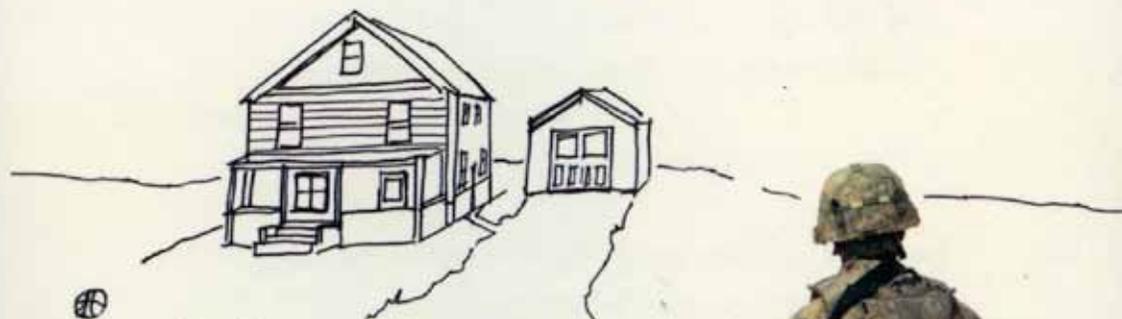


*"The Long Walk brings home in a visceral way the hidden, personal burden of war that many veterans continue to carry."*

—THE BOSTON GLOBE

# BRIAN CASTNER



# THE LONG WALK



A STORY OF WAR AND THE LIFE THAT FOLLOWS

MATTHEW HEFTI

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## The Long Walk: a conversation with Brian Castner

**I**n late 2004, more than one hundred Air Force explosive ordnance disposal technicians gathered together at Fort Carson, Colorado, for 34 riotous days of Combat Skills Training provided by the United States Army. The goal was to prepare over ten percent of all EOD Airmen to replace the Army EOD Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan in the first big request for forces from the other services. I was among these EOD techs, the progenitors of today's Joint Expeditionary Tasking—or JET—Airmen. Captain Brian Castner was also among them. I was a lowly Airman preparing for my first deployment. He was a company grade officer, getting ready for his second overseas tour since joining the Air Force, but his first as an EOD officer. He was preparing to lead a company-sized group of men straight into the escalating Iraq war, replete with roadside IEDs that were proving to be too much for the Army to handle alone.

I had no experience, but I carried plenty of hubris, idealism, and naïveté. I was wet behind the ears and as green as the pine trees covering the mountains that surrounded us. That is to say, I was just along for the ride. The leadership—always a faceless and nameless group—divided us by our future bases and introduced us to our respective chains of command. Captain Castner, the commanding officer of my group—the group trickling into Balad and its respective Forward Operating Bases over the next several months—looked every bit the part of the brainy engineering geek turned EOD tech. Not an imposing figure, he was one of the few men as short as I was. He wore glasses and his hair was shaved down close to his head. He was round of figure, not from being overweight, but from bundling up against the

Colorado cold in the middle of winter. He smiled often and seemed more eager to please his troops than command them.

Much later, I came to learn that this officer was a far more nuanced and complex creature than my first impression revealed. In a recent interview, he admitted he never put his whole heart into engineering. He originally wanted to be an astronaut. He often skipped the scientific electives common in his field of study so he could study history and humanities. He begged and pleaded until his ROTC leadership allowed him to take a semester to study in Oxford, where he wrote plays and short stories. His love of history, the bigger picture, and how we all fit into that picture is evident in his earnest memoir, *The Long Walk: A Story of War and the Life That Follows*.

During that month of training in Colorado, we trained hard like men preparing to meet the enemy. We partied even harder like men preparing to meet our maker. The one thing that struck me about Captain Castner, however, was that he thought clearly about priorities, and his priorities were his men. He didn't get too bent out of shape when the buses that transported us to the chow hall in the morning resounded with slurred songs about lewd nuns and lewder EOD techs who loved up on them; that is, he didn't get bent out of shape as long as we worked hard in training. When we found one unfortunate Senior Airman puking in his sleep from drinking too much Korean Soju, Captain took it in stride and made sure the Airman got the help he needed. When the paramedics and firefighters came to take that same Airman to the hospital, Captain Castner remained calm, and he made sure that kind of thing didn't happen again. When my own team leader lost a finger in a training accident and we had to rush him to the hospital—pale finger packed in snow—Captain Castner continued to instill confidence in his men for the rest of the exercise. Even after one knucklehead stabbed another knucklehead in the leg with an auto-opening knife when they were horsing around in the back of a duty van, Captain Castner kept his cool, and he didn't allow the stupid mistakes of a few dumb Airmen to ruin their careers.

The only times he lost his cool were when bureaucracy and red tape reared their ubiquitous heads. He had no problem chewing out Army Senior NCOs in front of everyone when his men had to stand on top of a freezing mountain in the middle of the night while it snowed all over them just because some Soldiers couldn't figure out the simple logistics of a bus schedule. He seemed to revel in the chance to explain to an Army weapons instructor during an after-action review that we were not typical Joes. We were EOD techs, and we were brilliant. Didn't they know? We

took apart bombs and did not need him to explain the workings of an M4 as if we were three years old.

Brian Castner is also his own harshest critic. For instance, he painstakingly describes his failures as a commander on his first EOD deployment; the commanding general charged him under the Uniform Code of Military Justice with disobeying a direct order in wartime. Yet, you have to read the short author's bio at the end of the book to learn that he was awarded a Bronze Star Medal for his service on his next tour; Castner makes no mention of it in his book. He writes about that first trip to Iraq, "The environment met expectations, but being in command did not. My carefully crafted vision of life as a deployed EOD operator met the practical limits of the Air Force bureaucracy almost immediately." In his case, the Air Force bureaucracy seemed to win the first battle.

By the time I got to Balad two months later, he had already been fired. The rumors we heard when we arrived to Balad were that Captain Castner was a hero who had put his men's welfare above his own career. From the perspective of the enlisted members, he had acted out of common sense in a matter of life and death. His reward was that the General had fired him for it. To read Brian's own humble account of the incident and to hear him recount his feelings of failure is sobering. He remains a humble and still fiercely loyal man—humble about his own shortcomings and fiercely loyal to his own superiors, the military, and those with whom he served.

After that incident, I had heard his name plenty of times. As Castner describes it, "It is a law of averages. So few brothers, there are few degrees of separation." Yet, I never had the opportunity to work with him again in the military.

In early 2012, I started hearing rumblings. Through the modern marvel of social media, someone in my EOD shop learned that Captain Castner—he was still Captain to us, you see—was publishing a book. I hopped on to the computer and sure enough, the news was confirmed by his blog, *Fever Dreams*. In his interview with me, he told me he had contacted the EOD techs and their families named in the book to seek their permission for what he wrote, but he had only shared the manuscript with one or two close EOD friends. Naturally, none of us knew what to expect.

Personally, I felt a great deal of excitement. In a way, it was historic. It was a unique opportunity to see our own personal wars develop into art in real time, as it was still happening. Someone we knew was creating our wars' literary aesthetic and preserving our experiences for posterity, and it was happening right before our eyes. As someone who earned his degree in English and was working on an MFA

in Creative Writing, I was excited that the conversation in our shop now revolved around literature, however superficial that conversation may have been.

The news of Brian's book was met with mixed reactions within our EOD shop, a small flight made up of one officer and twelve enlisted members. It made for wonderful conversation. We felt pride, of course. Like when *The Hurt Locker* came out, we were excited that people were going to hear our story, and that would naturally mean our huge EOD egos would be stroked a bit more; a book from a big publishing house by someone we knew would only serve to publicize our heroics as a community.

There was also skepticism. We had, after all, actually seen *The Hurt Locker*. How honest would Brian be with our story? Was he simply being an opportunist in the worst possible way? Yet, in his defense, we knew him. He was not just some reporter that had tagged along with an EOD team for a while so he could write a *Playboy* article and then an Oscar-winning movie. Even though he was no longer active duty, even though he wasn't the biggest and baddest among us, he was still one of us.

But still, we knew based on social media, the title of the book, and his own blog posts that the book touched on topics of post-traumatic stress disorder and his wounded psyche after returning from war. "But c'mon!" we said. "It's Captain Castner." *Captain* Castner was an officer after all. He was not an enlisted operator. What was he going to write about? Running the TOC? Checking reports? Marking things on the map? What did he know about the book's eponymous long walk? Had he ever strapped on the bomb suit and taken that lonely walk? What kind of experiences could he have possibly had that wounded him as badly as we were all wounded? Ironically, Castner was right on point when he writes, "The crucible [of EOD school] eliminates self-doubt and instills supreme confidence." I don't know if anyone in the world judges their own as harshly as EOD technicians. Even in our scars, we had been competitive. Even in our understanding, we had misunderstood.

With touching self-awareness and humility, uncharacteristic of most of us, he writes in his book:

I don't deserve to be Crazy. Not that I'm too good for it, but rather not good enough. Not enough tours. Not enough missions. Not enough bodies. Not enough IEDs. Not enough near misses. No friend dead in my arms. No lost limbs. No face exploding in my rifle scope. Plenty of other guys did more, endured more, and came home in worse shape. They deserved it, not me.

His admissions silenced us for a time and made us ponder the questions we had asked so often in another context. Why had we been spared? Why him and not us? In the context of resiliency, what causes one vet's brain to overload while another's keeps plugging along?

After the book was released, the conversation shifted dramatically. We purchased several copies; we passed them around; we read at our desks; we snuck away to the bathroom to finish chapters. We saw ourselves in his words. We had lived in the same HAS in Iraq. We had been to the same memorial services. We had driven across the same roads, picked up body parts from the same city blocks. We were and are a part of the same Brotherhood of bomb technicians he captures so intimately. We were brothers and sisters of the ghosts that walked the pages of his book, the ghosts of our own dead friends. We had felt the same anthropomorphic Crazy crawling around in our heads like a spider. He had earnestly written everything we could not articulate. He had said everything himself that we were too scared to say about ourselves, to include the ugly things. In a way, whether he was willing or not, he became somewhat of a spokesman—not only for the EOD career field, but for an entire generation of returning veterans. And for that, we were grateful.

Brian Castner was gracious enough to spend several weeks conducting an interview with me through email. What follows is part of that interview, lightly edited for clarity, context, and length.

**MH:** The introduction to your book is prefaced with a short characterization of your service and tours. You served nearly 8 years, and you left the military in 2007. What made you decide to leave the military?

**BC:** The truth is, I had to pick between a military life and my family, and I chose the second. If I took another assignment or deployed again, my wife would have left and taken the kids. I am not proud to say that it was mostly fear that drove me out. The military life was simply not working for our family, and once I had to choose, I picked my family instead.

I would be lying, though, if I didn't say that the military made my decision easier. The Air Force was shedding officers as a cost saving move, and despite the shortage of EOD personnel services wide, my career code was one targeted as an overage. That gives you a good sense of how valuable the military leadership finds your service.

**MH:** When did you begin writing *The Long Walk*? Did you have previous designs of becoming a writer?

**BC:** I began writing it in a hotel room in Colorado Springs in July of 2010. It was three years, nearly to the day, from my last time on active duty. I had gone Crazy, to use the term from the book, on February 6th of that year, and the Crazy feeling hadn't left me yet. That spring I realized on one of my many runs that maybe I had a story that other people might want to read about, that I had a topic for a book, but I didn't quit consulting full time to dedicate my main energies to writing until July.

That said, looking back, I feel like I should have figured out I wanted to write a book sooner. I kept a journal when deployed. I wrote political and opinion columns for a local alt-news website here in Buffalo. I wrote a piece for Newsweek in 2007 about moving from Las Vegas back to New York. It is clear to me now that I had been looking at the world as a writer for some time, that persistent observation and subconscious sentence construction perpetually playing my head, but I didn't think writing was a thing responsible adults did. I thought adults get jobs they don't like and pay bills, and that's where I was headed.

I should also say that in retrospect, being an EOD technician is good training for writing. Beyond all the useful life experience you acquire, EOD teaches you to peer closely and pay attention to fine details, to notice that which is often overlooked.

**MH:** Your post combat difficulties, manifesting themselves as Crazy, seem to be the *raison d'être* of the book. The symptoms you experienced, your feelings, your inner battle, and even Crazy as an anthropomorphized character all take center stage. How do you feel you've been received personally now that the book has been released?

**BC:** The Crazy was definitely the impetus that got me going, the thing worth writing about, and in some ways the completely unremarkable "war stories" that surround it are really just there for context, a framework upon which to hang this reintegration tale. When the book came out, people mostly wanted to ask about IEDs and robots and the bomb suit, and I got a lot of queries about *The Hurt Locker*. But as time has gone on, I answer fewer and fewer technical questions about combat, and more and more about the process of coming home. Maybe it's because more soldiers are home? In general, audiences at readings are gracious and kind, few want to ask about politics, and many actually want me to listen to their stories about Vietnam and their grandfathers in World War II. And if my book starts a

conversation about such things in families, that's a tremendous compliment, and beyond the scope of anything I anticipated when writing the book.

**MH:** Did you set out trying to make *The Long Walk* a “big issue” book to highlight PTSD, TBI, or the plight of the returning veteran? Or were your intentions more personal?

**BC:** Oh, I never had any of those aspirations. I hope *The Long Walk* isn't a “big issue” book. I think it is a plain book about an average experience, one that I just tried to present in a bare and straightforward way. Because the subject matter is so gruesome, straightforward might be cringe inducing and make the reader squirm, but such was the experience. I didn't write the book with the intention of giving myself a platform to be a spokesman for any agenda. I wrote it to explain the war to myself and my children, as a record for my boys when they got older so they understood why Dad was the way he was, and PTSD and TBI were part of that. It just so happens because the experience was so average, many families can relate, which draws them to the book and then the need to tell their own story. Simply getting the story out can be healing; me being the one to hear it in some ways is secondary.

**MH:** Creative writing as an adjunctive treatment for PTSD is becoming increasingly widespread. NYU now offers a veterans writing workshop; National Endowment for the Arts has been sponsoring Operation Homecoming for some time now; several veterans and other benevolent parties have created non-profit workshops such as Veterans Writing Project and Warrior Writers Project to aid veterans in reintegration. From a personal and experiential perspective, did you find writing your story therapeutic? Did the publication and widespread release of this personal project of yours in any way contribute to or diminish the psychological impact of the writing process itself?

**BC:** I think there are several things going on at once. On one level, writing out and sharing a story that haunts you, be it with 5 or 500 people, can be therapeutic, and this is what many of those writing projects seek to accomplish, and many do it well and effectively. For me, writing it out gave me the space to forget. If I ever want to know what happened on the Day of 6 VBIEDs, I can read my own work; I don't have to keep it upstairs. And when blast damage has taken so many other memories,

usually positive memories it seems, this forgetting is a great relief, to be able to let go of the worst days.

But there are several other aspects here that are separate from the writing but often get lumped together in a confusing assumption. In my therapy, the writing was not an end but a means to personal understanding, to foster lifestyle changes and engender new perspectives. I found this new way of looking on the world even more calming and useful than the writing itself. And then the act of publishing your story for wide consumption is a separate decision, and one for me driven by the desire to be a writer. This is what I want to do now. Talking about the book at readings and in interviews and at events then is just a lucky consequence of having written a book that has found an audience. It's not therapy for me, per se. It is part of the job of being a professional writer. You write a book, you publish a book, you talk about the ideas in the book, and you write another.

So if I look back I can easily imagine a situation where a veteran writes down his or her story, finds some relief, works with a psychologist, sees a new future before them where only a bloody past once lay, and decides to strike off to be a banker or doctor or car mechanic, and has gained equal satisfaction from the actual writing of their story as I did.

**MH:** Your book emphasizes the close-knit brotherhood of the EOD community. There was a slight overlap, it seems, between when you finished your EOD consulting work and when you finished the book. How much did you discuss the project with EOD personnel or military personnel in general?

**BC:** I stay in touch with my EOD brothers literally as much as I can without annoying anyone. The loneliness of separation from your military family is certainly one of the themes of the book, I think. I told people I was writing a book, but I was very hesitant to give specifics or hand out samples because I was embarrassed, and very cognizant that wanting to write a book and completing it through publication are two very different things. After I was done I sent a draft manuscript to one or two close EOD friends to make sure I wasn't completely off base or stepping over any lines. And I checked with nearly everyone named in the book, and I did my best to track down anyone that I had fallen out of contact with. Telling your own story is one thing, but including others is an additional step.

I was so hesitant, at first I didn't even want to put quotation marks around anyone else's dialog, since I'd be putting words in their mouths, probably the wrong words after so much time. So I fact checked incidents, tried to get all the specifics

right, noting how poor my memory was about certain things. My editor and I had a long conversation about keeping everyone's name or changing them, and I felt strongly that we should keep the names if at all possible. We didn't want to intrude on anyone's privacy, but we also wanted to honor what those men and women had been through, and I thought using real shortened names was the best way to do that.

But most of the brotherhood never saw it until it was published, and that was nerve wracking, because I cared about the opinion of the EOD community most of all. The ostracization that would have come if it was rejected by these men and women I love would have been too much to bear. Happily, instead, I have gotten almost universal positive feedback from EOD technicians and their families.

**MH:** EOD tactics and techniques are highly guarded for obvious reasons. Intelligence to which EOD members are often privy, although ubiquitous, is also typically classified. One of the pivotal scenes in your book prompting you to pursue EOD as a career comes in “a meeting whose agenda was kept secret.” During the meeting, spooks share intelligence about a possible suitcase bomb in the hands of Al Qaeda or the Taliban. The issue of classified leaks is always a hot news item. Seven Navy SEALs were reprimanded for their participation in the development of a video game. The memoir recounting the Bin Laden raid, *No Easy Day*, found itself as the subject of major controversy. DoD threatened legal action against its author. The life you led was full of similarly sensitive, if not always classified, information. Yet, you also had a story to tell, and an important one. Regarding that particular scene with the nuke mock-up, the scene with the “special weapons” item from the spooks that you blew up on Balad, and the sensitive nature of the EOD life in general, how did you resolve that sensitive information/story to tell paradox?

**BC:** Releasing classified information was something I took very seriously, for all of the obvious reasons: beyond the personal legal implications, I didn't want to put anyone in danger by letting methods and procedures out of the bag. This second concern I found relatively easy to alleviate. Most EOD tactics are classified, but the general outlines—we use robots, we use explosives, we use tools filled with water, we don't walk up to IEDs unless we have to—are fairly widely known already. Fortunately, the parts that are actually classified, such as how much water to put in a particular tool, or exactly where to place it to best disarm an IED, are details few really care about. They would have bogged down the narrative and bored the reader. Cutting to the chase served both the story and the classification requirements.

The writer who helped me get started was Stephen Phillips, a retired Navy EOD officer, and author of *Proximity* and *The Recipient's Son*. Stephen played a huge role, really the decisive role, in helping me prep my draft manuscript and then find an agent, and once the book was sold to Doubleday, he gently reminded me it needed a security review.

So for the specific incident you mention, where we were taught how to disarm a Soviet weapon, I relied on the professionals at the Pentagon. I submitted the entire manuscript for a classification check. They put it through their official review process and came back with items they asked me to change. I made those few small changes, and the book was approved. While going through that may not have been strictly necessary, it did give tremendous peace of mind.

**MH:** When I read the book, there seemed to be a conscientious decision to differentiate between the characters in the hierarchical environment that sometimes defines men in combat. All of the people you commanded, all the enlisted people, all your teammates, and your fellow EOD techs are referred to by first names, nicknames, and last names only. Rank is nearly non-existent within your narrative as it pertains to the EOD brotherhood. On the other hand, the man who charged you with a crime is referred to simply as the General. The man who schools you in history as you sit atop the HAS smoking cigars is a nameless Colonel. Was there any significance to this? Could you illuminate that decision?

**BC:** For me the issue was not to differentiate between those with rank and those without (effectively—the EOD world is a first name and nickname world), but between those people who were close to me, and those that simply served a role. I wanted the book to feel claustrophobic, like you are trapped in my head, which is how it felt with the Crazy, that I was trapped in my own broken brain. Some people were in my head with me—Trey, Castleman, Ricky, Kermit—and some weren't, and so they were the Colonel, the General, the Yogini, the New Shrink, the Old Counselor. Not naming the General who fired me was probably prudent anyway, but I had a literary reason which superseded it.

**MH:** This is a factual memoir, at least as reasonably factual as anyone can expect a memoir to be, so why do you feel it was prudent to not name the general who fired you? You seem so comfortable relating the good, the bad, and the ugly about yourself; why so hesitant to name in this instance—with the understanding of

course that the literary reason for keeping him nameless superseded the secondary reason?

**BC:** I thought it would distract. I am nobody. This isn't a "naming names" vendetta sort of book. In truth, I didn't know how he really felt about the incident then, and I certainly don't now, if he even remembers it. I think my prevailing emotion was the one I expressed in the book: failure. There was no moral victory in my head that I had made the right choice, that I had done the right thing despite the punishment. The rightness or wrongness of the choice was decided when I got fired. It meant I had failed. I had failed the men and women under my command because I was no longer there to lead them. I had failed myself by getting sent home (or to Qatar, close enough). By not waiting for the General's approval to conduct the mission, I wasn't trying to assert my independence, prove anything, or make myself a test case. I was trying to do the best I could and I failed. There were probably other ways to get the robots fixed. I learned my lesson, and when I went back, I managed (I hope) to both "do the right thing" and not get fired doing it. But since I wrote my book I have read a piece of advice in Tracy Kidder's *Good Prose*, which I subconsciously followed and am glad I did: to paraphrase, be harder on yourself than anyone else in your memoir. You are choosing to write, and everyone else is just coming along for the ride.

**MH:** You write in your book, "I think about going back every day. Back to the job. Back to the clarity of thought, the singleness of purpose, the mundane details of the world falling away and only the essential remaining." This is something that many of us vets can relate to after returning, and in the throes of the Crazy and while you wrote this book, it's obvious you felt this emotion as strongly as any other. What kept you from going back? Do you still think about going back?

**BC:** The same fear that drove me out kept me from going back, probably. In some ways, the wish to go back was safe because it was so unlikely. It's easy to hope for something that you know won't happen. If it were a real possibility then the wish would be far more dangerous. If my marriage had ended anyway once I got out of the military, I don't doubt for a moment that I would have returned as a reservist or contractor. Nearly all of my friends did go back again once they got out, working for a private company. I do still think about going back all the time. I think it won't fade until we are out of Afghanistan. I don't feel the same kind of draw to go to Syria, Mali, or Libya.

**MH:** What three books would you recommend as “must reads” to young military officers?

**BC:** My two most formative books as a young officer were *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse Five*. I’m not sure I should recommend them [to young officers], though I re-read *Catch-22* in Iraq, and it felt even more right there. The definitive book of brotherhood and military camaraderie is Sebastian Junger’s *War*. If I had read it before I wrote mine, I would have despaired that everything worth writing about combat had already been captured. It should be read by everyone.

**MH:** What three books would you recommend as “must reads” for combat vets just leaving the military?

**BC:** Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, Viktor Frankl’s *Man Search for Meaning*, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow*. Actually, veterans only need to look at the chart on page 74 of *Flow*. It will tell you everything you need to know about finding a healthy escape of a quiet mind between boredom and anxiety.

**MH:** Near the end of the book, there is the scene in which your counselor tells you that you don’t have PTSD; you’re just human. Are you in a better place now? Do you have any words of wisdom for others who may be struggling with intense anxiety, depression, anger, or other problems as they struggle to reintegrate?

**BC:** I struggle with words of wisdom because I am no health care professional, and I could barely figure out how to describe what was happening to me, much less fix it. Because my Crazy feeling never went away, I assumed it never would. That made it all the worse, of course. But what eventually helped, more than anything, was this understanding: my shrink taught me that anxiety is always about the future, and yoga taught me to let go of that future. The Crazy feeling has since faded, though

it's still there if I look for it. There is no real cure for all of these things that you learn in war.

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**MATTHEW HEFTI** spent 12 years in the Air Force as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal technician, serving two combat tours in Iraq and two combat tours in Afghanistan. In addition to defusing roadside bombs during his time on active duty, he earned a BA in English and an MFA in Creative Writing. Now, he is pursuing his JD at the University of Wisconsin Law School.

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**BRIAN CASTNER** is the author of *The Long Walk*, an Amazon Best Book of 2012 and Chautauqua Scientific & Literary Circle selection for 2013. He served as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal officer in the US Air Force from 1999 to 2007, and after leaving the active military he became a contractor, training soldiers and Marines prior to their tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. His writing has appeared in *Wired*, *The New York Times*, *The Daily Beast*, and *Foreign Policy*.