



WRITTEN BY LADY 6

Female Warriors

"Some people devote their lives to discovering a truth outside themselves. I am committed to discovering a truth within myself, and the soul which lies at the heart of it all. My truth is that I am scared and brave, fragile and indestructible, open and closed, and I have the ability to exist on several different emotional planes all at once. I know I many of you may be thinking I am some sort of female version of Highlander, and as awesome and fulfilling as that would be for the male reading audience, I regret to admit that I am nothing special at all. I am a voice among many, indeterminate against the others."

BOMBS AWAY

I opened my eyes painfully, stunned, and smelled smoke. I looked around at the team of Special Forces operators in the truck, my friends, all looking exactly how I felt. It was Ramadan in Afghanistan, and the heat was unforgiving as the day was long. We are exhausted, having just wrapped an intelligence-driven clearing operation for 8 hours leading up to that moment. The inside of the truck smells like sweat and expended ammunition, .50 cal shells raining down through the gunner's hatch I had just torn a ligament in my hand to open. The explosion disabled the hydraulic system that operates the back gate of the tactical vehicle, but the outer skin of the truck appeared to be generally intact, and no one said a word at first. We just looked at each other through a lens of gratitude, knowing that none of us were marked for death this day. The interpreter was the first to break the silence, he asked me if I was okay. "Do I F***** look okay?" I asked, rather sincerely, continuing to struggle climbing up to the open hatch. He simply nods, and the other guys laugh. I hoist my bodyweight, along with the 60+ pounds of gear and ammunition on my kit, into the smoke and dust-filled air.

I looked to my right and saw our foreign military partners in a freakish line, muzzles blazing towards the mountainside. I will never forget the excited look on their faces, their body language expressing pure ecstasy; a joy only known by those who have experienced the satisfaction of exacting well-deserved vengeance on a clear enemy. I looked past them now, at the other truck of Americans in their own more tactical dismounted formation. They are intently focused on returning fire at an elusive shooter, well-concealed in on the mountainside, only the flash of his muzzle visible to the naked eye in the rapidly descending dusk. On that mountainside, beautifully silhouetted by the purples and pinks of the waning sunset, he vainly attempts to lay suppressive fire for his comrade's escape. My colleague and friend stops to reload his rifle, glances over in the direction of my truck. He points at me with a gloved hand, slapped his open palm to his chest and shifts his focus back to the muzzle flash on the mountaintop. I could see his big goofy smile in my mind's eye, and he told me later that at that moment he felt intense relief. Bullets ricochet in the dirt, a trail of them chasing the heels of a seemingly superhuman young man charging the steep incline of the mountain. Of course, he doesn't stand a chance. I'm sure he expected the explosion to cause more damage, our reaction time to be slower, and I'm sure he expected to live. I was glad to see his final expectations not be met. Not this day. I hope his death was painful and slow.

Head injuries are a funny thing. Even in the wake of the blast, not one of us felt that we were experiencing the signs and symptoms of the explosion, the only thing I remember noting to myself was the burning sensation in my hand from a partially torn ligament, I kept checking and touching my glove expecting it to be ripped or on fire from the pain. Everyone in our little motley crew had a look of intense focus, devoid of fear or trepidation. We stormed towards a qalat nearby, and easily scaled the compound wall.

There was no discussion about this, it was just sort of a collaboration of the few of us that had the same feeling I suppose, that the foolish insurgents had used the compound as a hiding place to stage their cowardly offensive. We tore through the courtyard like it was taking it's last breathe, and quickly came upon a large metal mixing barrel that had been used so recently it was still wet inside, dripping with the oil from the empty cans littered about the courtyard. It was like blood, dark venous bleeding, as if the barrel was alive.

We searched the qalat in depth, and confirmed other improvised explosive device (IED) components, military grade detonation cord, and a working generator, which suggested this particular compound had been used frequently for IED construction, and perhaps safe haven for the emplacements and bomb technicians. I remember carefully unwrapping the door charges, which I lovingly constructed the night before with the gleeful oversight of my explosive specialist friends, and all of us placing them around the compound. We wanted to destroy the future usefulness of the location for insurgents, but it was also a measure of clumsy closure.

Watching the walls of the compound collapse on our command was intensely satisfying. It is so rare to have the opportunity to close the chapter of a book before leaving the place where it happens; We all wanted to believe that our actions were justified. We felt righteous.

Not only had we narrowly escaped death, but discovered the hide out where our would-be killers laid in wait, moments before our arrival. We destroyed them, and the place they used for their evil deeds. We felt resolved, and for days after the event most of us denied having any symptoms of head injury. I felt especially indestructible, and it was a welcome feeling in that hopeless place. Even when we got back in our truck and it caught on fire as soon as we started moving, I didn't feel the appropriate amount of alarm.

I smelled something like burning, got up to look out of the window, and saw flames shooting out from where we had attempted to tie up the severed hydraulic lines. I didn't feel any fear at that point, it was more of an annoyance. I simply pushed the button on my headset and said "Um, I think the truck is on fire, and we need to get out."

I was no kid when this happened, 29 years old with over 11 years of active duty service, and I always listed my ability for objective self-evaluation as one of my "strengths." Although I was a combat veteran several times over, this particular experience really influenced my life. It was humbling for me because I was admittedly one of those service members who believed that Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) was more of a myth than reality.

Experiencing it first hand was very eye opening for me. A revealing moment for me was when one of my team mates, who was also a very good friend, told me that maybe I needed to take a break on one of my first days back at work. It made me angry when he said that because I felt that my five days spent in a TBI clinic should have been sufficient, and that there was nothing wrong with me besides the headaches. He was very kind and patient with me, and tried to explain that I really was not acting like myself, and my speech was even still a little slurred. I reacted violently (I believe I may have even thrown an inanimate object from my desk), much like a child throwing a temper tantrum.

Our female Warrior stories are protected and written under the Lady G. byline. We believe in the power of collective voices and know that together we can help affect a change.

I stormed out of my office and immediately went to find a quiet place, where I used my phone to record myself speaking. As I played the recording back to myself, I was horrified. I felt like I must be crazy to not have recognized these things about myself.

I was fortunate to have a very compassionate female TBI doctor (although she was orthopedic by trade) who was very patient with me, even though I was far more bull-headed than usual. I wish I had been able to thank her, especially when I look back at some of my ridiculous behavior over those first couple of weeks following the blast. For instance, when they admitted me to the TBI clinic, my number one gripe was that there were no firearms allowed in the clinic. It turned my stomach to think of trying to sleep at night without a loaded firearm next to me, and this was one of the many topics about which I was very combative during my short stay. Even through the fog of sleep medications I was tortured by dreams that while I was "stuck" in the TBI clinic our base would be attacked and I would not be a gun in the fight, to defend what had become my home. This may have been in part to a vicious attack on the very same base earlier that year, after which I literally dug through rubble to pull out



Active Duty Women Serving
Today: 214,098
Percentage of the Military: 14.6%
Number of Female Veterans: 1,853,690

The current projected percentage of U.S. Veterans who are women is 10 percent**

In Federal Year 2009, the average age of women Veterans was 48 years, compared to 63 years for their male counterparts**

In FY 2009 and FY 2010 PTSD, hypertension, and depression were the top three diagnostic categories for women**

bodies and collected mangled pieces of bio matter to submit as evidence for the law enforcement liaisons...But that's another story.

I was even grateful for the TBI test that the military started to implement, which we all took prior to and following our deployments (and all of us that had never had a TBI thought was stupid and a waste of time). It is a computerized testing tool which gives a series of visual and task-oriented sequences, and is intended to create a baseline for each individual on things such as spatial recognition, memory, and reaction time. As I took that same TBI test over and over again the first few weeks, I was convinced at first that something was wrong with the computer that I was using for testing. There was no way that my scores could be so far off from my baseline. As I watched the TBI doctor switch out the computer to allow me to take it again (and prove that it was me, not the computer's fault), I was thinking that I was beginning to exasperate her. Still, she remained professional and patient, and taught me that the road to

recovery from any type of TBI is simply time. I felt frustrated because I was still in a combat environment, and I was not the highly sharpened tool to which all of my subordinates, colleagues, and superiors were so accustomed.

I personally believe that a lot of the poor decisions that I made in the year to follow were possibly linked to that one day, that one explosion. I will never forget the first phone call I got after I was admitted to the TBI clinic; it was my best friend, also a service member. I was still in such a fog I have to admit that I don't really remember the conversation, I just remember she sounded hysterical and was crying. Then the gravity of everything really hit me. As subordinates/colleagues/superiors-turned friends started pouring into the clinic to see me over those five days, I really felt fortunate. Still, I felt that I had somehow let them down, and it was a crushing weight on my self-worth. I felt that everyone was handling me with kid gloves, like I was dangerous or unstable, and I think it led to my eventual decision to voluntarily bow out of my active duty service.

I do not regret where I am now, and I do not wish to go back on active duty. People ask me pretty frequently how I could walk away from something after giving so much of my time. My party line response is "I gave my entire adult life to serving my country for 12 years. I was given a second chance, and now I'm going to spend it with my children." The truth is I think that in part, despite all the wonderful intent of individuals and program designers, the military was just not equipped to deal with such a large affected population. I felt that I no longer had a home there, and I think a lot of other veterans feel similarly. We are Soldiers without an Army, trying to find a place in a world that is not ready for our intense stares and determined will to fight and win.

Lady 6

You can reach Lady 6 at:
femalewarriors@womenwhorise.org.