

New Nonfiction: “Survivor’s Paradox” by Chris Oliver



When I first saw the photo of David Spicer in a 2009 *Army Times*, I was excited to recognize my friend there on the page staring back at me. The picture was closely cropped around

his face, but I could tell he was in his dress uniform when the picture was taken. I could see the globe and anchor on his high collar. There was no smile, except in his eyes. Marines don't smile, but David sure looked happy to be one. David and I were friends while growing up: grade school, middle, and high school. He always talked about being a Marine, and he joined up before he even graduated. The picture was lined up with half a dozen others, all servicemen and women, their faces inside their own individual boxes, names and ages typed out neatly beside. Above all of the pictures in a much larger and darker font than the rest was a headline. It read: "Photos of the Fallen." My initial excitement evaporated as I looked back at the picture of David. Underneath his name and age was another block of text: "KIA, Helmand Province, Afghanistan."

As most high school kids do after graduating, we went our separate ways in life. Even though we had both enlisted in the military around the same time, I had heard nothing else about David until I saw the picture. In that moment, we were jarred back together in recollection and sorrow. I had known others that had been killed in the War on Terror, even served with some. But this was the first time I had grown up with someone who had been killed in combat. I saved that issue of *Army Times*, folded it neatly, and tucked it away in the back of a notebook. On the first page of the notebook, I wrote David's name and the date of his death. Beneath the inscription I added the names of others I had fought beside in Iraq but didn't make it home. In the years that followed, anytime I heard of a friend's passing in Afghanistan or Iraq, I wrote the name down. One by one, the names kept coming. A guy named Cota who I knew from Basic Training in Fort Knox. A Sergeant named Rentschler I knew while stationed in Germany. Sometimes months would pass between names, at times only weeks, but the list kept growing. The wars in faraway lands kept chewing up friends and acquaintances. I had more than one turn in the same meat grinder, and during these

deployments I would lose men who were as close, and at times, closer than my own family. Brothers. Slowly and deliberately I inscribed each letter until the page bore their names with honor. The names sat together, unified without regard to color, race, or creed. Melo. Sherman. Tavae. Edens. Morris.

As days turned to weeks and months and years, the list kept growing but much slower. The fog of pain surrounding the list would slowly lift and I began to look at the names with less sadness and more admiration and respect. I began to understand their loss as a by-product of conflict and war. It didn't matter if we believed in the reasons or politics of the wars, we would always honor their memory. In early 2015, it had been close to five years since my last combat deployment and I retired from service. The list had stopped growing altogether. The notebook was put up, tucked away along with the rest of my war memories. Hidden, to be looked upon only through a haze of whiskey and tears. At some point the ink used to write the names began to fade.

Now, with quite a few years since my retirement, most of the men I served with have gotten out of the Army and moved on with their lives, as have I. Though my part in the war is done, or should be, I am still fighting. There is still a war raging. There is still death. New names to add to the list. I find I can't add these names though, as the deaths are much harder to accept. I don't know if they belong next to the others.

I find out in the same ways, while doing the same things. Someone from an old unit will call out of the blue. Maybe a message on social media.

"Did you hear? Chad Golab just died."

"How?" I hope the answer is a vehicle accident, or a robbery gone wrong. Murder. Anything other than what it really is, but deep down I already know what happened to Chad. The

caller's reply comes easily in a matter of fact way.

"Shot himself."

Slowly the story is told. There is little emotion given with the caller's words and I give none in return. We are both well versed in giving and receiving horrible news, numb to tragedy. At least, on the outside. Inwardly I feel sick. I flashback to a memory from years earlier in Mosul. I see Chad Golab leaning against a wall out of breath. He had just sprinted across an open area through a hail of bullets and rocket propelled grenades. He wore a smile from ear to ear. He was laughing. So very alive. I can't believe that the man I saw in that moment was the same one who was found outside of a convenience store in the front seat of his car, dead from a self-inflicted gunshot. But it was.

The same types of calls and messages have continued at a steady pace, to the point that I dread seeing the name and number of an old Army buddy pop up on the caller ID. Each time a call comes I learn yet another person who made it back from "over there" decided they had had enough. The question of "Why?" always lingers in the air, drifting along searching for an answer. The answer never comes, only more of those horrible phone calls. More names. More questions. I'm angry. I feel a deep sorrow and love for these men. I also hate them. I hate them for what they have done to themselves and the unfair enigma they have left behind for us all. We cry for those who have gone before us, yet they are the very ones who have created our pain. What sense can be made of this?

Why did they do it? Why? We will never know what only they knew. We are left to guess in wonder. And mourn.

After these calls of notification are over, my mind floods with more questions than answers. Deep down inside, my old wounds, the ones which don't leave visible scars, fester once

again. The wounds never fully heal and the pain they create is always there, subdued, yet constant. The hard, built-up crust covering these wounds is ripped away and the pain returns in full force, always stronger than before. I sit with hot embers burning away at my gut, wishing for one more chance to talk with these men. The chance for one more conversation. I want to ask them questions and I need them to answer me. What has caused their pain to be so great they decided to leave this world behind? What was the whole point? Why did we work so hard to keep each other safe when there was so much harm surrounding us? Why end it now? You made it home! You made it back to mom and dad and wife and child and friends! Why now? I want to tell them I'm sorry. Sorry for their pain. Sorry for my anger and hate. Of course, I am left to render my own conclusions, more a meditation in pain than an answer.

War is a journey, a journey with many paths and roads moving different directions to different places. In my own experience the trip begins and ends at the same destination. Home. Or at least whatever place each person finds most dear. It might not even be a place. It might be a person or activity. This "thing," whatever it may be, is what the warrior turns to when things are at their absolute worst. It's what they turn to after they have been away from home for months and it's hot and it's only going to get hotter and they are carrying 80 pounds of extra weight up the same fucking hill for the one thousandth time and someone they have never met tries to kill them and instead kills their best friend who was standing right next to them and then they have nothing to look forward to except that they get to do it again tomorrow. And the next day. And the day after that. When you go through days like that, there has to be something that keeps you going, makes you say, "I'm going to make it out of here." And then, finally, one day, you do make it out. Make it back home. Everyone cheers and is happy and claps their hands and you smile and you are truly glad to be home. Home in a

physical sense. In body. Your mind however is still in turmoil, still back in the desert or on the side of a mountain, stuck at a crossroads with no idea which direction to take. I think everyone who experiences war travels down the same road passing the same intersections. There are no signs to follow. No light to show the way through the darkness. Each intersection is a question which needs to be answered to make sense out of the senseless experience of war. The questions are impossible to answer. No one ever makes it completely back, but you can make it most of the way. Maybe these people, these guys like Chad, never make it far enough back. They take a wrong turn and lose their way. They get caught at a spot between the Hell of war and the comforts of home. The division becomes blurred by expectation and guilt and shame. Months of constant fear and excitement mixed with boredom and hate has made them question reality. Their loved ones are foreign beings. The precious people who occupied every waking thought and dream and fantasy are happy to see their soldier. Glad they are home. Home safe and in one piece. They give hugs and shake hands and have no idea the soldier is still fighting. Still "over there".

Of course, the soldier is glad to be home too. But home is different now, not at all like he remembers. His family and friends, like the soldier, have changed. His fantasies were a lie. He wants to talk about the war but can only do so with those who will understand. Only his brothers in arms will do. The one's he laughed and cried with and got blown up with, and shot at people with. Killed people with. They are gone now. They live across the country or are out of the Army, working at a home store or drawing disability from the VA. Some are buried and forever seared into the soldier's mind. The soldier wants to talk to the dead the most. The situation is an ocean of impossibility. They miss home while they're at war but find they miss war when they get home. To them, salvation can only be found at the bottom of a bottle or inside of a gun barrel.

I don't know if it does any good to sit here and ponder these questions or make half-hearted attempts to understand why my brothers have killed themselves. Wondering why they have survived so much only to give in at the last minute. I won't stop though. I can't stop. I can only keep asking the questions. And wait for the phone to ring.