

The Burn Pit Registry



It started with a cough none of us could get rid of. Sure I smoked. Lots of us smoked but the non-smokers had it too, even the fitness nuts that worked out all day. We all had that cough. Whatever refuse we had, we burned in a shallow pit at the center of our outpost. We burned expended radio batteries, the non-rechargeable lithium ion kind, dirty mattresses, and food waste. Anything that might benefit the enemy, we burned. Anything we didn't want, we burned.

I didn't think much of it over there until my wife said that my cough worried her. Running was always hard, but it was harder when I came home. Before we deployed, I thought that the men who fell out were weak. It pissed me off when other platoons passed us during runs because we had to slow down or circle back to pick up a straggler. When we came back from Afghanistan, the number of men who couldn't keep up increased. Some of them used to be PT studs.

Our unit's physician assistant wrote about as many prescriptions for sleeping pills and anti-depressants as asthma inhalers and sleep apnea machines. We made fun of the contraptions. Darth Vader masks for the mouth-breathers, the booger eaters, the sham-masters—we thought they wouldn't mind since they were sure to receive high disability ratings from the Army and VA. I coughed and hacked all the way through post-deployment leave, into winter holiday leave. I cut back on smoking but it continued. I had to take one of my wife's

inhalers because running in the cold weather burned my lungs hard and closed up my throat the same way a bad allergic reaction might. Fuck it, I thought. I still maxed out my PT test. I thought I was just fine—cough or no cough.

Other things seemed more immediate. The men in my platoon all left the Army, or left Fort Polk for other units. The anti-depressants the Army prescribed made me erratic and impotent, straining my marriage. I went off my meds and drank as much as I could get away with. That year at Mardi Gras in New Orleans I watched the parades while sipping from a box of wine with a straw in it. I spent too much money, to the point that I had to ask my mother for extra cash so I could go out and party. I cheated on my wife. I got an article fifteen for mishandling property. I tried to kill myself.

Despite everything my wife stayed with me and kept me together. Despite the suicide attempt, the article fifteen, the adultery, and the alcohol, I left the Army with my rank and an honorable discharge.

There isn't one singular reason that drove me towards self-destruction; like the war I fought the true answers are complex and messy. I will say that one component of my condition was the guilt I felt over the violence Afghan civilians endured because of the fighting I willingly participated in. I failed in Afghanistan. Trash wasn't the only thing we burned while we were there.

After a string of failed interviews and a souring experience working with veterans non-profits, I found out that there was a resettlement agency where I could help refugees, many of them Afghan. Maybe this would be atonement, at least in some part. I took a position as a casework volunteer as soon as I could.

I languished for three seasons without a paying fulltime job. From our apartment in Brooklyn every morning I climbed the

steps to the elevated subway track at Myrtle Ave. It was nice in the warm months, but as time passed and the bills stacked up, my breathing became labored, and my heart pounded in my ears. The colder it got, the harder it was—but I chalked this up to bad nutrition, lack of exercise and the stress of watching our savings account shrivel and wither.

The volunteer work at the resettlement agency was hard and thankless, but it was one of the few good things I did, even if it was as simple as advocating for a client at the food stamps office or processing paperwork. Sometimes the refugee families even thrived, although most didn't—the odds were always stacked against them. They were like my parents in many ways, just trying to get by so my generation had a chance to prosper.

I told my parent's story to clients every time they seemed to lose hope or when the obstacles seemed insurmountable. Eventually they became engineers, and owned a house in the suburbs, I said. I left out being house poor, the domestic violence, and abandonment. It didn't fit the American Dream. An Afghan family with two girls comes to mind—everyone in the office wished they would one day have everything they wanted from life. It was hard enough for the family to adjust to American life and make ends meet without the childhood blood-cancer that afflicted one of the girls. She had a smile that made my heart bleed, but she didn't have a single hair on her head, and fatigue from her treatment protocol meant she was conscious for precious few hours during the day. I remember the resettlement supervisor had to find an affordable apartment close to a cancer treatment center—apartments near NYU or Memorial Sloan Kettering were an impossibility. Can you imagine refugees in Murray Hill or the Upper East Side? So they settled in the Bronx near Montefiore, but far from everything else. I remember holding that little girl in my arms carrying her up and down the steps to their fourth floor walkup. I sang *Boats and Birds* by Gregory and the Hawk to her.

If you'll be my star

I'll be your sky

You can hide underneath me and come out at night

When I turn jet black

And you show off your light

I live to let you shine

I live to let you shine

When I held her, face on my shoulder for a pillow, her arms limp at her sides, I knew that I was responsible for her illness. Maybe I didn't drop any depleted uranium bombs, or institute the practice of burn pits, but I didn't do anything to stop it. I was only a teenager on 9/11, but I wanted revenge. As an adult, I didn't vote responsibly, or stage any substantive protest—I wore my convictions as a fashion accessory. If I couldn't atone for those things that I was only indirectly responsible for, how would I ever atone for the things that I did? I remember that day well because after I carried her down the steps to the bus stop, I needed to sit down and rest. I caught a flu that wouldn't go away, and if I so much as walked at a brisk pace, my heart beat in my ears again. That family left New York City for better prospects in a state with better jobs and lower rent.

A few weeks later my flu persisted, and I developed a painful abscess. Every passing day stairs were harder to climb, my breath harder to catch. By then, I knew no amount of cough syrup or acetaminophen could shake the fevers, so I went to the VA hospital's ER, hoping they would give me some medicine and send me on my way. I expected to spend a few hours there, I knew how slow hospitals could be, but the doctors had to call a hematologist to get a second opinion on my labs. Even the nurse commented that my blood looked so thin she didn't

need a microscope to know that I was anemic. I panicked. I was supposed to be in good health. Anemia seemed serious. When the doctor finally came back, he said he was almost positive that it was cancer. Those labored steps, that unending flu, my heart beating in my ears—it was leukemia, a cancer of the blood that begins in the bone marrow.

My wife and I lived from moment to moment during those months, living on a shoestring. We applied for disability and Medicaid to make ends meet. I was ashamed; I never thought I would need Medicaid. Some days our budget was so tight and the chemo was so difficult that I wished I died in Afghanistan.

Our friends were there at first for us at first, but by the end most stayed away. I don't blame them—it's hard to be giving all the time. After I reached remission, friends I hadn't seen in a long time would say, *look at all your hair, or you look so healthy*, but it felt like they were saying *I'm glad it's over, let's not talk about it*. I don't blame them, but like a fellow survivor said to me, *cancer is like a criminal record that follows you around for the rest of your life*.

A friend of a friend had leukemia too—he didn't go to war, he never smoked, never smelled a burn pit his whole life. Just bad luck I guess. After chemo and a failed bone marrow transplant, his doctors attempted a new radical procedure using a modified HIV virus that taught his immune system to kill the cancer cells in his body. From all accounts it was a difficult battle. The procedure took a heavy toll, but once it was done he was cured. Although the doctors said there wasn't a single cancer cell left in his body, he died anyway. Pneumonia. After destroying his defective lymphoblasts, his immune system was too exhausted to fight off a simple infection. It happened so fast. I only knew this man through stories my friends told about him, and the one email I sent his way offering him my moral support. I knew that he was an artist. I knew that he loved his son. That is all I will ever

know of him, that friend of a friend. How many people disappear like him? How many become unremembered names, night, and fog?

I don't know what happened to that Afghan girl I sang to, I only know that our war trash didn't disappear when we burned it. We sowed the air with poison. Afghanistan and Iraq's capacity to treat victims of American burn pits dwindles with each day the war continues, especially as the security situation deteriorates. Only in 2013 did the VA recognize burn pit related illnesses, more than a decade after the war started. At least my name will be recorded in the Burn Pit Registry. It is a pyramid of human maladies—a dozen different cancers, Crohn's disease, COPD, hypertension, hepatitis, chronic bronchitis, infertility, lupus, the list marches on. Who will list the names of that little Afghan girl, and everyone like her, still dying?