

He walks with a sense of authority, with confidence and pride. No shine or hint of fear, weakness, or defiance. He is a leader, molded and crafted to survive the harshest plains, tundras, or canopies. To travel the never ending scorching deserted lands with little water and a hundred pounds of supplies tearing at every muscle in his body. He trains relentlessly from physicality to mentality up to his wits end and pushed over the edge; stretched to beyond his limits. Years of this brutal training, fighting wars, abandoned in strange lands and forced to witness things that no civilian could even fathom. And what do these extraordinary individuals acquire by the end?

Pain. Indescribable pain. Pain that you or me would never ever know is there - pain from seeing the unseeable, the destruction, and unfortunately the torturous deaths of friends and foes. There is something that happens to the mind when stressed beyond the breaking point. This hero may seem like nothing can phase him, with strengths inside and out, but living in constant fear for years, day in and out, rips a part of the mind in which no one can see. The part he hides from the world - the part that's trigger by the simplest of actions. Actions, moments, that are only significant to its keeper.

A woman told me this story. At the time she was young and had no clue of the pains and fears that can lie under the surface. She and a few others were invited over by a friend. His grandfather was in the living room joking and laughing with his wife like any other day. A friend pressed the button on his new laser pointer. At that moment, the grandfather looked up at the wall and his world fell apart.

The table in front of him buckled and caved. The walls cracked and crumbled. Through the crevices grew vines and trees sprouted ripping apart the furnishings. He shouted, looking over at the oblivious teenagers. He yelled at them to find cover. Grabbing his gun he rushed through the overgrown brush. He slid to his knees decked out in a dark green helmet and forest cameos. He looked to his left; a friendly signaled him to move forward. He stormed into a rundown building. The stones were ruptured and debris from previous ambushes lie where the dust had settled. He stealthily raised his gun and stepped around every twist and turn. The group grew behind him. He stopped at a doorway and tossed a flash grenade in the room. They turned inside and checked every inch of the darkness.

He's in the middle of the line now; as they exited he looked up at the wall and saw the red dot. One, two, three within a second. Before he got a sound out of his mouth bullets ripped through the night air and slammed his friends into the wall in front of him. His friends, the men he trained with, the men he joked and laughed with, and day after day talked to about both pointless and meaningful bull, dead - murdered in front of him. He tried to reach them, but the red dots pinned him to a three-foot radius. He looked over and saw his friend choke on his own blood; gargle through it to his last breath unable to reach him, save him, comfort him. He was ripped from his spot and thrown into the black forest. He looked back at the building and saw a sniper on the top floor. The sniper raised his gun shining a red dot on his friends back. A shot rung through his ears and he collapsed backwards into the tree.

Spices fell on his grey hair and a glass jar broke next to him. The tree stub in front of him faded into his familiar fridge. The wind chime over the kitchen sink spun around sending a calming tune through the light air. The kitchen slowly completed around him. His hands shook and he looked down seeing his walker gripped tightly in his fist. Terror and confusion fill the brims of his eyes. Unable to stand, he shut his eyes and took in a few deep breaths to slow his weakened heart. Down the hall his grandson and friends cowered at the other end; some of them laughing one holding up a phone. A gentle hand reached in front of his face, he laced his fingers through hers and looked up at the kind loving smile. His wife looked down at him forgivingly and helped him to his feet. She pulled him into a hug and told him everything is okay now. Embarrassed, the grandfather returned to the living room and tried to flip the table back over. A strong arm reached around him and the man his grandson's eyes. Together they put the room back in order.

Things like that happen, things less extreme like that happen, but the most extreme pain lies within our courageous soldiers who place their own freedom and lives on the line for their country. So civilians can keep their freedom, keep their lives, and are able to come home to a warm bed and happy family. So before you judge a vet by what they look like or poke jokes at the military shut up and thank them. We should show these courageous heroes eternal appreciation for what they sacrificed for their country - our country.