

## PERSONAL JOURNEYS

# The colonel's war

Eric Welsh is on a mission to help veterans combat the unseen battle scars of PTSD.

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BY [MARK DAVIS](#) - THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION



Welsh talks to veterans at the Salvation Army Red Shield Center in Atlanta. Welsh a retired U.S. Army colonel speaks to these men each Saturday. PTSD is nothing new. In World War II, it was called shell shock. Soldiers returning from Civil War battlefields complained of "soldier's heart." PHIL SKINNER / [PSKINNER@AJC.COM](mailto:PSKINNER@AJC.COM)

Saturday morning, rainy and gray and dismal in the way that only mid-August downtown downpours can be. The water runs down the sidewalk in silver rivulets, past a handful of guys seeking shelter under an overhang at the Salvation Army's Red Shield shelter on Luckie Street.

"Eric Welsh? Col. Welsh?" one guy says in answer to a question. He points a thin finger at a locked door. His loose shirt flaps in the wind. "He's in there. He's always in there on Saturdays."



Personal Journeys: The colonel's war

<http://www.myajc.com/gallery/news/personal-journeys-colonels-war/gCFkW/#4086832>

“In there” is a room where 15 people sit in haphazard rows. They are thin and old and fat and young, 13 men and two women. They have this much in common: They served in the military; they are homeless; and they suffer, in varying degrees, from post traumatic stress disorder — PTSD.

And there is Welsh, retired colonel, U.S. Army, looking decidedly like a civilian in a worn Polo shirt and old cargo shorts, flip-flops flapping on the tiled floor. He is a walking contradiction: Maybe a man leaves the military, but it doesn't leave him. Despite his weekend attire, Welsh looks as if he's addressing the troops.

Actually, he is. For these people in this room on this rainy day are locked in a battle. If they cannot win this war against PTSD, Welsh warns, they are done, sunk, KIA.



MICHAEL YON

Welsh salutes the fallen. He commanded a battalion that lost 28 soldiers during 2006 and 2007 in Mosul, Iraq. When Welsh ... [Read More](#)

Welsh — warrior, grandson of the most famous Marine of all time, single dad, Coca-Cola executive — fixes them with a stare. He does not blink.

“You are in a fight,” he says, “a fight for your lives.”

Welsh knows. Their battle is his.

## **2 ‘Saved my life’**

Eric Welsh was born in Oxnard, Calif., in 1965. His mother died when he was 8, the result of an “unhealthy lifestyle.” His dad, a reluctant parent, often left the child alone. An early memory that stalks Welsh: He’s a kid, rummaging in a Dumpster for food.

A year after his mother died, Eric’s father took the boy to live with his grandmother. By age 9, Eric was, in essence, an orphan — one parent deceased, the other absent. His grandmother, not feeling equal to raising another child, enrolled him at the Milton Hershey School in Hershey, Pa.

“That school saved my life, absolutely saved my life.”

Founded by the chocolate magnate, the school was made for someone like young Eric: a place where a kid could find purpose in a life that, so far, had none. He played football, wrestled, baseball. He went to Kent State University, where he made a discovery: An athlete who’s “5-foot-nothing” needs to think about what he’ll do when his collegiate career is over.

One day, he stopped at the military recruiters offices near campus. He stuck his head in the Marine Corps office, where a recruiter was too busy to talk at the moment. He stepped to the next doorway, and thus did his life take one of those big turns that comes along every once in a while.

The Army recruiter had time to talk. Did Welsh have a birth certificate? Welsh did not. No problem, the recruiter replied. Who were your parents? Welsh provided the information, including his mother’s maiden name: Janet Boyington. The recruiter looked up.

“Just out of curiosity,” he asked, “are you kin to ‘Pappy’ Boyington?”

Gregory “Pappy” Boyington, the famed World War II Marine Corps air ace whose “Black Sheep Squadron” became the stuff of books and films? Welsh didn’t know. The recruiter did some quick digging and determined that the young man in his office was the grandson of the most famous Marine aviator of all time.

“Sign this,” the recruiter said. With the stroke of a pen, Welsh became a student soldier in Kent State’s ROTC program.

The smiling recruiter stepped next door to tell the Marine who'd just joined the Army.

Welsh excelled in the ROTC program. By the time he graduated in 1988, a second lieutenant with a bachelor's degree in political science, he was ready to serve his country. It began at Fort Benning.

Again, he excelled. The Army trained him in a variety of disciplines — airborne, ranger, reconnaissance. He'd scored well in aptitude tests. Each was a plum assignment for a young officer.

He lived a soldier's life, moving from one assignment to the next: Germany, domestic postings, the Middle East. He got introduced to war in 1990 as Operation Desert Storm, the first Iraqi war, was brewing. Welsh and others were among the first troops to put boots on that dusty land. In the coming years, he'd return to that desert country.

"That was probably the beginning of being in the right place at the right time," he says. "Or the wrong place at the wrong time."

When Welsh came back, he was marked. The kid, his higher-ups had decided, had promise. A variety of assignments followed. Each tested the young officer's mettle, and each he handled with aplomb.

If he had any doubt that the Army had plans for him, Welsh laid that aside with his next posting, in 2003: as a special assistant to Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, at the time head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon. He was rubbing elbows, sharing the same space, with the nation's top military leaders.

But war wasn't through with him.

### **3 A prayer in combat**

The images are shaky, poorly shot, and for good reason: It's not easy to hold your camera steady when chasing the enemy, or when the enemy is chasing you. The pictures are, in the truest sense, *cinema verite*. Can anything be more realistic than watching an armored personnel carrier get blasted by an IED, an improvised explosive device?

"Look." Welsh, sitting at the dinner table in his home, points at his laptop screen. "I'm about to get blown up."

On cue, an IED erupts in flame and smoke from the pavement beside the tan Humvee. It's a fiery uppercut, a hell of a wallop. Welsh is inside the Humvee.

Another video, "A normal day in Iraq," flashes on the laptop. It begins with another subterranean explosion, a blast so powerful that an earthen wall erupts from the desert. The image shifts to a crew of soldiers in a Black Hawk helicopter. The big machine thunders over the desert, casting a shadow across sand. The soldiers laugh and point. You're reminded of kids on a field trip, kids with guns.

The videos — he has many — are reminders of 2006-07, when the Army sent Welsh to Iraq again as commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, the same cavalry unit once commanded by Lt. Col. George Custer. The soldiers were posted to Mosul, north of Baghdad, where insurgents littered roadsides with bombs and conducted a persistent guerrilla war. The surge was on, and it was up to the battalion to keep order in Mosul.

*Mosul.* God, what a hellish place. Welsh suffered so many roadside bombs that physicians diagnosed him with traumatic brain injuries, or TBI. The injury can occur when the brain collides with the inside of the skull, rattling it so thoroughly it may cause memory loss, impaired cognitive skills, mood swings or even death. Exposure to multiple explosions is a prescription for TBI.

Mosul was a cauldron of IEDs. Welsh recalls July 2, 2007. His Humvee was rolling along a road in Mosul when he heard a boom, felt the vehicle shake as if the ground was about to swallow it. The force of the blast knocked him out. When he came to, Welsh, shrugging off his latest concussion, returned to his troops. A physician stopped him. How many blasts does this make? the doctor asked. Welsh thought. “I don’t know,” he replied.

A scan of his brain revealed damage on both hemispheres, permanently affecting his memory and some motor skills. Without realizing it, Welsh had started performing some tasks with his left hand that once he’d done with his right. The brain, even injured, compensates.

Welsh used to be able to recite a couple of dozen numbers after quickly committing them to memory; these days, he can make six or seven before faltering. He struggles with names. The doctors have a term for it: “degraded executive management capability.”

If untreated, his TBI can cause seizures. Welsh makes sure he takes his medicine; too much is at stake not to. He accepts the injury with a soldier’s stoicism. Other guys, he figures, had it worse

“I can have absolute clarity in some things, and in others I cannot.”

One number he’ll never forget: 28. That’s how many soldiers he lost in that 15-month deployment. When he talks about Mosul, Welsh is there again — in the heat, and the dust, and the dirt, “nerves on fire.” Welsh cannot talk about that without waging a smaller war with his emotions.

There’s Dunkleberger — Brent Dunkleberger, a staff sergeant, a good guy. He was the first in the battalion to die in Mosul, Dec. 12, 2006, the victim of an RPG, a rocket-propelled grenade. Welsh learned later that Dunkleberger’s wife collapsed when officers brought her the news.

The last ones occurred Oct. 31, 2007, when a massive, buried IED blasted a Bradley armored vehicle. The explosion blew the turret off the small tank, claiming the lives of Spc. Brandon Smitherman and Capt. Timothy McGovern.

It also temporarily claimed Welsh's resolve.

When he heard that two were killed, Welsh — he was outside the city at the time — aimed his Humvee toward Mosul. He arrived to see a shattered vehicle. Stepping to the ground, he sagged. He'd worked closely with McGovern.

James Pippin, his command master sergeant and the battalion's senior enlisted soldier, guided Welsh to a walled courtyard. He wrapped an arm around his commanding officer's neck.

"Almighty God, I ask your blessing, strength and wisdom on my battalion commander," Pippin prayed. "Grant him the clarity of thought that he will inspire us and get us through this extraordinary rendezvous with destiny."

Pippin, now retired from the Army, figures that was the only time he saw his commanding officer waver. "He got after the bad guys in a big way. He was a nasty (expletive). "And that's a huge compliment."

#### **4 'Reflection' of others**

PTSD is nothing new. In World War II, it was called shell shock. Soldiers returning from Civil War battlefields complained of "soldier's heart." Herodotus mentioned the stress of battle in his account of the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE.

But never before has PTSD been so prevalent. Officials at the Atlanta Veterans Medical Center estimate that 30 to 40 veterans are referred to its PTSD team every week. Two years ago, the hospital identified about 7,500 cases of PTSD among its patients.

The number of PTSD sufferers has been steadily growing, said Dr. Lisa Najavits, a professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine and a lecturer at Harvard Medical School. She's the author of "Seeking Safety: A Treatment Manual for PTSD and Substance Abuse." Welsh uses the manual when working with veterans at the Salvation Army.

Najavits recalls getting a phone call from Welsh earlier this year. He was a veteran who'd undergone trauma in combat and earlier in life, Welsh told her. He wanted to use her book to help other vets confront and control their PTSD.

Although never diagnosed with PTSD, Welsh knew the monster when he saw it.

"I was very, very moved," says Najavits. "He's lived it — the best and the worst. He connects with veterans who may feel alone. I just think the world of what he's doing."

So does Kevin Hall, lead case worker for specialized services at the Salvation Army shelter. Hall was not an easy sell: He frequently hears from would-be do-gooders who don't follow up on their promises to work at the shelter. So when Welsh offered to work with veterans suffering PTSD, Hall gave a cautious OK.

By Welsh's second session, says Hall, he knew he'd made the right decision. "The guys

(veterans) are always talking about it," said Hall, also a veteran. "He's lived it, he's walked it." He's still walking it, says Daryll Whitehead, an Air Force veteran who ended up at the center after washing out of his last job because he clashed with the boss. Salvation Army workers found him in Centennial Park. Whitehead, 57, wants to return to school to learn hotel management.

"The colonel's like a reflection in the mirror," says Whitehead, a tall man who considers each word before he releases it. "He's a reflection of ourselves."

## **5 A new career**

Welsh lives in a townhome in east Cobb. He shares it with Coby and Willie, his sons, and Barnsley, a big-headed yellow Labrador retriever who follows him on plodding, silent feet. He's tried hard to make it a real home; on a recent evening, scented candles burned on a table laid out with Halloween-themed placemats. He is, after all, dad *and* mom.

He doesn't like to talk about his ex-wife, whom he met while a young officer at Fort Benning. The courts awarded Welsh custody of his sons when he got divorced three years ago.

They love their old man. He gave up a military career to look after them.

"Truth be told, he is my best friend," says Coby, 16, whose weightlifter physique brings to mind a teen Stallone. "No one could be there for me any more than him." Willie, 14, nods.

A home office just off the entryway is a four-wall testimony to military service. It is lined with medals (he has 18), including a purple heart and awards for valor. Shadowboxes display the ranks of an officer moving steadily toward a general's star. He has a black Stetson worn only by the select few who serve in the cavalry.

Welsh retired two years ago after talking with his uncle, Gregory Boyington, the air ace's son. An Air Force veteran, Boyington met Welsh less than a decade ago after a writer working on a book about Boyington's famous father told him about a guy in the Army whose mom had been Janet Boyington. The retired pilot sought him out.

"We've been fast friends since," says Boyington.

Welsh deployed to Iraq again in 2010. When he came back in 2011, his uncle had some advice: "Forget about getting a general's star. It would take too long.

"A military career is a wonderful thing when you're a young officer," says Boyington, who retired after nearly three decades of service. "But when you get older, it's a lot easier to get a job in your 40s than a decade later."

Welsh listened. He retired at 46, moved to the metro area and got a position with the Coca-Cola Co. Earlier this month, the company named him global operations director of

the Ekocenter initiative, which provides safe drinking water, wireless communications and other services to improve living conditions in 20 nations.

Welsh has a simpler reason for leaving the military. “I wasn’t going to let my sons be one more in a long list of tragedies from this war.”

It’s also the reason Welsh spends his Saturday mornings at the Salvation Army shelter. He lost soldiers in combat; he cannot abide the loss of more in peacetime. Welsh cannot save them all, but he has to try.

“If I don’t do this, then I’ve failed.”

## **6 Atop a volcano**

Another Saturday morning, the October sun winks between high-rises, a cool wind blows along Luckie Street. Nearby, Georgia Tech is gearing up to pound Syracuse University on the football field. It is a beautiful day.

Things are not as rosy inside the Salvation Army shelter, where nearly 40 men sit at tables. They are worn, and afraid, and angry. Welsh stands atop a figurative volcano.

“Any new people here?” he asks.

“Maurice,” one man offers. “Marines.”

“Joe. United States Navy.”

“Francis. Third Rangers.”

Welsh gives a brief sketch of his life — orphan, homeless, 28 years in the Army, and “way too many deployments,” he says. He reaches for a tried-and-true phrase:

“I was always in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

*Wrong place.* This touches a chord. Men nod. Whether in combat or not, they understand those two words. They’ve all been there, hell yes.

A man raises his hand. It is a big hand, attached to a big arm. He was in the Army.

“I got tired of feeling like I was the only one (with PTSD),” he says. “I’m a train wreck.” He scans the room.

“No reflection on anybody here, but I don’t trust you. None of you.”

A slender young man is next. He looks as if he should have played football for his high school team the night before. A Humvee hit him in Iraq, shattering his knee. He’s fighting an addiction to painkillers.

“As a kid growing up, watching ‘Rambo,’ I thought the military was so bad-ass — explosives, you know.” He looks at his knee and shrugs. “Over there, I got hurt a little



bit.” Welsh nods. “We *all* got hurt a little bit.”

And so it goes. One man says he feels as if his contributions to America were ignored when he got home. Another says he got out of the Army, lost his home, then took a bullet in the guts in a street fight.

A former Ranger raises his hand. He was in the seventh grade when terrorists attacked America on Sept. 11, 2001. He grew up wanting to avenge the deaths of so many innocents. Now, he says, his family thinks he’s nuts.

“This,” he says, sweeping his arms about, “is the only place I can talk.”

A big man in a sleeveless T-shirt sits at the back, a glowering presence. “I can relate to that young man.”

He joined the Army as the Vietnam War wound down. As a civilian, he went looking for trouble, taking drugs and fighting. No surprise that he found it.

“I hung with violent people,” he says. “The drugs helped me deal with my stress levels.”

Welsh fixes the young Ranger with a stern look. “You listening? That’s you in 10 or 15 years.”

A man wearing a purple Polo shirt that strains across his chest nods. “Not long ago I busted this guy on the head with a Coke can.”

This goes on for a half-hour longer. The men yell, point fingers, tell a few to shut up and urge others to talk more. Welsh, still wearing those goofy flip-flops, moves from table to table to table.

“I hear ya,” he says. “I know. Brother, I know.”

The cook comes in and tells everyone he needs the room to feed folks. Everyone looks surprised. Where did the time go?

Some men file out, while others hang around. Emotions, once loosed, aren’t so easily reined in.

Welsh spends 10 more minutes talking, one on one, with some of the guys. Each leaves promising to return.

“See you next week,” says Welsh, who then offers a little bomb he drops at every session:

“While we were talking,” he says, “two vets committed suicide.”

Welsh stands down. Their battle, for another week at least, is won. So is his.



A single father, Welsh shares his home in east Cobb with his teenage sons, Coby and Willie. " Truth be told, he is my best friend," Coby says of his father. "No one could be there for me any more than him." Willie nods.

PHIL SKINNER / [PSKINNER@AJC.COM](mailto:PSKINNER@AJC.COM)

Welsh juggles the demands of work, volunteer and keeping food on the table for Coby (right) and Willie. Welsh has a simple reason for leaving the military two years ago "I wasn't going to let my sons be one more in a long list of tragedies from this war."

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Welsh talks to veterans at the Salvation Army Red Shield Center in Atlanta. Welsh is retired U.S. Army colonel speaks to these men each Saturday. PTSD has never been so Prevalent. Officials at the Atlanta Veterans Medical Center estimates that 30 to 40 veterans are referred to its PTSD team every week

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U.S. soldiers from Demon Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 7th Cavalry—Welsh's command—come under fire from insurgents in western Mosul in November 2007. Welsh suffered so many roadside bombs that physicians diagnosed him with traumatic brain injuries, or TBI. Mosul was a cauldron of IEDs. AP Photo/Mayta Alluruzzo, file



Welsh salutes the fallen. He commanded a battalion that lost 28 soldiers during 2006 and 2007 in Mosul, Iraq. When Welsh talks about Mosul – he is there again—In the heat, and the dust and the dirt. Welsh cannot talk without waging a small war with emotions, “soldier’s heart.”

Photo courtesy of Eric Welsh



Welsh with his collection of “Leaderships Coins.” - given to him by senior commanders for acts of excellence during his 28 year military career—at his Marietta home. Welsh volunteers to help homeless veterans suffering from PTSD. This den is a four-walled testimony to 28 years of military service.

PHIL SKINNER / [PSKINNER@AJC.COM](mailto:PSKINNER@AJC.COM)

**HOW WE GOT THE STORY** As the nation's population of returning war veterans grows, the AJC continues its commitment to reporting on the challenges these men and women face as they re-enter civilian life. Prompted by a series of articles he read in the AJC, retired Col. Eric Welsh contacted staff writer Mark Davis to talk about post traumatic stress disorder, which plagues between 11 percent and 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. When Davis learned Welsh was volunteering to help homeless veterans suffering from PTSD, he attended a session to see Welsh in action. Davis was impressed and knew he'd be back because Welsh's story was one that needed to be told. **Suzanne Van Atten Features Enterprise Editor [personaljourneys@ajc.com](mailto:personaljourneys@ajc.com)**

### **About the reporter**

Mark Davis joined the AJC in 2003 after working in Philadelphia, Tampa and his native North Carolina. A graduate of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Davis has reported on heroes, bums and creatures that walk, swim, crawl and fly.

### **About the photographer**

Phil Skinner has been a photojournalist at the AJC for 16 years, working on a variety of stories, including the Masters, Olympics, Atlanta Braves, presidential campaigns, hurricanes and all kinds of human interest stories. Previously he worked at the Sun-Sentinel, the Boca Raton News, the Sarasota Herald Tribune and the Jupiter Journal.

### **FOR VETERANS**

In observation of Veterans Day, today's Personal Journey on Eric Welsh is part of a four-part series about the men and women who serve our country in the military.

#### **Saturday**

The Atlanta History Center's "Stories of Sacrifice: Listening to America's Veterans," lets visitors listen in on personal accounts of sacrifice and bravery during its program Monday.

#### **Monday**

Some returning veterans encounter challenges when attempting to re-enter the civilian workforce. Hire Heroes USA is an Alpharetta-based nonprofit organization that helps former warriors land jobs after they return from military campaigns.

#### **Tuesday**

More women than ever before are serving high-stress roles in the military. We look at an Atlanta Veterans Administration program that helps returning female veterans overcome some of the traumas they've experienced.