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The Aftermath For Nate Self, Battlefield Hero, Trauma Takes a Toll

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Beset by Nightmares, Anxiety, Ranger Leaves the Army; More Screening for Soldiers

'I'm Not the Same Person'

By GREG JAFFE Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL October 6, 2005; Page A1

TEMPLE, Texas -- This summer, Nate Self's wife caught him staring at his old Army uniforms, hung neatly in his closet.

"What was all this for?" the 28-year-old former Army Ranger said. His wife, Julie, tried to reassure him. "Nathan, you did great, great things in the Army," she recalls telling him.



Nate Self

In January 2003, the Army Ranger captain sat in the Capitol as the president's guest while Mr. Bush gave his State of the Union address. To the White House, Mr. Self was a symbol of American strength, resolve and success in the war on terror. Badly outgunned, the young officer led his men through a bloody 15-hour firefight against al Qaeda fighters atop a remote mountain in Afghanistan.

After the battle, the Army awarded him the Silver Star, heaped praise on him and assumed he would move swiftly onto the next war. He did. In the spring of 2003, he deployed to Iraq. There, Mr. Self began to suffer from grisly nightmares, anxiety and depression.

Last year the war hero came home. In November, he quietly -- and inexplicably, to his Army friends -- left the military. A few months later, he was diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

Today, Mr. Self presents a different sort of model for the Army. He's a striking example of the emotional toll the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are taking on soldiers and the U.S. government's incomplete efforts to respond. Just as the U.S. military underestimated many things in Iraq -- the insurgency, the need for better body armor and stronger vehicles -- it didn't anticipate the levels of emotional stress soldiers have faced, Army officials say.

Of about 49,000 veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq who received care at a Department of Veterans Affairs facility between October 2003 and February 2005, 26% screened positive for a mental disorder, the VA says.

Until recently, the Army only had enough counselors to screen soldiers for mental illness immediately upon their return to the U.S. That missed thousands of soldiers like Mr. Self, whose symptoms are slow to appear. One Army study of 1,000 soldiers, for example, found troops were seven times as likely to report symptoms that merited further study if they were surveyed four months after returning home.

Now the Army plans to screen troops a second time, three to six months after their combat tours end. But that effort has been slowed because the Army hasn't had enough psychiatrists to provide follow-up care, officials say. "It is not appropriate to [screen troops and then] say maybe we'll get to you later," says Lt. Gen. Kevin Kiley, the Army's surgeon general.

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Many more don't get help because they're concerned about the stigma. Half of the troops who screened positive for a mental disorder in a study published last year in the New England Journal of Medicine believed seeking help would "harm their career." Sixty-five percent worried they would be seen as "weak" by their leaders.

Comparisons with the number of troops suffering disorders after previous wars is difficult, the article noted, because few studies have looked at mental-health outcomes shortly after troops returned home. It said most studies that have examined the effects of combat on mental health were conducted among veterans years after their military service had ended.

The Veterans Affairs Department, which spends about \$2.2 billion a year on mental health for those who have left the military, was allocated an additional \$100 million for 2006, in part to help Afghanistan and Iraq vets. Despite that, a recent report by the Government Accountability Office questioned whether the VA had the "capacity to identify and treat veterans returning from military combat who may be at risk."

Mr. Self blames himself for not getting help sooner. "If I never asked the Army for help, it is not their fault," he says. Except for a two-hour group session with the battalion chaplain immediately after the battle, he didn't talk with anyone about the emotional fallout from the fight while he was in the service.

He often thinks that if he could just rejoin the Army, slip on one of the old uniforms and slip back into the world he knew, he'd find peace. Even death wouldn't bother him. "It would make a nice end to it all -- an honorable way to go," he says in a darker moment.

Right now, going back isn't an option, he says. "I'm not the same person."

Mr. Self grew up in China Spring, Texas. He played football, got good grades and, in 1994, won acceptance to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Raised a devout Baptist, he made time to pray or read the Bible every day.

His parents, who weren't in the military, worried about their son becoming a soldier. "Nothing is going to happen," he recalls telling his mother when he left for West Point. "There aren't any wars."



Nate Self at his home in Temple, Texas.

After graduating, he married his high-school girlfriend, Julie, and they moved to Germany where he served with the 1st Infantry Division. Mr. Self, who has broad shoulders and a blond buzz cut, was well-suited to the Army, slow to anger and able to take criticism. "He was just someone you had confidence in and wanted to follow; a quiet professional," says Josh Walker, one of his soldiers.

After a six-month deployment to Kosovo, Mr. Self was accepted to join the elite U.S. Army Rangers, soldiers specially trained to perform raids and rescue missions behind enemy lines. "I remember the look

on Nathan's face when he learned he was going to be a Ranger. It was priceless," says Mrs. Self. "He was always so driven to be the very best."

Two months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Mr. Self and his men deployed to Afghanistan. At first, the pace was slow. They trained in an abandoned aircraft hangar, lifted weights, watched movies and played cards. "Some of the guys developed a hunger" for combat, he says.

'Operation Anaconda'

Their opportunity arrived in March 2002, after the Army kicked off "Operation Anaconda," a large-scale attack designed to trap al Qaeda fighters who had fled to the mountains.

A team of Navy SEALs tried to land atop Takur Ghar, a snow-capped peak they hoped to use as an observation post. But their helicopter came under heavy fire. As it sped away, one of the SEALs slipped and fell to the ground. A second helicopter, sent to retrieve him, was also attacked. One of its six men was shot and killed. The others scrambled down the mountain to safety, without rescuing the fallen SEAL.

Around 3 a.m. on March 4, Mr. Self was told to pull together a 23-man rescue team that headed out in two helicopters. But because of a communications glitch, he and his men were never told that previous helicopters sent to the mountain had come under fire. They had no idea what they were in for.

As the helicopter carrying Mr. Self and 12 others landed, the enemy attacked. The next few moments were a blur of bullets, sparks and blood. Within seconds, four of his soldiers were dead. One was shot in the head. Another lay face down in the snow.

Badly outgunned, Mr. Self and his remaining men took cover behind a boulder. His leg was bleeding from a shrapnel wound. As bullets whizzed past his head and rocket-propelled grenades exploded around him, he thought of his wife and 4-month-old baby. "What would happen if I died here and my wife and son were left alone," he recalls thinking.

The thought flitted through his mind and disappeared. He began to plot a counterattack. With good shooting and help from circling Air Force planes, his men took control of the battle. The

second helicopter, carrying other members of Mr. Self's team, diverted to a safer landing area. Those Rangers then hiked four hours through knee-deep snow to help their embattled comrades.

Mr. Self and his men found the fallen SEAL, who had been killed with a shot to the head, and located the body of a dead U.S. serviceman from the first failed rescue attempt.

Around 11:30 a.m., five hours after they landed on the mountain, Senior Airman Jason Cunningham, one of the medics on the mission, was badly wounded. Hoping to stabilize the area so a helicopter could evacuate the wounded, Mr. Self and his men continued fighting. They were close enough to see the faces of some of the enemy fighters they killed.

By early afternoon, Mr. Self believed the area was safe enough to bring in a helicopter. But senior officers, monitoring the battle via surveillance planes, overruled him. They didn't want to send another helicopter until nightfall. Mr. Self and his men spent hours surrounded by their fallen comrades, who were "lying and bleeding in the snow," he recalls.

Around 6 p.m., as darkness descended, Airman Cunningham, 26, died. The evacuation helicopters arrived two hours later.

In all, seven U.S. servicemen were killed in that day's battle on the mountain.

Upon Mr. Self's return to the Afghan base, senior officers praised him and his men. "It was unbelievable the Rangers were even able to get off that [mountain] and kill the enemy without suffering greater losses," Lt. Gen. Franklin Hagenbeck told the Washington Post in May 2002, two months after the battle.

His men say Mr. Self never lost composure. "He always seemed calm. He never second-guessed himself," says Mr. Walker, one of the soldiers who fought alongside Mr. Self. Another soldier, David Gilliam, says he and his fellow Rangers never even knew Mr. Self was wounded.

"I've always believed that leaders shouldn't burden their soldiers with anything outside of their control," Mr. Self says. "They couldn't help me and I didn't want to stress them unnecessarily."

Back at the base, doctors patched up his leg. Then he got some sleep. When he woke, his bosses told him to call his wife and tell her that he was all right.

Mr. Self, however, couldn't bring himself to call. He procrastinated for two days. "I guess I didn't know how to tell her about it without upsetting her," he says.

A few hours after reports of the fight began to appear on television, Mr. Self's wife got a call from another soldier's spouse. There were pictures of the dead Rangers being loaded on a plane. "Those guys on TV are our guys," Mrs. Self remembers the caller telling her.

Mrs. Self frantically called the representative from her husband's unit in the U.S. "You've got to tell me what is going on," she demanded.

Finally, Mr. Self's commander told him to call home at once.

Mr. Self and his men spent one more month in Afghanistan. They held a memorial service for their dead and met as a group with the battalion chaplain. "Guys were talking about what they

saw, crying and patting each other on the back," Mr. Self says.

In April 2002, the men prepared to go home. In the middle of the night, Mr. Self gathered his soldiers one last time. After a deployment, a unit typically breaks up. An impromptu speech on the tarmac was Mr. Self's last opportunity to address his platoon. He grappled with a problem that still haunts him: bridging the violent world of the battlefield with home.

"As soon as you get on that plane everything changes," he recalls saying. "You'll fall asleep and wake up back home" in another world. He told his soldiers he was proud of them and urged them not to forget their fellow soldiers who had died atop Takur Ghar. "Make sure the things that happened here aren't forgotten and the lives that were lost aren't wasted," he said.

The men then filed quietly on the plane for the 20-hour journey home.

The Rangers were greeted at an airplane hangar full of friends and family. As soon as his wife spotted him in the sea of desert camouflage uniforms, she rushed to grab him. "I couldn't wait to see him. It was a feeling of 'Wow, I could have lost him,' " she recalls.

They stayed up well past 3 a.m. talking. Mr. Self showed his wife where the shrapnel had taken a small chunk out of his leg, but he didn't say much about the fight and she didn't ask. "I figured he'd talk about it when he was ready," Mrs. Self says. Instead they talked about their son, their future, and how glad they were to be together.

Mr. Self resumed his schedule with the Army. He talked tactically about the battle with Army teams assigned to study the fight. He discussed it with generals, eager to glean insights from the U.S. military's first big battle with the shadowy al Qaeda enemy. With the Army's blessing, he also talked to a few reporters. But he never really spoke about it with his wife or closest family members.

"It's funny, but I felt comfortable talking about the battle with everyone but the people who meant the most to me," he says. "I didn't want to desecrate their minds." Mr. Self's wife assumed he had just moved on. "I thought, 'He has this amazing faith. It hasn't shaken him a bit,' " she says.

After a few months, Mr. Self's parents mentioned to his wife that he seemed different -- more serious and withdrawn. They assumed it was related to his experience in Afghanistan. When she raised it with her husband, he "vehemently denied it. It bothered me that they thought I changed," Mr. Self says. "I felt like Afghanistan didn't faze me a bit. It was not even a back-burner issue."

In September of 2002, he went through a six-month course for officers, preparing to take command of a 120-soldier company. Midway through the class, Mr. Self was awarded the Silver Star, the Army's third-highest honor. Then came his appearance at the State of the Union. Except for his immediate bosses and family, he didn't tell anyone he was going to be the president's guest. When he and his wife returned to their apartment in Georgia, their answering machine was full of messages from friends and relatives who had seen him on TV.

"It was hard for him," Mrs. Self says. "I could tell he was thinking: Why do I get to benefit from this horrible battle?"

Gradually, he began to notice a change in himself, he says. A feeling of malaise began to set

in. He uncharacteristically put on weight. He began experiencing nightmares. After learning he had a chance to finish at the top of his class, he did poorly on his final test. "I just felt stone cold, like I had lost my personality. I didn't want to succeed," he says. "I wanted to be mediocre."

But with the Army gearing up for the Iraq war, there wasn't much time for junior officers like Mr. Self to pause and reflect. "In the Army everything is so pressing," he says.

In May 2003, he went to Iraq. The three-week ground war had just ended and the insurgency hadn't begun to gather steam. Mr. Self served on the brigade staff, monitoring radios and helping plan missions. Compared with commanding a Ranger platoon, it was a relatively safe and easy job.

But as the insurgency worsened, Mr. Self says he became more anxious. It was a startling change, especially for a man who had been calm under fire in far worse conditions in Afghanistan.

One day, he was monitoring the radio when he learned two Blackhawk helicopters collided after one was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. Seventeen soldiers died. Listening to radio reports of the carnage, Mr. Self felt as though he were there. His heart began to race. He began to sweat.

"It was like I lived through things I never saw," he says.

A few days later, Sgt. Maj. Jerry Wilson, the brigade's senior enlisted soldier, was killed while driving through Mosul. The man, who had served 27 years in the Army, projected an air of invincibility. Although Mr. Self didn't know him well, his death affected him deeply. He began to calculate how many deployments he'd likely have before he retired. Then he tried to estimate the odds that he'd survive them all. Every time he left the base, he assumed the odds were against him. "It was very distant from how I had always viewed my life," he says.

He began having ugly, vivid nightmares. In one, he was walking down a street in Texas with his wife and son when he noticed terrorists who looked like the 9/11 hijackers. Convinced they wanted to kill just him, he told his wife and son to turn left, while he continued straight down the street. After they separated, the terrorists grabbed his wife and son. Mr. Self gave chase until he found his son sitting in the grass by a lake, holding a large silver knife. In the knife's reflection he saw his wife's dead body floating in the water.

Gradually, his faith began to waver. He stopped reading the Bible and praying regularly. "Before I wasn't afraid to die," he says. "I thought God would take care of me and my family. But I lost that. Suddenly I needed to control every aspect of my environment." He felt he couldn't be a good soldier as well as a good father and husband.

The fear was humbling. If he hadn't experienced it under heavy fire in Afghanistan, why was it consuming him now, he wondered. But people around Mr. Self -- including several of his closest friends in Iraq -- say they had no idea he was struggling. "Everything he touched was excellent," says Brett Martin, an officer who worked closely with him. "Nate had a walk-on-water reputation."

A Call to His Wife

In January 2004, as his brigade was readying to return home, Mr. Self called his wife and said

he wanted to get out of the Army. She was shocked. In six years of marriage, she figured he had spent at least three away from home. "I was tired of being a single parent," she says. "But I never really felt at peace with him leaving the Army. Nathan Self is a soldier. That is what he is."

When his unit returned to its base in Fort Campbell, Ky., Mr. Self filled out the mental-health forms. He says he thinks -- but isn't sure -- that he checked off boxes indicating he was experiencing nightmares, intrusive thoughts and anxiety. "Everyone knew at that point what I had been through in Afghanistan," he says. He had nothing to hide.

He says he wasn't offered any help and didn't ask for any, believing he could handle his problems on his own. Army officials acknowledge they walk a fine line when it comes to pushing soldiers to get help. Encouraging soldiers to get counseling soon after symptoms appear can prevent progression to more serious illness, says Col. Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, the senior psychiatrist on the staff of the Army surgeon general.

But not everyone experiencing symptoms needs counseling, she says. In many cases, nightmares and anxiety fade over time. "War is not good for mental health, but these are normal reactions to war," Col. Ritchie says. "We don't want to set up a supposition that all of these people are broken."

Mr. Self's wife noticed he seemed distant and distracted. He talked in his sleep almost every night. "I'd hear words like tank, civilian, fire," she says.

In May 2004, he changed his mind and accepted command of a 120-soldier company that he was to lead to Iraq. Then his wife became pregnant again. A couple of months later, Mr. Self suddenly relinquished command and told his bosses he was leaving the Army. (After officers meet their initial commitment -- five years in the case of West Point graduates like Mr. Self -- they are generally free to leave the service.)

The family moved back to Texas. Mr. Self took a job selling medical supplies.

"I looked at him in his business suit and I thought: Who is that? It wasn't Nathan," his wife says. "I could see he was struggling with finding his place."

His nightmares worsened. Images from Afghanistan -- of Airman Cunningham bleeding in the snow and dead bodies of his fellow Rangers lying on the ramp of their damaged MH-47 helicopter -- intruded on his thoughts. His depression worsened. He began to wonder why he had survived while others died. He criticized himself for not realizing sooner that his platoon was sent to a mountain crawling with al Qaeda fighters. (His fellow soldiers and commanders say there was no way Mr. Self could have known.)

"Maybe I survived because I have a message or a story to tell," he often thought. Maybe he could do something to memorialize his fallen soldiers, giving meaning to their deaths. "I never really fulfilled any of that," he says.

Getting Help

In March, at his wife's urging, Mr. Self finally sought counseling -- three years after the Afghan battle and five months after he left the Army. He went to the VA hospital in Waco, Texas, where a psychologist diagnosed him with severe post-traumatic stress disorder. Mr. Self says the doctor told him about programs available at the hospital and even offered to treat

him personally, but because of a busy schedule could only see him once a month. Mr. Self met three or four times with the psychologist, he says, and once with a psychiatrist, who offered medication and told him about other options. Mr. Self says he declined them.

"It didn't seem like he was getting much help," his wife says.

A spokeswoman for the VA in central Texas said she couldn't comment specifically on Mr. Self's case. She says soldiers suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder are offered help ranging from weekly group counseling to one-on-one sessions, to a spot in an 11-week inpatient program, depending on their needs.

"We probably don't have enough staff at the moment. But we recognize the need and are trying to get ahead of the curve," says VA spokeswoman Liz Crossan. Her region recently received grants to add three psychologists specializing in post-traumatic stress disorder and introduced an 18-week support group for Iraq and Afghanistan vets.

Mr. Self isn't sure the VA counseling helps. When he comes home from sessions, he seems exhausted and depressed, his wife says. "Talking about my problems in a clinical setting is hard," he says. "I guess it forces me to admit that something is seriously wrong."

Instead, he recently began to meet with a retired Army chaplain, whom he met through a friend. "It is easier to talk to him about the Army and my faith," Mr. Self says.

In the spring, Mr. Self left his sales job and became an independent contractor with CompanyCommand, an Army-sponsored Web site. The site allows officers to trade advice gleaned from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mr. Self likes his job, and his bosses -- all of whom are current Army officers -- give him rave reviews. He has even used the Web site to spur debate over how the Army should deal with post-traumatic stress disorder.

This summer, he and his wife bought a small gray house in Temple. Yellow ribbon magnets for the troops grace many of the cars on Mr. Self's quiet suburban street -- though not Mr. Self's vehicle. The only hint of his military service is an American flag that flies on the front of his house. His Silver Star, Bronze Star and Purple Heart are tucked into a shoebox in his home office.

Not long ago, Mr. Self and his 3½-year-old son, Caleb, were painting with water colors when his son asked: "Daddy, why are soldiers so special?"

The question caught Mr. Self off guard. "They make sure we are free and have a good place to live and the bad guys don't get us," he responded.

He felt a surge of pride at the thought that his son wanted to be like him. But his son's queries about the Army also worried him. "Caleb seems so small and fragile," Mr. Self says. "Part of me was hoping to get him away from all that."

The war hero still experiences regular nightmares. In one, he's being chased through an Iraqi city. He draws his pistol only to realize it's missing a critical piece. He worries his family is vulnerable in their house, though he realizes the fear is mostly irrational. Often, his new life just seems strange and remote.

"I feel sometimes like I have lost the ability to be myself," he says.

Write to Greg Jaffe at greg.jaffe@wsj.com

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