For Wounded Vet, Love Pierces the Fog of War

By MICHAEL M. PHILLIPS  
February 4, 2012

DALLAS—The night Katie Brickman met Ian Welch at the bar, she knew right away the Iraq war veteran was the man she wanted to marry.

That made it all the more jarring when he asked a favor as they said goodbye in the parking lot: "When you see me again, just say, 'Hi, Ian, you remember me,' so I'll know that we've met before."

So began the wartime love triangle of Ms. Brickman, Mr. Welch and his post-traumatic stress disorder.

Mr. Welch's amnesia, induced by the combination of PTSD and traumatic brain injury, leaves him struggling to remember events, words and friends, even Ms. Brickman. Most days, Mr. Welch doesn't change out of his pajamas. Small surprises—a traffic jam, a crowded waiting room, a loud noise, a change in plans—trigger anxiety and anger, echoes of the violence he dealt and endured.

The Iraq war is over for America and the end of the Afghan conflict is just over the horizon. But a generation of military families will face its physical and psychological consequences for years after most other Americans have put the wars behind them.

Unlike most couples coping with the aftermath of war, Ms. Brickman, 23 years old, and Mr. Welch, 28, fell in love more because of his wounds, than despite them. Both say they wouldn't be a couple if they had met before his wartime service. "I'm so happy with who he is, and he wouldn't be that way without his…experiences," said Ms. Brickman.

But, like others, their relationship is precarious. Devoting herself to Mr. Welch has put Ms. Brickman's own dreams on hold. She is both Mr. Welch's girlfriend and his government-paid caregiver under a new federal program for badly disabled veterans. She lives with the pressure of knowing if she ever left, he might slip deeper into the despair and confusion that mark their lives.

One recent day, Ms. Brickman asked Mr. Welch to drop a comforter at the dry cleaner, but when it was ready, he had forgotten which shop. The lapse embarrassed him, and he lashed out during a car ride.

"Katie, I need you to talk to me right now and explain how this is going to be OK," he said, frantically lighting a cigarette.

View Graphics
Later, as Ms. Brickman hunted for a receipt, he said: "I feel like I'm weak. I feel like I'm stupid. How am I going to remember to drop my kids off at school? How am I going to remember what school they go to? How am I going to be a father?"

The questions also bedevil Ms. Brickman. "I don't worry about us as a couple," she said during a moment alone. "I worry if we have kids, will he get mad at them?"

Mr. Welch was born near College Station, Texas, where his mother and father dated and married while attending Texas A&M University. He was an easygoing boy, artistic with a goofy side, a B student who threw himself into art and English. His best friend remembers him showing up at high school with a breakfast of hash browns in one pocket and a toothbrush in another.

The field work of his father, John Welch, an entomologist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, took the family to Central America. His mother, psychologist Nancy Welch, worked as a therapist during their years abroad.

As a boy, Mr. Welch imagined his G.I. Joe toys planting the Marine Corps flag he received from his mother's stepfather. When he was about 11 years old, his paternal grandfather, a veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, shared memories from his service in the Pacific. His grandfather talked about leading patrols and losing friends. He described the guilt he felt for failing to spot the ambushes that killed them.

That night, Mr. Welch said, he decided to join the military. At the end of high school, he visited the Marine Corps office in College Station and told the recruiter he wanted to be an infantryman. He reported to boot camp on Sept. 10, 2001, standing 6 foot, 2 inches and weighing 120 pounds—wraith-thin, just like his grandfather.

He was also a grunt like his grandfather. On April 7, 2003, Mr. Welch's battalion was outside Baghdad, pounding Iraqi positions and waiting to attack across the Diyala bridge. Mr. Welch knelt with his back to an armored vehicle, cleaning his bullets. On each, he wrote the name of a friend or relative.

Moments later, a 155-mm artillery shell landed inside the top hatch of the vehicle behind him. The explosion knocked Mr. Welch unconscious and killed two men inside. When he came to, his vision was blurred. Blood dripped from his ears. Wounded men nearby screamed for help.

Gunnery Sgt. Jean-Paul Courville saw Mr. Welch standing in the open, disoriented and exposed to enemy snipers. "What's going
"Gunnery Sgt. Courville, now a sergeant major, recalled Mr. Welch asking. He told Mr. Welch to help tend to the casualties.

Mr. Welch's memories are hazy. But he recalled seeing the vehicle's interior painted with blood and realizing he was stepping on someone's brains. He vomited. Then he helped collect the dead men's remains in a sleeping bag.

Shortly after, Mr. Welch's unit stormed the bridge, his face captured in a news photo that became one of the most widely viewed images of the war. The battle victory, however, was stained by the shooting of Iraqi civilians in the confusion.

During a lull in the fighting, Mr. Welch drew a sketch of the first man he killed, an Iraqi soldier he shot in the neck. Later, in a bombed-out Iraqi barracks, he wrote a starkly prescient letter to a Marine friend.

"Our penance comes in many forms," he wrote. "Never will we smell fire the same. Never will we be at ease during the fireworks and storms….Our penance will be the sleepless nights, the fools we will make of ourselves at loud noises, the looks on our faces at the sight of swerving cars, and the pains in our chests when no one is awake."

Mr. Welch called April 7, 2003, "the beginning of the end of my life."

He completed two more combat tours of Iraq over the next two years. During one fierce urban fight in 2004, Mr. Welch and another Marine were on a rooftop, exposed to hours of enemy fire. They wounded an armed insurgent about 300 yards away, then killed him when he showed no sign of giving up.

Over the years, Mr. Welch experienced an expanding list of symptoms of PTSD and traumatic brain injury, from insomnia and anxiety to dizziness and vomiting. "I am filled with rage and hate," he wrote in his journal in June 2004, during his second tour of duty. "Today is my 21st birthday."

The following year, Mr. Welch married the daughter of Louise Palermo, a 56-year-old museum curator who had been a pen pal while he was overseas. The marriage soured quickly, but Ms. Palermo kept her friendship with Mr. Welch.

In 2006, he was diagnosed by military doctors with chronic PTSD, according to Mr. Welch's medical records.
The Department of Veterans Affairs has treated nearly a quarter of a million Afghanistan and Iraq veterans for PTSD. The advent of roadside bombings, meanwhile, has caused a wave of brain injuries, ranging from concussions to major head wounds. Symptoms of both injuries often overlap, making it difficult for doctors to peel apart the effects of each. Testing by the VA found 44,500 of 570,000 Iraq and Afghanistan vets had suffered what it called mild traumatic brain injuries.

On Valentine's Day 2007, as his marriage was collapsing, Mr. Welch called Ms. Palermo from the balcony of his apartment building near Camp Pendleton in Southern California and said he was thinking of diving off. Ms. Palermo begged for five years to help him get his life on track.

A military psychologist wrote at the time that Mr. Welch talked of “repeated, extreme disturbing thoughts and images of Iraq, recurrent distressing dreams, feeling extremely upset when something reminds him of Iraq.”

True to her word, Ms. Palermo stayed an ally. In April 2008, she helped persuade the Marines to assign Mr. Welch to the Wounded Warrior Battalion, the Corps’ way of easing badly injured Marines out of service.

Following his divorce, Ms. Palermo introduced him to a new girlfriend in Ohio. After the military retired him on Feb. 27, 2010, for medical reasons, Mr. Welch moved to join the young woman. The relationship didn’t last. One reason, he said, was that he was drinking 12 to 18 beers a night. Soon after, the VA declared Mr. Welch 100% disabled from the brain injury, with additional damage from the PTSD and other injuries.

On Aug. 8, 2010, Mr. Welch took his sketchbook to Frank & Tony’s Place, a bar near Cleveland. He was no longer the slender boy who had enlisted nine years earlier but a thickset man, with shaggy hair and an untamed beard. He walked with a cane.

Ms. Brickman, the daughter of a police chief and a stay-at-home mom in Mentor, Ohio, was selling shots of vodka and Red Bull from a tray. Petite, with long brown hair and a tiny jeweled stud in her nose, she worked days at a camera store and nights at the bar. She was applying for an AmeriCorps job to help adults earn high-school equivalency diplomas.

Ms. Brickman knew PTSD. Years earlier, she had visited a military base in Germany to comfort a childhood friend who was suffering after combat in Iraq.

She spotted Mr. Welch’s Marine Corps pin and the dozen rifle-and-helmet memorial tattoos on his forearms, each bearing the surname of a fallen friend. She wept as Mr. Welch told the story of one man who died shielding others from a grenade blast. She wasn’t put off by Mr. Welch’s condition. If anything, his injuries made him more admirable.

Two days later, Ms. Brickman broke up with a college student she had been dating. She stayed late at the bar, hoping Mr. Welch would return. When he did, two weeks later, Ms. Brickman hugged him and—as he had asked—reminded him they had previously met.

“Your name is Katie, right?” he said.

In his driveway that night, he gave her an ink sketch of a demon entwined with an angel. He hoped she would understand: Men are corrupt, women can save them. On their next outing, a few days later, Ms. Brickman had his angel-and-demon drawing tattooed onto her leg.

He warned Ms. Brickman: “You’re not going to do anything harder in your life than being my girlfriend.” At his home in those days, Mr. Welch positioned mirrors so he could watch the doors. He arranged furniture in ways he imagined would corral intruders into an ambush zone.
She embraced the role. During lunch breaks, she took Mr. Welch to medical appointments. She kept a journal of their dates for him to remember their times together.

In September, Mr. Welch moved to Dallas for a VA medical center more to his liking. He also would be closer to his mother, who had become Texas A&M's coordinator of veterans' services.

PTSD is among her specialties. But Ms. Welch is barred by professional ethics from treating her son. He finds it easier to talk to counselors with military backgrounds, anyway. He doesn't want to tell his mother what he saw and did in Iraq. He doesn't want her to think less of him.

"I've never tried to be his therapist," said Ms. Welch. "I've always tried to be a good listener, as any mother would." Instead, Ms. Welch handles his finances, putting her trust in military doctors and, ultimately, in Ms. Brickman.

The VA pays a stipend—about $1,800 a month in Ms. Brickman's case—to some 2,900 parents, spouses and friends who serve as primary caregivers for vets disabled by PTSD, brain injuries or other wounds suffered after 9/11. Most are wives or mothers; fewer than 90 are girlfriends.

Ms. Brickman moved to Dallas a few weeks after Mr. Welch. Even during their short separation, she began to fade from his memory. "I want to come home," he said by phone. "I'm starting to forget how your face moves and your body moves."

The conversation jolted Ms. Brickman. "It's not easy when your boyfriend says he doesn't remember you," she said later.

Ms. Palermo traveled to Dallas and found the couple a rental house, with a yard for their bloodhound puppy, Willow. As a housewarming present, Ms. Brickman framed Mr. Welch's dress-blue Marine uniform, with its golden sergeant's stripes and white gloves.

Their life is a routine built around Mr. Welch's condition. Ms. Brickman gives a warning before she vacuums or makes popcorn. She color-coordinates his clothes when he dresses. At the Cracker Barrel restaurant, the hostess knows him as the polite man in pajamas who asks for a corner table, where he can keep a lookout. A trip to the grocery store requires at least a day's notice.

Ms. Brickman tries to find the balance between lover and nurse, helper and enabler. She asks chores of Mr. Welch she knows he can do—changing light bulbs, remembering to brush his teeth. She wants neither to give him impossible tasks nor infantilize him.

Mr. Welch does nearly all of the driving. He took a wrong exit on a recent night and turned surly and anxious. "This is a perfect ambush location," he said. When Ms. Brickman tried to distract him with questions and a gentle touch, his anxiety turned to self-loathing. "My reactions are so unreasonable," he said.

Later, he explained, "It's never about Katie. It's all lack of control."

He usually stays up late, playing videogames in the role of an elf slaying dragons and skeletons. Sometimes he stays up painting figurines for fantasy war games. His medications—a cocktail of six, including painkillers, sleep aids and antipsychotics—often keep him asleep until early afternoon.

Ms. Brickman once planned to join the Peace Corps or work in photography, which she studied for a year at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. Given Mr. Welch's medical needs, she knows that may not happen, a prospect that troubles her. "Sometimes it's really boring," Ms. Brickman said of her life. "I want a job real bad. I want to meet people."

Mr. Welch has agreed to take Spanish classes together. They are looking into joint volunteer work with veterans groups and have signed up for couples counseling. At times, she said, it is hard to distinguish between ordinary boyfriend-girlfriend issues and PTSD flare-ups.
Ian Welch was on his first combat tour in Iraq, waiting to storm across the Diyala Bridge and seize Baghdad, when an artillery round exploded behind him—changing his life forever. Now he and his girlfriend Katie are hoping love can change it back.

Ms. Brickman, Mr. Welch and his parents see progress. The flashes of anger and panic are fewer and less intense. Last year, when a smoke alarm went off, Mr. Welch threw it across the room. When it went off recently, he took it almost in stride.

Mr. Welch’s mother hopes his memory will grow more reliable and his reactions less volatile, and that someday his life will approach normal. “I believe with Katie at his side, if he stays on top of this, that can happen,” she said.

Mr. Welch hopes so, too. But he fears a normal future may prove as elusive as his memories. “The amount of luck and the amount of love and care I’m receiving is not normal,” he said. “I know it can be immediately taken away from me.”

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