

During a May 12, 2006, ceremony on the drill field at MCRD Parris Island, S.C., BGen Richard T. Tryon, the commanding general of the recruit depot, presents Sgt Jeremiah Workman with the Navy Cross for his actions on Dec. 23, 2004, in Fallujah, Iraq.



LCPL TROY LOVELESS, USMC

“Don’t Be Afraid To Raise Your Hand”

For Navy Cross Recipient, Battle of Fallujah Led To a Battle Within

By Sara W. Bock

A survey conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs’ National Center for PTSD found that post-traumatic stress disorder affects eight out of every 100 U.S. military veterans. As some servicemembers returned home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan exhibiting symptoms of PTSD in the early 2000s, Marine Corps leadership made great strides in reducing the stigma of the mental health condition and encouraging Marines to come forward and get help.

June is PTSD Awareness Month, and nearly 15 years after his heroic actions during the Second Battle of Fallujah earned him the Navy Cross, retired Staff Sergeant Jeremiah Workman and his wife, Jessica, sat down with Leatherneck to talk openly about his battle with PTSD—one that he continues to fight today.

During his first month back from Iraq in the spring of 2005, Jeremiah Workman, newly promoted to sergeant, racked up more than \$3,000 in bar tabs.

Alcohol was his way of self-medicating. It helped him forget the horrors of combat, numbed the pain of losing his buddies in Fallujah during Operation Phantom Fury—the bloodiest battle of the Iraq War—and suppressed feelings of guilt about the Marines who didn’t make it home. He recalls a specific instance when he picked up his father-in-law at the airport in Southern California and opened the trunk of his car to load up his bags. It was littered with empty liquor bottles.

“You think you’ve got a problem?” Workman remembers his father-in-law saying. “Even after that, it still didn’t really sink in,” he said, noting that it was the first time anyone confronted him about the issue. He continued to drink heavily because it was the only thing that kept the memories of one terrible day in Iraq from flooding his mind.

As a mortar platoon squad leader with Weapons Company, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, then-Corporal Workman had been providing mortar fire on insurgent positions until the Marines took control of most of Fallujah. At that point, the platoon’s mission changed to patrolling the city and searching for weapons. On the morning of Dec. 23, 2004, he went out on a routine patrol, unaware that it would very quickly become his worst day in the Marine Corps. After searching a few buildings, his team received word of an ambush in a house on the other side of the street. Heavily armed insurgents on the second floor had trapped another team of Marines from his platoon.

Workman led his squad up the stairs, engaged in a firefight with the insurgents, who had barricaded themselves in a bedroom, and provided cover fire that allowed some of the trapped Marines to escape down the stairs and into the street. Despite being wounded by shrapnel from an enemy grenade, he led his team on two more assault strikes into the building and up the stairs, bringing wounded Marines to safety while exposing himself to heavy fire. During the firefight, he eliminated at least 20 enemy combatants and saved many lives. But he couldn’t save them all, and the loss of his fellow Marines was hard to wrestle with.

A corpsman patched him up after the battle and Workman finished up the deployment, returning to Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., with the rest of his unit. He had only been back a few months when he received orders for a tour as a drill instructor.

His arrival at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., came with a realization: the curriculum at DI school was so rigorous and the PT so intense that he couldn’t get drunk every night and still manage to keep up. That’s when he began having nightmares.

He couldn’t sleep at night, was irritable and overly vigilant, always positioning himself where he could see the door so he could escape if necessary. Workman quickly became, in his words, a “monster.” He was still functional, graduating DI school near



COURTESY OF SSGT JEREMIAH WORKMAN, USMC (RET)

Then a corporal, a young Workman relaxes in a bunker outside Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004. According to Workman, during that time he and other members of his unit could only venture outside the bunker at night due to a large volume of indirect fire on their position.

the top of his class, but on the inside it was a different story. He was at rock bottom.

In May 2006, during a recruit graduation ceremony on the drill field, Workman was presented with the Navy Cross for his actions that December day in Fallujah. The attention he received for earning the nation’s second-highest award for valor only aggravated his symptoms.

“A lot of people say, ‘He *won* the Navy Cross.’ But it wasn’t a contest or a game. A lot of bad stuff happened. For the longest time, even when I got the award at Parris Island, I didn’t even want to



COURTESY OF SSGT JEREMIAH WORKMAN, USMC (RET)

On a cold morning in December 2004 in Fallujah, Iraq, Cpl Workman prepares to take out targets during a fire mission as a mortar platoon squad leader with Weapons Co, 3/5.

He continued to drink heavily because it was the only thing that kept the memories of one terrible day in Iraq from flooding his mind.

Right: Workman and his wife, Jessica, enjoy a boating expedition in Port Alsworth, Alaska, in June 2018, during a weeklong marriage retreat sponsored by Operation Heal Our Patriots.

Below: Showing off his catch, Workman enjoys the outdoors in Alaska in June 2018. Although he continues to battle PTSD, he and Jessica say they have come a long way since the trials of his first few years home from Iraq nearly ended their marriage.



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wear it because it reminded me and flooded me with bad, negative stuff,” recalled Workman. “One day you’re a sergeant and the next day you’re still a sergeant but now you have this award and you have a lot of ‘friends’ now.”

Jeremiah’s wife, Jessica, is open about the toll that deployment and its aftermath had on their marriage, saying that it nearly brought it to an end. She had moved back home to Ohio to attend cosmetology school, recounting the emotional

disconnect between the two of them and how the Navy Cross presentation amplified all of it.

“It was kind of like a roller coaster,” she said. “It was totally up and down, and then having that award on top of it kind of reignited everything again.”

The tension continued to build until an incident with a recruit led to a “mental breakdown” for Workman. He sat down with Sergeant Major Scott Booth, his battalion sergeant major, who personally walked him to the clinic.

“I really credit him with getting me the help that I needed. He actually, no kidding, called me into his office. He said, ‘I don’t really feel like you had any business being a drill instructor. No one should go straight from Fallujah to being a drill instructor,’” Workman recalled.

He remembers sitting and talking with a psychiatrist, who told Workman he believed he was suffering from severe PTSD.

“I remember looking at him and saying, ‘What the hell is PTSD?’” Workman said, emphasizing how far the Marine Corps has come since then

in spreading awareness of PTSD, encouraging individuals to seek help and equipping commands to recognize the signs and symptoms and take care of their Marines.

At the time of his diagnosis, he said, it just wasn't something that was talked about like it is today, adding that upon his return from Iraq, he was asked mental health screening questions while he waited in a long line of Marines turning their weapons in at the armory.

"That's when the corpsmen would say, 'Is anyone feeling depressed or anxious?'" Workman said "Oh, hell no!" was the resounding reply. "You didn't want to be the guy to hold the line up ... that's how it was done. I look back and think that is just bizarre."

A delayed onset of PTSD symptoms, as was the case for Workman, is not uncommon, according to the American Psychiatric Association, which defines the disorder as "a clinically-significant condition with symptoms that have persisted for more than one month after exposure to a traumatic event and caused significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning."

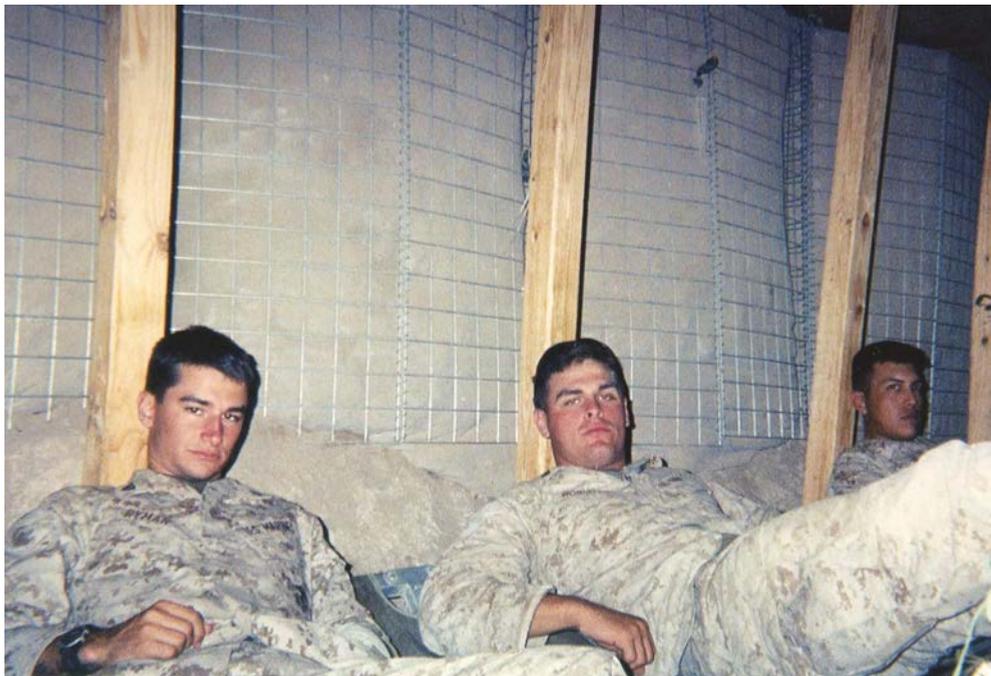
The association's "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" (DSM-5) establishes the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, which includes an exposure to "death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence" through direct exposure, witnessing a traumatic event or having someone close to you exposed to trauma. It also can include indirect exposure to trauma; for example, a first responder at the scene of a mass shooting or terrorist attack. The individual may re-experience the traumatic event through upsetting memories, nightmares, flashbacks, emotional distress or physical reactivity after being exposed to stimuli that symbolize or resemble the traumatic event. Other symptoms may include overly negative thoughts, feelings of isolation, irritability, risky or destructive behavior, difficulty sleeping and hyper-vigilance, among others.

The VA's National Center for PTSD estimates that between 11 and 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans; 12 percent of Gulf War veterans; and approximately 30 percent of Vietnam War-era veterans have had PTSD in their lifetime, either from combat, military sexual trauma or other service-related event.

Workman's diagnosis led to the prescription of numerous mental health medications. At one point he was taking 15 different pills each day, which he says turned him into a walking zombie. "Back then that was the first thing they immediately did," he said. He was relieved of his duty as a drill instructor and sent to Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., in 2006 to give tours at the National Museum of the Marine Corps.

The new job meant wearing his medals and

Symptoms may include overly negative thoughts, feelings of isolation, irritability, risky or destructive behavior, difficulty sleeping and hyper-vigilance, among others.



From the left, Chad Ryman, Workman and Jarrett Kraft are pictured here in their bunker outside of Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004. Kraft also received the Navy Cross for his actions to save the trapped members of their unit on Dec. 23. (Photo courtesy of SSgt Jeremiah Workman, USMC (Ret))

ribbons daily, which of course included his Navy Cross and Purple Heart. The attention Workman received there because of his awards sent him into a downward spiral.

He recalls regularly being asked by museum visitors how many people he killed.

"It sucked. It was terrible. It was making my symptoms worse," Workman said. "I [was] kind of at rock bottom again."



CWO-2 MICHAEL D. FAY, USMC (RET)

As a sergeant working at the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Va., in March 2007, Workman enjoyed the company of Col John Ripley, who was awarded the Navy Cross for his actions in Vietnam.

From the left, Workman, SgtMaj Carlton Kent and Matthew Hammond, a retired gunnery sergeant, celebrate the Marine Corps Birthday in Las Vegas, Nev., Nov. 10, 2018. Workman and Hammond served together at the Pentagon on the sergeant major's staff.



COURTESY OF SSGT JEREMIAH WORKMAN, USMC (RET)

**“I wanted to leave the impression on all Marines— just because you’re going through PTSD that’s not the end of your career, that’s not the end of your family, that’s not the end of your life.”
—SgtMaj Carlton W. Kent**

The 3/5 Marines killed in action on Dec. 23, 2004, during the Second Battle of Fallujah were remembered at a memorial in Iraq by their fellow leathernecks. The events of that day would later trigger severe PTSD for Workman, who despite his heroic actions was unable to save all of his Marines.



COURTESY OF SSGT JEREMIAH WORKMAN, USMC (RET)

About to break, Workman was given an opportunity that would become a turning point in his life. Sergeant Major Carlton W. Kent, then the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, pulled him from the museum and brought him onto his staff as his personal driver. Having served as the I Marine Expeditionary Force sergeant major in 2004, Kent was in Fallujah during the battle and saw firsthand the horrors of combat that Workman had endured. In fact, he had talked with Workman just after the Dec. 23 firefight, encouraging him to stay strong and focused. The two reconnected twice, once at the request of General James Mattis, and again at Quantico while Workman was assigned to the museum.

Kent realized that if there was any hope of Workman bouncing back, he needed to get out of Quantico. After bringing him on board at the Pentagon, Kent's entire staff rallied around Workman and took him under their wing.

“It just takes people to believe in these Marines, to understand what they went through and say ‘It’s OK.’ You’ve got to tell them that it’s OK to go through this but we’re going to get through this together,” Kent, who retired from the Corps in 2011, said with emotion in his voice.

For Workman, the mentorship of SgtMaj Kent and others was integral to his ability to move forward, as was the opportunity to share his story with others. Kent began taking Workman to events, giving him a platform to speak to Marines about PTSD.

“I got him involved with going around speaking about his PTSD so other Marines would have an opportunity to understand that there shouldn’t be a stigma,” said

Kent. “I used to take him out to town halls with me and I’d talk about it. I’d say, ‘Jeremiah Workman is on my team in my office, he’s not a failure’ ... I wanted to leave the impression on all Marines—just because you’re going through PTSD that’s not the end of your career, that’s not the end of your family, that’s not the end of your life.”

Kent worked tirelessly alongside General James T. Conway, the 34th Commandant of the Marine Corps, to ensure that Marines battling PTSD were taken care of. They instituted an open-door policy for anyone whose command was not assisting or supporting them and released videos discussing mental health and PTSD, determined to put an end to the myth perpetuated by many Marines that coming forward to get help was a sign of weakness.

“The Marine Corps has made leaps and bounds,” said Workman. “Not to take away from any of the services, but I think the Marine Corps has really spearheaded this mental health thing and made it a priority and made it OK to get help ... not that it wasn’t OK before, but nobody really knew what it was.”

In 2007, Workman began a two-year process of

writing his story with the help of author John R. Bruning. “Shadow of the Sword: A Marine’s Journey of War, Heroism and Redemption,” co-written by the two, was released by Presidio Press in 2009.

“The book really helped me,” he said. “It kind of gave me a platform to go out in front of the Marine Corps and tell my story and try to help Marines. I think by helping other Marines it helped me in the process. It helped me tremendously.”

Since he was medically retired as a staff sergeant in 2010, Workman has worked for the VA as a military services coordinator at the Naval Health Clinic aboard MCB Quantico, assisting Marines who are going through the medical board process and transitioning out of the Corps. It’s a unique opportunity for him to use his personal experience to help others through their own time of uncertainty.

He’s tried counseling and various therapies available to him, including Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), a form of psychotherapy that has successfully helped many servicemembers cope with PTSD, but he says that his family, a strengthened dedication to his faith, and a strong support network have been the keys to moving forward and adjusting to his new normal. He also has been able to drastically reduce the number of medications he was originally prescribed.

Becoming a dad to his two children—now 8 and 12—during a point in his life when he didn’t care about anything, he said, changed everything for him.

He and Jessica have attended numerous marriage retreats for veterans and their spouses, and Jessica strongly believes that the difficulties they faced in the past are things they can look back on now and say, “We’ve grown from it.”

Even though today he’s in a much better place, Workman emphasizes that PTSD is still something he deals with every single day. Both he and Jessica are open about the fact that there are still bumps in the road and that PTSD will never be something he is “cured” of.

“I’m a firm believer that PTSD never goes away,



but I believe that you can learn to control it and not let it control you,” Workman said. “I still have bad days, but the good days outnumber the bad.”

On those bad days, he often will pick up the phone and call SgtMaj Kent, who has become like a father to him.

“He has come a long way because he has a lot of support people around him. A lot of people think the world of him and a lot of people know that he has a bright future—he has a focus now,” said Kent of Workman. “He’s always going to have those ups and downs.”

Workman’s symptoms have changed over the years. The nightmares have faded, but he continues to wrestle with insomnia and depression. By sharing his story, he hopes to encourage others to come forward if they are dealing with symptoms of PTSD.

Over the past decade, he has received middle-of-the-night phone calls from Marines who are struggling to make it through. His message to them is this: “Don’t be afraid to raise your hand and get the help you need, because holding it in will not get you anywhere.” 🙏

Workman says that becoming a dad to his children, Delaney, left, and Devon, right, pictured here in a family photo with his wife, Jessica, was a crucial turning point in his battle with PTSD.

Need Help?

The following resources are among the many available to individuals who may be suffering from PTSD:

For Individuals in Crisis

Call (800) 273-TALK anytime to talk to a crisis counselor. The call is confidential and free.
Chat online with a crisis counselor at <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>.

For Support and Help on the Go

The National Center for PTSD has a variety of mobile applications that offer self-help, education and support (to supplement, not replace, professional medical care). They include “PTSD Coach,” “VetChange,” and “Mindfulness Coach” among many others. For a full list of apps, visit <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/index.asp>.

For Veterans Who Need Care

To see if there is a specialized PTSD program at a VA facility near you, visit <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/index.asp>