

## Marine finds writing offers some relief

by **E. J. Montini** - Dec. 31, 2009 12:00 AM  
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Clint Van Winkle recalls sitting in his first college class as a 25-year-old freshman, listening quietly from the back of the room while other students talked about what they'd done over the summer.

"They'd gone to the beach and had summer jobs," he says. "It's one of those times when you realize that you don't fit in. What was I going to say? I spent my summer doing war?"

In 2003, during the initial invasion of Iraq, Van Winkle was a Marine sergeant leading an amphibious assault-vehicle unit.

"In those days it was constant patrol," he says. "There were no bases, no camps. For three months we moved from city to city, doing missions, doing what we needed to do."

The stress lasts all day, every day. The horror is shocking at first, then accepted, then hardly noticed. But the memories stay with you, seeping deeper and deeper like a bad bruise, from muscle to bone to heart to

soul.

"No one back then talked about PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)," Van Winkle says. "Maybe if I had stayed in the Marines it would have been easier to deal with. Those were the only guys who knew what it felt like. Out among civilians you can become really isolated."

At Arizona State University's West Campus, Van Winkle took a writing class.

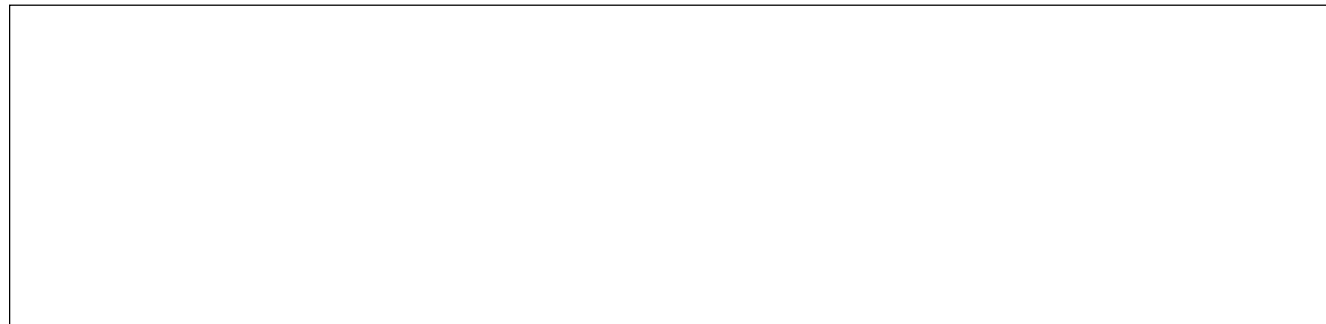
"It was a way of talking to myself, I guess," he says. "I found that I could write about those experiences better than speak about them."

There still were troubles. Self-medicating through alcohol. Mood swings. Depression. Van Winkle wonders sometimes how his wife, Sara, a teacher, stuck with him. But she did. His first trip to the VA hospital to seek help for PTSD came about a year after he got back from Iraq.

"They weren't ready for guys like me," he says. "I remember a counselor asking if I had seen any death and destruction. I wanted to say, 'Are you (expletive) kidding me? I *created* it.' "

The essays he wrote for class at ASU became Van Winkle's therapy, and this year, St.

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Martin's Press published "Soft Spots: A Marine's Memoir of Combat and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." A reviewer in the *Washington Post* praised Van Winkle's book for its "lacerating honesty."

Van Winkle was afraid the Marines he served with would disapprove.

"But they didn't," he says. "The book gave them a way to work through their own war issues. It's been great. No one who has been through combat comes back unaffected."

Particularly from our long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the dangers from IEDs (improvised explosive devices) are constant and there are repeated deployments.

Van Winkle worries about the troops who will participate in the latest "surge." Not just for their safety in a war zone, but for the unseen wounds they'll bring back with them.

"The VA has gotten better with PTSD, but there are still a lot of problems. Thousands of troops have this, and it's not going away," he says. "We're seeing the bad things that can happen if you don't do anything about it."

Suicides. Drug and alcohol problems. Spousal abuse. Van Winkle, who lives in

Phoenix and has earned a master's degree, still doesn't feel "employable." And he's troubled that people have lost interest in the wars.

"I guess if you don't have a dog in the fight, if no one in your family is in the military, you can ignore things," he says. "That's too bad."

Veterans like him can make it tougher for the rest of us to avoid the subject. The more they speak out, the better we'll understand the sacrifices made in our name and the needs of wounded warriors who bear no visible scars.

Which may lead to fewer casualties.

At least at home.

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