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THE WAR WITHIN

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(01-29) 04:00 PST Pike County, Ky. -- BATTLE SCARS: The photo of the 'Marlboro Man' in Fallujah became a symbol of the Iraq conflict when it ran in newspapers across America in 2004. Now the soldier has returned home to Kentucky, where he battles the demons of post-traumatic stress

The photograph hit the world on Nov. 10, 2004: a close-cropped shot of a U.S. Marine in Iraq, his face smeared with blood and dirt, a cigarette dangling from his lips, smoke curling across weary eyes.

It was an instant icon, with Dan Rather calling it "the best war photograph in recent years." About 100 newspapers ran the photo, dubbing the anonymous warrior the "Marlboro Man."

The man in the photograph is James Blake Miller, now 21, and he is an icon, although in ways Rather probably never imagined.

He's quieter now -- easier to anger. He turns to fight at the sound of a backfire, can't look at fireworks without thinking of fire raining down on a city. He has trouble sleeping, and when he does, his fingers twitch on invisible triggers.

The diagnosis: post-traumatic stress disorder.

His life in Kentucky, before and after the clicking shutter, says as much about hundreds of thousands of new American war veterans as his famous photograph said about that one bad day in Fallujah -- a photo Miller cannot see as an icon.

"I don't see a whole lot," he said. "I see a day I won't care to remember, but that I'll never forget."

James Blake Miller was born in Pike County in the hills of eastern Kentucky, where Daniel Boone is said to have walked and where moonshine is still consumed. An average family here makes about \$24,000; the only decent-paying jobs are down at the coal mine.

Miller got his first name from his father, who got it from his and back into family history. But folks called him Blake, the middle name his parents heard on the television show "Dynasty."

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His paternal grandfather was a Marine in '53; a heavy smoker, like most of the men in the family, he died of cancer before he was 40. The man Miller grew up calling "Papaw" was his grandmother's second husband, an Army vet of Vietnam.

Sometimes, Papaw would get crying drunk and start telling the story about the boy who came into the camp in Vietnam one night, and how they had to shoot him. Then he would stop speaking, and look at the little boys hanging on his every word. "You've had enough, Joe Lee," his wife would say then. "It's time to go to bed."

"It wasn't that he liked to drink -- that was how he dealt with it," Miller said.

Miller grew up in Jonancy, a tiny hamlet 20 miles from the county seat of Pikeville. He got his first job -- washing cars at the local auto dealership -- at age 13, about a year after he took up smoking.

Before long, he began working in a body shop, where the owner told him the most extraordinary thing: Miller could get his auto body repair certification for free -- just by joining the military. A Marine recruiter offered more: insurance, housing, college money.

"I thought, 'Well, damn, that's amazing,' " Miller said. "Hell, here I am, 18 years old -- I can have all this in the palm of my hands just by giving them four years."

Following his grandfather's footsteps, he went infantry, and left for boot camp in November 2002. Four months later, the war in Iraq broke out.

"Before I knew it," Miller said, "I was thrown into the mix without even thinking about it."

Miller was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment of the 2nd Marine Division, based in Camp Lejeune, N.C.

"Right before we got ready to leave for Iraq, I guess I was a little nervous. I started smoking more -- I went from about a pack-and-a-half a day to 2 1/2 packs a day," he said. "When we got to Iraq ... I was smoking 5 1/2 packs."

For a while, Iraq didn't seem all that bad. Miller and his fellow Marines settled into a routine in Anbar province in western Iraq, setting up hiding places among the palms and sand, and watching for the white pickups that insurgents would use to plant bombs and fire mortars.

There also was time for candy and laughter with the Iraqi children who came running to see the American troops. Miller felt like he was helping.

Then, on Nov. 5, 2004, in the middle of a sandstorm, the Marines got the word that they might be heading for an assault on Fallujah -- at the time, the capital of the Iraqi insurgency.

No American forces had gone inside the city in months. And now Miller would be among the first. He had been a Marine for less than two years.

"It puts butterflies in my stomach right now," he said. "I don't know if you can describe it. I don't think words can."

The days before the assault were an intense blur of training, preparation and fear. But there was one bright spot, when Miller ran into a good friend in the chow hall -- Demarkus Brown, a 22-year-old from Virginia.

Miller met Brown in infantry school, when the smiling African American introduced himself to the white Kentucky native with a grinning, "What's up, cracker?"

Miller quickly realized Brown didn't mean the word seriously -- didn't mean much of anything seriously. Brown liked to party all hours and go dancing, then call Miller to come pick him up.

"It didn't matter what you told him or how s -- ty it was," Miller said. "He was always the one guy who had a smile on his face."

But one thing Brown took seriously was music: He loved raves and techno music, and Miller played bluegrass on bass and guitar. Their styles somehow harmonized, and they became close friends.

Now they were together outside Fallujah.

The night before U.S. forces went into the city, Miller gathered with his fellow Marines and led them by memory through a passage from the Bible, John 14:2-3.

"In my Father's house, there are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I leave this place and go there to prepare a place for you, so that where I may be, you may be also."

The assault on Fallujah began Nov. 8, 2004, when U.S. planes, using a combination of high explosives and burning white phosphorus, hammered the city in advance of the artillery push. Miller was under fire from the moment he stepped out of the personnel carrier.

It lasted into Nov. 9 -- the day that, for a while, would make Miller's face the most famous in Iraq.

As Miller remembers that day, he was on a rooftop taking fire and calling for support on his radio - a 20-pound piece of equipment that he had to lug around along with nine extra batteries, hundreds of extra rounds of ammunition, and a couple of cartons of cigarettes.

As insurgent bullets from a nearby building pinged off the roof, a horrified Miller heard footsteps coming up the stairs behind him. He raised his rifle -- and barely had time to halt when he saw it was embedded Los Angeles Times photographer Luis Sinco.

Miller returned to his radio, guiding two tanks to his position. When they opened fire, he said, the thunder left his body numb -- but the building housing the attackers had collapsed. Later, he said, they would find about 40 bodies in the rubble.

"I was never so happy in all my life to take that handset away from my head," Miller said. "I lit up a f -- cigarette."

His ear was bleeding from the sound of the tank firing -- Miller still can't hear out of his right ear. His nose bled from a nick he took when his rifle scope and radio got tangled up midfire. He looked at the sunrise and wondered how many more of those he would see.

He was vaguely aware that elsewhere on the rooftop, Sinco was taking pictures.

At a briefing the next day, Miller's gunnery sergeant walked up to him, grinning, and said: "Would you believe you're the most famous f -- Marine in the Marine Corps right now? Believe it or not, your ugly mug just went all over the U.S."

The Marines wanted to pull him out of Fallujah at that point, Miller said, not wanting the very public poster boy to die in combat. But he stayed.

He won't talk about the weeks that followed. He only mentions moments, like still frames from a film. The day his column barely survived an ambush, escaping through a broken door as bullets struck near their feet. The morning he woke up to discover that a cat had taken up residence in the open chest cavity of an Iraqi body nearby, consuming it from within.

The day he discovered that Demarkus Brown had been killed.

"When we found out, I told a couple of my buddies who were close to him, too. We just sat around, and we didn't say much at all," Miller said. "You didn't have the heart to cry."

But it wasn't those terrible benchmarks that affected him the most, Miller said. It was the daily chore of war: the times he had to raise his rifle, peer through the scope and squeeze the trigger to launch a bullet, not at a target, not at a distant white truck, but at another human being.

"It's one thing to be shot at, and you shoot a couple rounds back, just trying to suppress somebody else," Miller said. "It's another thing when you see a human being shooting a round at you, knowing that you're shooting back with the intent to kill them. You're looking through a scope at somebody. It's totally different. You can make out a guy's eyes."

When Miller returned to America, he brought back a big duffel bag packed with numerous letters and gifts from those who had seen his photo. It was only later that he discovered he'd brought home some of the war, too.

None of the Marines talked much about the strain that war puts on one's emotions, Miller said. The "wizards" -- military psychologists -- gave the returning troops a briefing on the subject, but nobody paid much attention. Even guys who were taking antidepressants to help them sleep didn't think much about the long-term consequences.

"What the hell are those people going to do once they get out? They ride it out until they get an honorable discharge, and then they're never diagnosed with anything," Miller said. "How the hell are you going to do anything for them after that? And that's how so many of these guys are ending up on the damn streets."

Miller dismissed the early signs, too. When he and his buddies reacted to a truck backfire by dropping into a combat stance and raising imaginary rifles, well, that was to be expected. And when his wife, Jessica -- the childhood sweetheart whom Miller had married in June -- told him he was tightening his arm around her neck in the night, that was strange, but he figured it would pass. So would the nightmares he began to have about Iraq, things that had happened, things that hadn't.

Then one day, while visiting his wife at her college dorm in Pikeville, Miller looked out the window and clearly saw the body of an Iraqi sprawled out on the sidewalk. He turned away.

"I said, 'Look, honey, I just got to get out of here.' I couldn't even tell her at the time what had happened," he said. "(I thought), 'Well, that's it. That's my little spaz I'm supposed to have that the psychiatrists were talking about ... I'm glad I got it out of the way.'"

But he hadn't. Jessica, a psychology student, tried to help with a visualization technique. But when he looked inside himself, Miller found a kind of demonic door guarded by a twisted figure in a black cloak. Under the cloak's hood, he spotted the snarling face of the teufelhund, a Marine Corps icon -- the devil dog.

"So I come out again, without closing the door," he said. "After all this happened, my nightmares started getting a lot f -- ing worse."

Finally, Miller went to a military psychiatrist, who diagnosed him with signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. Miller thought that meant he could not be deployed. But in early September, he joined a group of Marines headed to police New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

"I really didn't want to go. ... There was a possibility we would be shooting people," he said. "We could be going into another (urban warfare) environment just like Iraq, except this would actually be U.S. citizens.

"Here we go, Fallujah 2, right here in the states."

Not long after they arrived, as Hurricane Rita bore down on them, the Marines were packed into the amphibious assault ship Iwo Jima to wait out the storm offshore. And one day, as Miller headed for the smoke deck with a Marlboro, a passing sailor made a whistling sound just like a rocket-propelled grenade.

"I don't remember grabbing him. I don't remember putting him against the bulkhead. I don't remember getting him down on the floor. I don't remember getting on top of him. I don't remember doing any of that s -- ," Miller said. "That was like the last straw."

On Nov. 10, 2005 -- the Marine Corps' 230th birthday and one year to the day after the Marlboro Man picture appeared in the Los Angeles Times, Miller was honorably discharged after a medical review. His military career was over.

Miller returned to eastern Kentucky, the place he had spent years trying to escape. He wanted the familiarity and safety of the people and land he'd known since birth.

"Maybe it made me think twice about what I had lost," he said. "What I was really missing."

In a way, though, his family is still missing Blake Miller -- the Miller who left Kentucky for Iraq a couple of years ago.

The man who left was easygoing, quick to laugh, happy to sit in a relative's house and eat and smoke and talk. The man who came back is quick to anger, they say, and is quiet. He still smiles often but does not easily laugh.

And when he takes a seat in his adoptive grandmother's home, amid her collection of ceramic Christ figurines, it is in a chair that faces the door.

Mildred Childers, who owns those figurines, sees Miller's difficulties as a crisis of faith. She still remembers Miller's call just before the assault on Fallujah, and his terrible question: "How can people go to church and be a Christian and kill people in Iraq?"

"He was raised where that's one of the Ten Commandments, do not kill," she said. "I think it's hard for a soldier to go to war and have that embedded in them from small children up, and you go over there and you've got to do it to stay alive."

Recently, some of his Marine buddies have been calling Miller up, crying drunk, and remembering their war experiences. Just like Papaw Joe Lee used to do when Miller was a boy.

"There's a lot of Vietnam vets ... they don't heal until 30, 40 years down the road," Miller said. "People bottle it up, become angry, easily temperamental, and hell, before you know it, these are the people who are snapping on you."

Jessica interrupted. "You're already like that," she said.

She recalled her own first glimpse of the Marlboro Man -- an image seen through tears of relief that he was alive, and misery at how worn he looked.

"Some people thought it was sexy, and we thought, 'Oh, my God, he's in the middle of a war, close to death.' We just couldn't understand how some people could look at it like that," she said. "But I guess for some people it was glory, like patriotism."

She looked at her quiet husband through the smoke drifting from his right hand.

"But when it comes out and there's actually a personality behind that picture, and that personality, he has to deal with all the war, and all he's done, people don't want to know how hard it actually is," she said.

"This is the dark side of the reality of war. ... People don't want to know the Marlboro Man has PTSD."

Miller stood outside his father's home in Jonancy, looking over the beaten mobile homes, the rows of corn, potatoes and cabbage. For a change, he wasn't smoking - he's down to a pack-and-a-half a day.

"There ain't a goddamn thing around here," he said. "My whole life, all I did was watch my old man bust his ass."

It was why he joined the Marines -- why part of him wishes he could go back.

"My whole life, all I've ever known is working on cars, doing body work, cutting grass, manual labor, you know? It was something different," he said. "You always hear those commercials -- it's not just a job, it's an adventure. It was, you know?"

On the other hand, Miller isn't sure he'd want to go back to combat -- nor sure he'd ever let any kid of his enlist. He has mixed feelings about the oversize copy of the Marlboro Man picture proudly displayed in the lobby of the Marine recruiting station in Pikeville.

Some of his relatives and friends are against the war; others see it as a fight against terrorism.

Miller himself seems torn -- proud of the troops fighting for freedom, but wondering whether there was a peaceful way, to find terrorists in Iraq without invading.

There was no time for such questions in Fallujah. But now, at night, when he can't sleep, Miller thinks of the men he saw through his rifle scope, and wonders: Were they terrorists fighting against America? Or men fighting to protect their homes?

"I mean, how would we feel if they came over and started something here?" he asked. "I'm glad that I fought for my country. But looking back on it, I wouldn't do it all over again."

It helps, sometimes, to talk about it -- last week, Miller did what he hopes other veterans do: He had his first visit with a Veterans Administration counselor.

"I've got my whole life ahead of me," he said. "I'm too young to lay down and quit; too young to let anything beat me."

Down the road, Miller hopes to start a business. For now, he is waiting for his disability benefits to kick in. Maybe then, he and Jessica can afford the big wedding they had always wanted. She already has her white wedding dress. He still intends to wear his Marine Corps blues.

Veterans and stress

Post-traumatic stress disorder is an ailment resulting from exposure to an experience involving direct or indirect threat of serious injury or death. Symptoms include recurrent thoughts of a traumatic event, reduced involvement in work or outside interests, hyper alertness, anxiety and irritability.

About 317,000 veterans diagnosed with the disorder were treated at Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers and clinics in fiscal year 2005. Nearly 19,000 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were seen for the disorder in veterans' medical centers and Vet Centers from fiscal year 2002 to 2005.

A recent study of soldiers and Marines who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan found that about 17 percent met criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or generalized anxiety disorder. Of those whose responses were positive for a mental disorder, 40 percent or fewer actually received help while on active duty.

For more information, contact your local veterans facility, call (877) 222-VETS or visit one of the following Web sites:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: www.ncptsd.va.gov/

San Francisco Chronicle Guide for Returning Veterans: www.sfgate.com/returningvets/

Sources: Department of Veterans Affairs, New England Journal of Medicine

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