



# Broken Soldier

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## ABSTRACT

This short fictional story aims to highlight the continuing difficulties and frustrations that UK veterans and their families face in getting the help and support they need and deserve around their mental health and substance misuse issues.

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I don't want to kill myself, but the bad thoughts are there ...

I'm pacing around my flat, trying to find a way to calm my thoughts and stop the voices in my head. I press my head against the cool windowpane, closing my eyes. The cold damp condensation on the glass spreading across my forehead seems to help, and, for a moment, the voices in my head seem to fade. I lift my head from the glass and slowly turn around, opening my eyes and taking in the debris scattered about my small flat. The chaos of empty pizza boxes and fast-food containers, dirty cups and plates, newspapers, empty lager cans, and bottles of vodka and whisky swamp the room. I groan in disgust and walk back to the sofa and flop down, absently glancing at the small flickering television in the corner of the room. I reach for the open vodka bottle on the coffee table in front of me and take a large swig from the bottle. As I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, I remember how life used to be and think about how it could be again, if only I could make the voices in my head stop.

In my happiest and proudest moments, I have been a husband, a father, and a soldier. I'd always struggled with anxiety and depression as a youngster and life at home was difficult once my mother married my stepfather. But when I was seventeen years old, I managed to escape from my difficulties at home by joining the Army. I found that I loved military life. It gave me the structure and stability that I'd been looking for and I found the greatest bunch of buddies that a guy could hope for. Then I met and fell in love with Hannah and couldn't believe my luck when she agreed to marry me. When our son Jack was born, I thought my life was perfect and it couldn't get any better than this. Sadly, I was right because that's when it all started to go wrong.

As a soldier I was used to being sent all over the world and, in 2003, I was amongst the British troops sent to Iraq, where our company was involved in fighting to secure the city of Basra. As the months went by, we found that the favored weapon of choice against the British soldiers was the use of improvised explosive devices. It felt like we were under constant attack.

It was a roadside bomb that finally got me, an explosive device that was hidden in the earth next to a lamppost. I still don't remember the explosion that caused my head injury, but I remember waking up in the hospital and the weeks of pain that followed. The doctors told me that I was lucky and that my prognosis was good, but it never felt that way to me. I felt I had to fight to live, and living was a slow, painful process that I had to endure every day. The worst of it was that my head injuries resulted in permanent

problems with my short-term memory, so I was medically discharged and had no choice but to leave the Army and the life that I loved.

I soon learned that while the Army is great at training people and molding them into whatever they need them to be, they're not so good at preparing soldiers like me to become civilians again. I received very little support in making the transition to civilian life. When I used to be on furlough with Hannah and Jack between tours of duty, it was great, and it felt like being on a long holiday. But being back in civilian life fulltime was no holiday; there were so many things that had to be dealt with and decisions to make. I didn't know where to start and I felt like I'd been tossed out into the great big world and left to deal with it all by myself.

It was Hannah who took charge and dealt with everything. While I was in the Army, I happily let Hannah manage the household issues and paid all the bills. Then when I was discharged, I felt useless when Hannah continued to take responsibility for everything. I didn't know who I was supposed to be or what to do as a civilian or husband. I hadn't planned for this because I'd always believed that the Army would be my life and I frequently wished I was back with my company and my Army buddies. Without them, the world suddenly felt so heavy and so hard; my anxiety and depression resurfaced and I began to suffer from flashbacks and nightmares.

We had to move out of our military home and find a new place to live. We didn't have much money, but it was Hannah who found us a small flat on a rundown housing estate. There was someone from the Army who was supposedly assigned to support us and to help us make the transition to civilian life, but he only visited the flat twice. I didn't know him, so I didn't feel I could admit to him that I was struggling. I just told him I was fine, and that everything was okay. As a soldier in the Army, I was taught not to be weak and to deal with my own situations, but the truth was that I couldn't deal with the changes. I started to drink more to help manage the nightmares and the pain in my head.

I became a shadow of my former self. I was outgoing, but now I locked myself away and just drifted away from my family. Hannah tried to help me, but I couldn't talk to her, and drinking just made me angrier and more frustrated. I kept things bottled up, but sooner or later I'd get to the point where I'd explode and lose my temper with her and Jack. Hannah stuck it out as long as she could. In the end, she couldn't cope with my temper and drinking. I could see from how she looked at me that she was worried about Jack's safety.

Finally, she left me, taking Jack with her. I was alone. I don't blame her, but once I was on my own the voices in my head got worse. Just coping with everyday activities became more difficult for me and thoughts of suicide began to fester in my head. Once, when the headaches got really bad, I went to the emergency room and was seen by a nurse, but then I was left to wait for five hours. I eventually got up and walked out.

After that, I admitted to myself that I had to get help. I found the strength to go and see my General Practitioner (GP). I tried to explain my physical and emotional state to the doctor, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him that I was drinking too much. The GP was sympathetic and tried to be supportive. He made a referral for me to see a psychiatrist, but there was a five-month waiting list. He understood that this was too long a waiting period for me, so he put me on anti-depressants and referred me to a veterans service organization (VSO).

Once I managed to get a date for an appointment with the VSO, I was initially pleased. But then I found it would take me three to four hours and three bus transfers to get to their treatment facility. I got really stressed and ended up having to have a drink to calm down, and when I finally got there, they refused to see me because I'd been drinking. Since then I've learned that VSOs are great for some people, but hell for others because they expect you to fit into the services that they offer, rather than focus on what the individual veteran actually needs. VSOs create barriers, such as fixed access criteria, which means that those who need their services the most are often barred.

So, once they detected the alcohol on my breath, I had to reschedule my appointment. When I did finally see them, they offered me group counseling. I felt I needed to be seen individually. I felt both vulnerable and as though I'd be somehow disloyal to my Army buddies if I let others see how weak I'd become and what a failure I was.

I ran out of antidepressants a few weeks ago and haven't returned to my GP to renew my prescription.

Tonight, the voices in my head are really bad. I've been drinking most of the afternoon and evening trying to suppress them. As the evening wears on, the voices seem to be getting louder and more frantic than ever. I don't want to live like this anymore. The voices in my head seem to be saying there is a way to end the pain. All I have to do is end my life.

I let out an anguished groan and frantically reached for my mobile phone. With my hands shaking, I dialed the GP's number. However, it's later than I thought and the only response I got was an electronic voice asking me to

leave a message or in the case of an emergency to call the emergency services at 999. I hung up and began to desperately pace around the flat. I know I'm drunk, I'm sweating, and my vision is blurred, but in despair I dialed 999. I hear a woman's voice on the other end of the phone, but it sounds far away. I try to explain what the problem is, but I don't think she's listening. I can't understand what she's saying. I'm shouting for her to listen, telling her I need help, or I'll kill myself.

I don't know how long this goes on for but suddenly there's a loud banging on my front door and I can hear yelling, but I just shout back telling them to go away. The banging on the front door continues and, without warning, the wood splinters and the door flies open. Four police officers run into the hallway but freeze when they see me. The cop in front holds up his hands, palms out toward me, and in my drunken state I can hear him telling me to calm down and to drop it, but I don't know what he's talking about. He points to my right hand and tells me again to drop it and says that they don't want to hurt me.

I look at where he's pointing and I see a knife in my right hand. I'm confused, I don't remember picking it up. I open my hand and the knife drops to the floor. Two of the cops leap on me. They grab my arms and push me to the floor. They quickly frisk me to see if I have other weapons on me, then handcuff me. I'm hauled upright and dragged into the back of a police car.

I assumed that they were taking me to a police station. They actually took me to the local psychiatric hospital. Once inside the reception area, one of the cops goes over to talk to the hospital staff. I can't hear what is being said, but I think he wants them to admit me. The staff don't seem to be very happy. One staff member picks up a telephone.

The cop walks back to his partner standing next to me and says to him, "They won't take him because he's been drinking."

His partner grunts in disgust, "Isn't this meant to be a so-called 'place of safety' and aren't they supposed to assess people with mental health problems who are in crisis and offer them assistance? What are we supposed to do with him?"

The cop shrugs. "I'm not sure. I've told them I'll speak to the duty inspector at the police station for advice. In the meantime, they're contacting the psychiatrist on duty. Let's see if they can sort something out."

Ultimately, the hospital staff don't admit me because I'm drunk. The cops have no choice and are instructed by their superiors to take me to the local police station instead.

We arrive at the police station, where I'm asked a lot of questions, searched again and eventually placed in a cell, with a policeman on watch so I can't hurt myself. The police sergeant in charge is sympathetic and tells me that they've

called the mental health team and requested that they come to the station to do an assessment, but it will take some time until they get there. They bring me some food and drink, but no cutlery, so I have to eat with my hands. This is where I sober up, feeling frustrated, ashamed, and humiliated. Now that I am sober, I just feel very tired. I look at my hands, which are shaking.

I don't know how long I've been in this police cell—it seems like hours—but eventually a mental health nurse arrives. She has a list of questions and makes hurried notes of my answers, all the while barely glancing at me. She never asks me if I am a veteran. She leaves, and soon after the police sergeant enters my cell and tells me that the nurse says I'm fine now and can be referred back to my GP. So, on that basis they're not going to charge me with anything and will release me.

By the time the release paperwork is completed and I'm let out, it is 4:45 a.m. I have no money on me and haven't received any assistance. I've got nothing else to do but wander the streets and to try and find my way home. It's dark and cold, and I feel very alone.

Every day I have suicidal thoughts. I don't want to kill myself, but the bad thoughts are there ...

## ARTIST STATEMENT

I am a former social worker that worked for six years with children and young people, including young offenders.

I moved to the nonprofit sector, where I worked in the drug and alcohol treatment field for 10 years. There, I managed a range of frontline services including residential, inpatient detoxification, and outpatient services. Within these roles, I first encountered veterans and their families struggling with mental health and substance misuse issues. I also worked in the UK Government for over 10 years, in the Home Office, and the Department of Health's (DH) Substance Misuse Policy Teams and within DH's Offender Health Team.

Since 2014 I have been working as a senior researcher with a range of organizations carrying out health needs assessments on veterans. I have authored and co-authored numerous reports. As a result of this work over the past nine years, I have interviewed around 100 veterans and their family members, and heard their stories and experiences first hand. They inspired me to write this short story to highlight the continuing difficulties and frustrations that our UK veterans and their families face in getting the help and support they need and deserve.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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