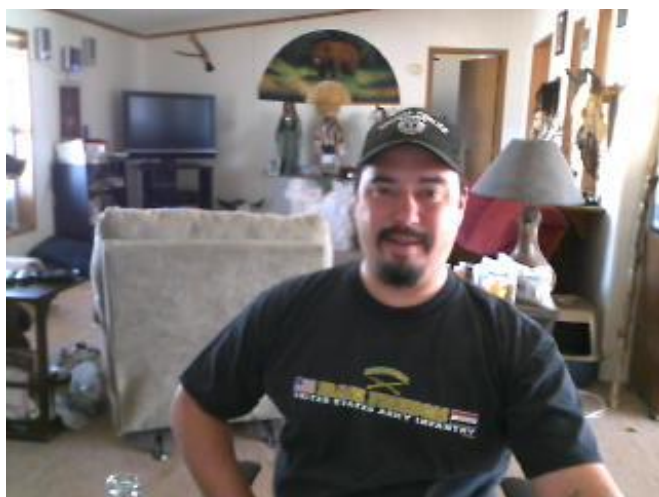


Testimonial – John Radell

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Testimonial: From Warrior to Healer

Give an Hour™ spokesperson John “Medicine Bear” Radell shares his story (as excerpted from Celia Straus’s book *Hidden Battles on Unseen Fronts*)

John Radell deployed for war in Iraq with the California National Guard’s 1498th Transportation Company, on May 15, 2003. He was 35 and had served in the early 1990s with a Special Forces unit. His mission in Iraq was to supply, service, live in, drive, and provide protection for Heavy Equipment Transporter Systems, recovering and hauling everything from M-1 battle tanks and Humvees to Port-o-Johns across war-torn Iraq. He would be attacked, ambushed, blinded in sand storms, swelter in 130-degree heat, and perform two-week long dangerous convoy missions without adequate body armor, radios, or supplies—even, at times, basic parts to his truck such as cab doors that could open and shut. By the time he was injured on July 22, 2003, he had either experienced first-hand or observed enough violence, killing, torture, and mayhem to sear his psyche forever.

“Camp Liberty in Kuwait was a grim, hot, sandy tent-city. Despite what they told us at briefings, each time our supply convoy went out, the action changed to front-line combat conditions. This was nothing remotely like simple supply runs. To make things more disorienting our rules of engagement changed on a daily basis.” Most roads held the potential of ambush and some, like the highway between Baghdad and the airport, guaranteed a drive fraught with danger. John got used to living out of the truck for 15 days at a time and driving for days without sleep in dust so thick he could seldom see the truck in front of him.

Since he was trained as a weapons specialist, it wasn’t long before he was moved from the driver’s seat to the turret of a converted HMVEE with a 50 mm machine gun in hand instead of a steering wheel. On his “Alive Day” the convoy was traveling north to Mosul to supply the 4th Infantry when an IED hit the truck in front of the one John was protecting. It was the start of an ambush. For an instant he could neither see nor hear, the blast was so close. Moments later a bullet from an AK47 slammed into his right leg just below the knee. “At the time I was oblivious to my injury. We were in the midst of a fire fight, and guys were going down all around me.”

A medic treated the bullet wound, and John went back to business until the convoy made it back to their Forward Operating Base almost a week later. “There was a lot of frustration over the red tape during our missions. We lost 15 guys in the time I was there. We’d be in the midst of an RPG attack and be taking 20

or 30 rounds and then we'd have to call in for permission to engage the enemy: 'Would it be appropriate to return fire? We have two men down.' I felt like here we are, soldiers trained to fight, and all we can do is to watch our comrades fall by the wayside."

His frustration built up over the months as it became more and more difficult to tell who was friendly and who was not. "We knew not everyone was the enemy but no one told us how to tell the difference. I wound up killing a twelve year old boy because I thought he was an insurgent getting ready to throw a grenade. I killed a man and his wife and the small child she was holding in her arms when their car wouldn't stop at our roadblock. When reality set in and I realized what I had done and was a part of, I tried to talk to my superiors but they basically said, 'Suck it up and drive on.' It's one of those demons I'll always live with as a soldier."

It wasn't until almost a month later that John was flown back to the United States. "I was in crazy pain but they told me to perform my duties, so that's what I did. When I got back to Fort Lewis they fixed my leg and discovered damage to my eye and ears due to the blast. But my worst injury was Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome and no one recognized that condition, not even me, not back in 2003." He would spend the next year fighting for his sanity.

"The year at Fort Lewis was bad. My first therapist was an Army Major who refused to believe I had PTSD. She thought that it all related back to being spanked as a child. I got so angry that I slapped her. She pressed charges for that and I almost got an article 15. Instead they labeled me 'unstable' and didn't allow me off the base." At one point John was reviewed by a medical board to see if he was capable of being redeployed to Iraq but was deemed "a threat to the military" and "suffering from a moral flexibility." "It was only so long that I could be an emotional drone.

I trained so long and so hard that I did what I was told, totally cut off from my emotions. But eventually it came back to haunt me. I had to pay for all that."

On February 1, 2004, John was retired from the Army with 100% disability, 70% of which was PTSD. It would be years before his Traumatic Brain Injury from repeated exposure to IED blasts would show up in a CATScan prescribed because he'd lost all feeling in his right arm. He returned to his family in Oceanside, California, a changed man. "I couldn't relate to anyone when I first got home. I couldn't hold my wife or my fifteen-year-old daughter. I felt like I was stained. I saw blood on my hands. I had night terrors. I've been prescribed up to 13 medications a day in various combinations depending on my levels of anxiety and depression." After four years of intense therapy, sometimes as often as three times a week, he is coping better with his level four PTSD but still grapples with his "evil twins, general anxiety and panic attacks."

Early on he also knew his PTSD was affecting his marriage. While he sat paralyzed with anxiety and depression, his wife, Aiyana, was left to run the household and take care of everything from finances to children to pets. When John overdrew their bank account with his debit card, they decided she would give him a monthly allowance instead. By 2007 they were wise enough to get some marriage counseling. "There were only so many times that she could hear the same excuse, 'I've got PTSD.' We had to work through the issues. Now I have a weekly chore list I'm supposed to do, but I still forget about it, and that causes trouble." In the fall of 2008 John and Aiyana separated.

Today John is clear about who he is and what he wants to do. "I am John Medicine Bear Whitebow. I am of native indigenous ancestry from the Midwest, born and raised in California. My ancestral roots are of the Blackfoot, Yaqui, and Cherokee tribes, and I am a member of a non-federally recognized tribe. I am a descendant of medicine people, and I am also a medicine man. I have a vision to create a sanctuary where one can go to get away from the hectic lifestyle that modern life brings and become centered once again, where one can leave stress behind and seek the welcoming shelter of a sacred place that our Mother Earth has prepared for us.

To learn more about the Rainbow People's Medicine Lodge Sanctuary started by John, please visit: <http://www.rpmlmedicinelodge.org>.

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