it.

The surgeon had been stationed near to where my unit was based, and when he was checking on me while I was in recovery after a successful extraction, I happened to mention Jimmy. I said that maybe he knew the background, and I asked how none of us could be aware that he was suffering from PSTD.

“I remember him – an outstanding officer. No, that was not PTSD,” he said, and then he added with a grin - “You might call it … let me see … TDSD – Trump Determined Sex Dysphoria. Jimmy’s condition was gender dysphoria.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. But he said that he had probably told me too much. He suggested that I ask around to find out what it was. I did not have to go far. The nurse who discharged me told me.

It seemed unbelievable. I described Jimmy to her. How could he think that he was anything other than a man?

"This is a classic flight into hypermasculinity,” she said. “So many join the service to find a way through their problem. They surround themselves with men who are comrades. They choose a regimented life where they follow orders and don’t make choices. They become as masculine as a man can be, but they are living a lie.”

I explained that I felt that I should tell others in my unit, but I needed to check with Jimmy first. It was a lie. I did not catch up with the guys as much as a I should, and I would respect Jimmy’s privacy if he chose not to tell us, but my purpose was to reach out to him.

“I can track him down,” the nurse said. “But I won’t give you any contact – I will do that and invite him to contact you.”

That seemed fair. I said that all I wanted was to know that he was alright, and maybe to tell him something of what happened to the guys after he left.

It was about a month before I heard anything. I got a call on my cell from a woman called Jessica who suggested that a meeting could be arranged. I could come around to her place that very Sunday evening. I agreed. I took down her address. It was in a neighboring state, but I could drive there and stay over in a motel. I thanked her for arranging it.

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| I spent a good part of the day driving there, but I got to the house on time at 16:00.  The door was open with just the screen door closed so I knocked. I saw a woman coming towards me through the screen mesh. She was wearing a long floral dress and sandals, and had long hair was curled and blonde. As she opened the screen I said – “You must be Jessica?” And then I stopped dead.  “I am now,” she said.  She was unbelievably pretty. Her skin was smooth and flawless. But those brown eyes belonged to somebody else, and if she had received surgery then she had left the nose slightly pushed to one side. I remembered the blast that had face-planted Jimmy into the dirt.  “Jimmy?”  “You had better come in,” she said. “I have a pot roast in the oven for later if you are interested in staying. But if you think the situation is a little weird I won’t think badly of you if you decline. I know it must be a lot to take in. I just try to be the best woman that I can be, you see?” | A person sitting on a bench  Description automatically generated |

“You have succeeded,” I croaked, because it seemed that in her presence, I barely had the ability to speak.

It came with the help of a beer. She had one too, but she handled it with a feminine elegance that continued to plague me with the notion that she might be Jimmy’s sister playing a game with me.

“Trump brought in a rule that all transsexuals should be discharged immediately,” she said. “I had declared my condition earlier and when I was called in off the battlefield I was invited to retract it and I refused. So I guess I have the past president to thank for who I am now. Without the service I had no reason to masquerade anymore.”

How strange that seemed – the notion that the man was the mask. But looking at her, that seemed exactly right. This was underneath the whole time. The man had been shed like the skin of a snake, and underneath it was this gorgeous creature.

The dress showed that she had breasts, but I wondered what else there might be under that fabric. Please God not a pair of hairy balls!

I gulped and started to talk about all the guys in the unit and some actions after Jimmy had left and before we went home. Everybody was out for good now.

“Jimmy was the glue that kept us together,” I said – just like that – in the third person.

“Jimmy was a lie,” she said. “You were all real people. You are real people. You are the heroes, not Jimmy. He was on a death wish crusade into harm’s way. He owes you all and apology.”

“That is not true,” I said. “You looked after us. You kept us safe. We only went where you were ordered to go, but you attacked rather than wait to be killed. We were lucky to be in your unit. Nobody thinks otherwise. But they all think that PTSD got to you.”

“You haven’t told them?”

“No. You can tell them if you want to.”

She smiled one of those mysterious smiles as women do. “Are you staying for dinner?” she asked.

I did. And I had not arranged a motel, so she invited me to stay the night too. We eaten well and finished off with a bourbon nightcap. But that had nothing to do with sleeping arrangements. I wanted her, and to my surprise, she wanted me.

Her body was perfect too. Every inch a woman. There was a scar or two that I recognized, and somehow kissing those blemishes made her all the more special.

We are married now, Jessica and I. We never talk about the past or her flight to hypermasculinity. The way she puts it, the only flight that mattered in her life was the one away from that, when she spread her wings and took to the sky, as a woman.

The End

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