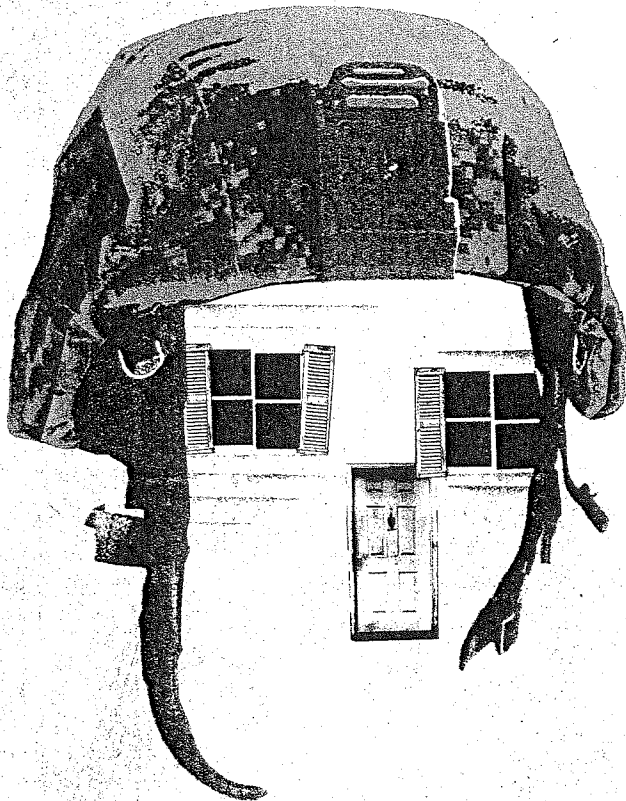


THE MILITARY LIFE

THE RETURN

The traumatized veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan.

BY DAVID FINKEL



The way it worked was that they joined the Army because they were starry-eyed or heartbroken or maybe just out of work, and then they were assigned to be in the infantry rather than to something with better odds, like finance or public affairs, and then by chance they were assigned to an infantry division that was about to rotate into the war, and then they were randomly assigned to a combat brigade that included two infantry battalions, one of which was going to a bad place and the other of which was going to a worse place, and then they were assigned to the battalion going to the worse place, and then they were assigned to the com-

pany in that battalion which went to the worst place of all. If you listen to the eulogies, so much of war is said to be accidental. Poor Harrelson. Wrong place. Poor Cajimat. Wrong time. But for members of Bravo Company, which in 2007 and 2008 spent fourteen months in combat, in a bomb-filled neighborhood in east Baghdad, the war eventually felt like the wrong everything. Twenty-five-year-old Nic DeNinno was in 3rd Platoon. He thought of himself as a patriot who had enlisted in the Army for the noblest of reasons: to contribute and to make some kind of difference. Then he punched his first Iraqi in the face, and pushed his first

Iraqi down the stairs. Now he was back in the United States, crying and telling his wife, Sascha, "I feel like a monster."

It was November, 2010, and he was in a twenty-three-bed psychiatric facility called Haven Behavioral War Heroes Hospital, in Pueblo, Colorado. It's on the top floor of a six-story building; the exit doors are bolted and the windows are screwed shut, to keep patients from jumping out. Two and a half years earlier, Nic had come home from the war relatively healthy. Then he began having nightmares and flashbacks. He talked with increasing frequency of killing himself, and made at least one attempt. He was counselled and put on anti-anxiety and antidepressant medications, but when he was found one night in mid-flashback, driving in the wrong direction on a one-way street, the decision was made to send him to a residential treatment program for twenty-eight days. Twenty-eight days to get it fixed, as one of Nic's sergeants said.

If war is accidental, so is what happens afterward. Two million Americans have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most of those who have come back describe themselves as physically and mentally healthy. They move forward. Their war recedes. Some are even stronger for the experience. But studies suggest that between twenty and thirty percent of returning veterans suffer, to varying degrees, from post-traumatic stress disorder, a mental-health condition triggered by some type of terror, or a traumatic brain injury, which occurs when the brain is jolted so violently that it collides with the inside of the skull, causing psychological damage. Every war has its after-war: depression, anxiety, nightmares, memory problems, personality changes, suicidal thoughts. If the studies prove correct, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have created roughly five hundred thousand mentally wounded American veterans.

For the worst off, there are programs like Haven Behavioral's, which offers intensive therapeutic services. But the Army has yet to figure out which of its hundreds of programs across the country are most effective. Some are part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Others, like Haven Behavioral, are private and for-profit. Some last seven weeks; others four weeks. Some mix sol-

Nightmares, flashbacks, and thoughts of suicide led Nic DeNinno to treatment.

diers who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan with Vietnam veterans; others are made up entirely of soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan. Some have been around for decades; Haven Behavioral, which opened in 2009, is one of a wave of programs begun when the extent of psychological damage caused by the current wars was becoming apparent and the wait for a vacancy in a V.A.-run program was lengthening. Is one program better than another for a mentally wounded soldier? The answer, in Nic's case: Haven Behavioral had an open spot.

"Contraband items," the instructions Nic was sent before leaving Fort Riley, Kansas, read. "Weapons or any object which could be used as a weapon. Razors. Hangers. Neckties, scarves, belts, shoe laces, strings in sweatpants. Any ropes, strings, or chains. Neck chains longer than 24 inches. Panty hose or long stockings. Glass of any kind. Any electrical appliance using an electrical cord. Any sharp object. Plastic bags—any and all . . ."

He saw the theme here.

When he left for the airport, Sascha watched him go, her heart sinking. They had been married for fourteen months. They had met a week or so after Nic got home, when she heard that some soldiers were back and went online to see who they were. Her father and her grandfather had been soldiers. Most of her uncles had served in the Army. She had a soft spot for the military. She liked that Nic was big and muscled and spoke thoughtfully and had a tattoo on his back that read "Unity and Peace." He got it when he was a teen-ager, he told her, before he thought of becoming a soldier, and she liked that about him, too. "You do know that something's wrong with him," a friend said.

He didn't like crowds. He had nightmares. He had received a diagnosis of P.T.S.D. and depression from the Army. She was concerned. But there was something about Nic that made her want to stick with him, and so she did, through his flashbacks, and drinking binges, and a suicide attempt by overdosing on drugs, and then she married him. Now she was six months pregnant, and hoping that Haven Behavioral would make him realize that he could tell her about the war, and that she could take it.

"Report to the East Entrance by the

flag pole and statue of Mary," Nic's instructions continued. "Go to the elevator, 6th floor, left out of elevator and pick up phone dial '0.'" He dialed "0." A door swung open and locked behind him, and before long someone was explaining how the program worked. For the first three days, he would be constantly monitored and could have no contact with anyone outside the program. After that, his privileges would be determined by his behavior, up to Level III, which included computer use, cell-phone use, trips under escort to the Loaf 'N Jug convenience store on the far side of the parking lot, unsupervised shaving, wearing shoes with laces, and having visitors. The day would begin with exercise at 6:30 A.M. There would be group sessions with the other twenty-two men in the program, on dealing with anger, setting goals, and, most important, talking about what had happened, over and over. Lights-out would be at 11 P.M. Nic was also expected to keep a journal. Out of profound need, or just the desire to wear shoes with laces again, he started doing that right away.

He wrote:

"My childhood was quite a normal one growing up, no physical abuse, loving parents. My dad traveled a lot but made up for it in family trips we took yearly around the world and all over the country. My mom never let me play with toy guns or any kind of weapons or watch TV during the day, instead she forced me and my brother to play outside rain or shine in the woods behind our house."

Of his decision to join the Army, he wrote that it was "one of those apifany-like moments."

He wrote about an early mission in Iraq:

"I don't remember the exact briefing before we left but we were to show extreme force and to let these people know we owned this city now. The adrenaline began to flow, the thought of having that kind of control was intoxicating in a sick way."

He wrote about the first soldier he saw killed in action, who had burned to death:

"What was left of his skeleton was hanging out of the driver-side door, his helmet a different color possibly fused to his skull and his IBA and plates which made up his torso, or what was left of it.

That image still haunts me, it changed me. . . . I don't know how many others saw that as we turned our trucks around but all I wanted was death and violence from then on. . . . To me this is where I lost my old self."

He wrote about being home:

"I try so hard to be polite to everyone but I don't know how much longer I can do it. I am trying to let this anger out bit by bit but it's like holding up a dam with my mind, letting bit by bit out to keep it from going over the edge or breaking all together. Is there no medium, have I gone past that point where there is a safe way to get all this out without losing control? I am beginning to feel not. I feel it's gonna happen soon. It's just a matter of who says the wrong thing at the right time."

He wrote about a nightmare:

"The anti-nightmare meds are not working. I was on a patrol last night and we entered a school, same as one from our deployment, but as we were clearing the school I went into an all-girl class and in real life they just screamed but in my dream they screamed and I opened fire, killing the whole class. What that is about I do not know. I am angry I have these dreams, I am angry they don't stop. I miss my pleasant dreams of my past."

He started to write about another nightmare, but he didn't finish. Two weeks had passed, and he had made it past Level I, past Level II, and arrived at Level III. He could wear shoes with laces. He could shave unsupervised, and go to the Loaf 'N Jug.

What he had written so far:

"What the fuck is going on in my mind? Last night I was sitting in bed and looked across the room to a chair in my room and there was a young girl covered in blood. What happened after that I don't remember. I was told a full-scale panic attack. This is not the first time I have seen dead bodies. For a while I used to find dead Iraqis floating in my bathtub. Why they were in the bathtub I will never know.

"I FEEL SO FUCKING VIOLENT RIGHT NOW."

It was an eight-hour drive from Fort Riley to Pueblo, not easy for a pregnant woman in a compact car. But Sascha wanted to see if this program she knew nothing about was helping. In



"We don't need to reinvent the wheel—just the earnings report."

Kansas, Nic had been taking forty-three pills a day—for pain, for anxiety, for depression, for nightmares. Were there fewer pills now? Was he still having flashbacks? Thrashing around in his sleep? Sleepwalking into closets, looking for his rifle? Could he start telling her what had happened during the war? And could she tell him about what was happening to her? The other night, she dreamed that she had given birth, and for some reason she took the baby and put it in a pressure cooker. Could she tell Nic that soldiers aren't the only people who have nightmares? Was he ready to hear that?

She checked into a hotel in Pueblo, and waited for visiting hours to begin. Meanwhile, a nurse gave Nic his antidepressants and mood stabilizers. Pill, water, swallow. Pill, water, swallow. When he had finished, another soldier took his place—twenty-three P.T.S.D. cases in all, including one who was blinded in an explosion and had a guide dog. Many soldiers with psychological injuries envy those with physical injuries, because those soldiers can see that something is really wrong with them. But what to make of this poor sightless

soldier who didn't get even that benefit? The other soldiers were especially gentle with him.

"Smoke break," a soldier hollered. "Smoke break."

"Level III smoke break," a nurse called out, checking the time. The smokers with Level III privileges were led out by an escort, who unlocked the door; after they returned, all the soldiers went into a conference room for cognitive-processing therapy, an hour-long session whose purpose is to get them to read from their journals and talk with one another until they are no longer avoiding the subject of what has happened to them. Of all the protocols being used to treat P.T.S.D., this one is considered to be among the more effective.

"All right. Everybody pay attention, and don't talk when others are talking," a staff member leading the session said. He thought for a moment. "Also, don't fart," he pleaded, and, with that out of the way, the first soldier began reading.

He had spent his war in a vehicle that crept ahead of convoys, looking for roadside bombs. "This is just something that's been on my mind for quite

a while," he said. "It's entitled 'Bombs Bombs Everywhere.'" He sat at the head of a long table with his journal, reading slowly, and if this were happening anywhere else guys would have laughed at him, or thrown beer bottles, or done whatever it would take to get him to shut the fuck up. But, in this room, when he said, "I still see the bombs, I see bombs all the time," a few of the other men ducked their heads, because of what they were seeing, too. "Make it stop," he read. "Make the bombs go away. I don't want to see them anymore. How do I become normal? How can I stop seeing bombs?"

He looked up from his journal. Heads hung. Feet tapped. Legs twitched. Another guy pressed his hands between his knees and then stood up, too nervous to sit. Nic was standing, too, at the far end of the room, and he asked the guy who had been reading, "What kind of vehicle did you drive?"

"I was the Husky guy."

"The Husky's the big one?" Nic asked.

"It's the vehicle that goes in front of the convoy."

"You were in Iraq, right?" another Husky driver, an Afghanistan soldier, asked.

"Yes."

"Were you hit?"

"Yeah."

"It's hard being the first one," the other driver said. "I mean, you have the whole convoy coming behind you, and if someone behind you gets hit you feel bad, because you're supposed to be the one to find it."

"Yeah."

The session leader spoke to the group about a process he called habituation. "Think about when you guys go see a scary movie," he said. "The first time you see a scary movie, at least for me, it sucks. I get home, and I have nightmares, and I'm frustrated, and I don't sleep well, and just whatever, because I'm a wuss at scary movies. If I go see the same scary movie the next day, and I go see it a third day, the third day it's still a little bit scary, but it's not getting to me as bad. The fourth and fifth day is when I'm starting to sit there and I'm actually starting to get a little bit bored. The tenth time I see that scary movie, I'm, like, O.K., cue Freddy Krueger, here's

the cheerleader who gets her neck cut off, here's the blood, and now the chainsaw, and I'm getting bored. It's the same principle with explosions for you guys. If you guys can go to a place and have the experience repeatedly, and stay with it until it starts to dissipate, that's when the explosion starts to be less and less impactful. It's called habituation. To habituate. Make sense?"

And it did make sense, until the next soldier started reading. "Here goes," he began. "I personally never shot a round into somebody, but God damn if I didn't see my fair share of deaths, charred bodies, and dismembered—"

He paused for a moment, and then described a day in which he discovered some skulls. He had no idea what to do. He didn't know who they were. Insurgents? Victims? Men? Women? He decided that it was best to take them back to the base, so he picked them up, loaded them into his vehicle, began driving, and then, near the base, pulled over. "What the fuck was I doing?" he read. "I kicked them off. I booted the skulls into the ditch next to the road, and drove through the gate, thinking, Fucking ragheads."

"That story right there," Nic said. "Would you tell your wife that story?"

"The first time I ever told my wife about an Iraq incident was two weeks ago," the soldier said.

"How'd she take it?" Nic asked.

"She started crying," he said. "She said, 'I'm so sorry.' She didn't know."

"I think the fact that she took it like that? That shows right there how much she cares about you," Nic said.

"If you told her that story and she started crying, be grateful," someone else said. "I told my wife some of my stories about my experiences, and her response to me was 'You knew what you were getting into when you signed on the dotted line, and I don't feel sorry for you.' And you know what? That fucking killed me. She didn't give a shit about me. When she said that to me, I turned to the bottle, and I never shared another fucking word with her."

He started crying. Three soldiers stood up and began moving around the room.

"Anything else for this gentleman?" the session leader asked, and when there wasn't anything else a third soldier

moved to the head of the table and began reading a story about being a medic, his gradual mental disintegration, and what he did one day to an Iraqi as a result. "To make it short, I gave this one guy a needle decompression just for the hell of it," he said. "I know it hurt. But fuck it. As far as I knew, he had helped emplace a fucking I.E.D. Did I care? No. Do I care now? No. Was that right? Fuck it."

Silence.

Everyone was twitching now.

"I know what you mean," another soldier finally said. "We never had any remorse for anybody we saw dead. Because fuck it."

"I guess I'm trying to learn compassion all over again," the medic said.

"We used to occupy an Iraqi police station," Nic said, "and every once in a while the Iraqi police would bring in dead bodies, a couple of dead bodies. They'd throw 'em in the back of a truck, bring 'em in, shit like that, and at the time—this was the beginning of my deployment—we'd all run down there and go take pictures. You know? And one guy—his head was chopped off, his body was all bloated and shit, because it had been sitting in raw sewage, you know? And now I can't get those images out of my mind. At the time, though, it was 'Yeah, this is so cool. This is so cool.' I mean, what were we thinking? Why did we even want to go look at that shit? You know?"

"Yeah, I just remember this one time—I don't talk about it, I got a picture of it," another soldier said, describing a day when he found a body, mostly bone, still some skin, and picked up a piece of it. "The femur, or something like that. I got pictures of me looking like I'm taking a bite out of it," he says. "What the fuck was I thinking?"

"Exactly," Nic said. "I had a hard drive that I destroyed. Pictures and stuff like that, next to dead bodies, shit like that. Horrible, horrible stuff. Horrible stuff. Us hanging out with dead bodies. At the time, I mean we were rockin' and rollin', we were mean, mean killing machines. Now I look back and I'm, like, God, what were we doing? What were we thinking?"

Everyone was talking now except one

sweet-faced young soldier, who suddenly started shaking. His eyes fluttered and rolled back in his head before he blinked them back into place. He held up his right hand, watched it tremble, and grabbed it with his left hand until whatever was happening passed through him. He took a sip of soda. But then, as the conversation around the table continued, he teared up, grabbed some tissues, and covered his face.

"And it really hit me when I saw my first baby come in burned," someone was saying. He wasn't reading, just talking. "Dipped in boiling water and skin sloughing off," he said. "I got to the point where I started feeling kind of sorry for them. I started feeling sorry that we're sitting there fucking beating these people and it's just like that fucking baby. We're just using them, like they're fucking nothing. Like they're not even human . . ."

And now he was the one shaking and sobbing, until one of the other soldiers came to his rescue.

"I thank you for fucking being there," the soldier said, putting his arm around him. "Secondly, I would like to applaud you for your usage of 'fuck.'"

Laughter. Tears. Smoke break.

Sascha arrived at the east entrance, by the flag pole and the statue of Mary, took the elevator to the sixth floor, dialled "0," and waited for the door to be unlocked. Nic was by the nursing station.

"Hi, sweetie," he said.

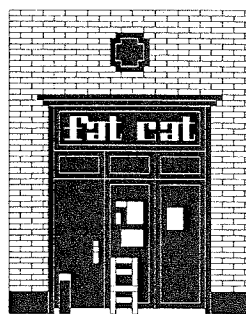
He walked over and kissed her.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked her. "Was the baby kicking?"

She had slept terribly, though she didn't tell him that. He hadn't slept well, either. The circles under his eyes looked like bruises.

He had been up writing, trying to make sense of the hallucination he had about the girl in the chair. "Dark hair with light strips of red flowing down to her shoulders," he wrote. "She couldn't be more than seven or eight, sitting in the chair right across from my bed. She was wearing a flower dress ripped and soaked in blood. Her eyes seemed to stare right through my soul."

It went on for three pages. As he



walked down the hall with Sascha, he wondered whether he should show her his journal. He wondered whether she would be the wife who said, "I'm so sorry."

They sat at a table in a visitation room stocked with some worn books and board games and began a game of Scrabble. At some point, Nic decided that he'd tell her. If she really wanted to know what the war was like, he'd tell her. He slid the journal over to Sascha, opened not to the story about the bloody girl but to what he'd written next, about a search for a high-value target.

"Baby," it was titled.

"I loved owning the night," it began.

She started to read, and Nic looked down at the table and rearranged some of the Scrabble pieces.

"I don't remember what time of the year it was but it had to be cold outside," he had written. "As we near the house the only light that is on is the one in the courtyard so we need to move quick into this house for this HVT. The mission: secure all military aged males to be able to identify a certain HVT. The first team kicks the gate clean open. I lead the second team straight through the courtyard to the front door. Using my momentum I kick the stained-glass door open, sending broken glass into the room and the door against the wall. As we move through the first room, glass cracking under our boots, we identify only women sleeping in there so we clear the kitchen and bathroom and move upstairs. First team secures the first floor as I lead the second team upstairs. Just as I come around the staircase a man is running down. I slam him against the wall, forcing my rifle into his neck. Just as he starts to scream I push harder, crushing his windpipe and muffling the high-pitched yelp. I yell to one of the soldiers downstairs 'I got one.' He replies 'Send him down.' I grab the terrified man's arm, pulling him down off balance over my left foot sending him tumbling down the stairs. We keep moving up. There are three rooms upstairs. One was already empty, another had a man with his wife and child waiting at their bedroom door and there was another door closed. I told one soldier to take them downstairs as me and my buddy prepared to breach this last door. I had my rifle drawn while my

buddy kicked it open, and there sitting on the side of the bed was an older couple just waiting like they have been through this before. I sent the woman downstairs and just stared at the man as he stared back at me, waiting for me to do something. After a few seconds I lost my temper, grabbed him by the throat and walked him out toward the stairs. I don't know if he understood me when I told him you can either walk down or fly down but after about two seconds he started to move."

Sascha turned the page, but there was no more to the story. She didn't say anything. She just looked at Nic as he continued to rearrange the Scrabble pieces. He lined up five tiles in a row. He took five more tiles and lined them up in another row. He took the tile holders and lined them up in between.

He kept at it with more tiles and holders, and soon Sascha could see a grid. What Nic saw, though, was Humvees and houses. Then he told Sascha that that house right there—he pointed to one of the tile holders—was where he threw the man down the stairs. He could see it clearly, as clearly as he saw the bloody girl, and apparently he could hear it, too, because what he said next was the part of the story that he had yet to write. That there was a baby crying. That there was a woman screaming. That he got to the bottom of the stairs and saw the screaming woman holding the crying baby, and that the baby was wrapped in a blanket and the blanket was covered with shards of stained glass. And it took him a moment, but then he got it—the baby had been sleeping by the stained-glass door he kicked open, and when he ran in he just missed stepping on it.

His scary movie, then. Here's the soldier kicking in the door, and cue the sleeping baby, and here's the squish, and here's the blood, and now the screams, and even though he had seen it dozens of times, he had yet to get even remotely bored. As for what actually happened, he saw that movie, too: the man he threw down the stairs, the old man he had by the throat, the screaming woman, the crying baby, the blanket covered with shards of glass, the soldiers filing out, and then, once they were outside, the lieutenant who said to them, "This is the wrong fucking house."

"The wrong fucking house," Nic said to Sascha. "One of the things I want to remember is how many times we hit the wrong house." Then he waited for her to say it: "I don't feel sorry for you."

"But you did get the right house sometimes," she said.

He wondered if this was how habituation began.

"So how has this taken a toll on your marriage?" a counsellor asked Nic a few hours later, as Sascha sat next to him.

"I'm afraid to tell her stuff," Nic said, breaking down. "I don't want to tell her about the dreams I have. I don't want to tell her about the nightmares I have. I don't want her to know that her husband, the person she married, has nightmares about killing people. It just makes me feel like a monster."

"The nightmares? Or that she'll look at you like you're not understood?" the counsellor asked.

"That she'll hate me," Nic said. "What kind of person has dreams like that?"

"I don't hate you," Sascha said.

"So do you feel like a monster?" the counsellor asked.

"I feel like a monster," Nic said.

They tried to tell him that it wasn't his fault.

"I know it's not my fault," Nic said. Then, crying harder: "Oh, fuck."

Two weeks later, released from Haven Behavioral, Nic boarded a plane and made one last entry in his journal.

"Taking off during a sunrise in bad turbulence is one of the most beautiful things in the world," he wrote. "The fear that something could go wrong, like the wings fly off or the pilot decides to up and quit and jump out compared to the beauty of the sun cresting over the edge of the planet gradually turning the edge of the sky from dark orange to a fading black as night retreats as the chase goes on, and there's that fucking turbulence, like an eight year old driver at the wheel of a 68 Ford Bronco driving through Walmart, fuck, keep the main sails steady! I'm surprised I can keep my pen straight."

And then he was home with Sascha, who now knew about one day of the war.

Four hundred more to go. ♦