

Iraq to Penn State: Ethan Marshall's Journey

By Jordan Tracy

STATE COLLEGE- Ethan Marshall, along with his fellow platoon mates from Hill Air Force Base, Utah, was transported to Iraq in a Blackhawk helicopter. Toward the end of their travels, the chopper began evasive maneuvers as the pilot yelled, "We're getting attacked! Rocket attack!"

"Ah shit," Marshall said, "we're going to die before even getting to Iraq. This sucks!"

With his heart pounding from the threat of death, he noticed that the chopper returned to its normal flight pattern. He could hear the pilot yell again, "Just fucking with you guys! Welcome to Iraq."

His head wasn't full of fears about joining a war nor was it full of stories of soldiers lost. Marshall had a positive attitude that has remained with him to this day that has gotten him through four years and three months in the military and now college. Marshall said, "You always try to remain positive no matter what is going on."

Positivity is what essentially made the decision for Marshall to go back to school. After the military, he went to work at a local prison but soon realized it wasn't for him. He said, "Everyone was miserable there...It couldn't have been good for my psyche."

Marshall told himself, "I want to do something I love. I've done the military; it's time for me to do something that I want to do."

At the age of 17, Marshall, 25, of Centre Hall, Pa., enlisted in the United States Air Force because he hadn't done too well in high school and paying for college was going to be a problem. He had uncles from the Army, Navy and the Air Force who encouraged the choice to enlist.

After six months of training, Marshall was informed that he was being deployed to Camp Bucca, Iraq. Marshall was a senior airman and was trained in security forces with the job of securing the base as well as manning the M240 Bravo Machine Gun on top of the Humvee. His job was like a lookout. He'd sit on top of the Humvee and report anything suspicious and be alert at all times.

Marshall's first fire fight is something that stays with him to this day. They were following through on a report of something suspicious. On that mission they were not only hit with a roadside bomb, but they were ambushed as well.

Marshall said, “The second truck was hit and decommissioned. I was in the fourth truck back when it was hit. There was a loud explosion and I was dazed for a while.”

Marshall explained how he wasn’t able to move. He was frozen and asking himself, “What did I get into?” When he was finally able to move he began laying down fire. He said, “It feels like it lasted hours and hour but it was max 10 to 15 minutes. It’s like the longest time of your life right there.”

Marshall spent a total of four years and three months in the Air Force which included a tour in Afghanistan. It was a time in his life where late night rocket attacks woke him up routinely. He said, “It started to feel like a routine. I’d be lying in bed when I’d hear an explosion. I’d make sure it wasn’t me that was hit then wait in my bed until the sirens would sound and I’d have to get up.” He described it as a nightly “annoyance.”

When Marshall was discharged from the military, the military wasn’t discharged from him. The experiences overseas were in his thoughts and haunted his sleep. Marshall explained how soldiers that came home would suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD. He saw it first hand when a friend of his from the Utah platoon took his own life upon returning to Hill Air Force Base.

The first fire fight was what haunted Marshall. It was a part of a struggle that he faced for two years after being discharged. His mother, LeAnn Marshall, explained, “For two years there was an adjusting period.....There was a stress there that has never been there before and is still there to this day.”

Marshall turned to alcohol to try and cope with returning to civilian life. His mother recalled how it was hard for him to keep a job because of his lack of sleep. Marshall said, “You lie awake there but get nightmares if you do fall asleep finally. Sometimes you even act things out while you’re sleeping. I’ve woken up many times in a cold sweat.”

Things got better for Marshall when he found someone he could relate to. An older veteran of the Air Force that he had met at a gym, in State College, had gone through similar situations as Marshall. “We help each other out,” he said, “I feel like I have a more positive attitude now and it definitely helps not going through it alone.”

With a more positive attitude, Marshall has returned to school and is a sophomore kinesiology major at The Pennsylvania State University. He wants to become a personal trainer and work at a gym. He said, “Who wouldn’t want to work at a gym? It’s a place you can go to work in shorts and a T shirt.”

It has been difficult for him adjusting to college from the military. He explained, “It’s been years since I’ve been in school. In the military you have set tasks that you need to complete right

after they are assigned. With school, I have to make myself do everything.” He also talked about how difficult it is to remember concepts from high school, especially math.

College isn’t the biggest struggle for Marshall heading forward. Family is very important to Marshall and his mother explained that missing out on things that took place during his service has been tough on him.

“He missed four years of family time and it bothered him to not be there for it,” she said. She explained how Marshall never misses out on family time now that he’s home. He enjoys playing with his nieces and nephews and stops by for visits often.

Even after it all, Marshall did mention that a return to the military might be in his sights. He thinks about it a lot and what draws him back are the friendships he made. “Friendships you make in the military are life long,” he said. The other reason is “job security,” he explains, “you’re not going to get fired because there are too many people.”

As the road continues, Marshall’s positivity will be taken with him. It’s just who he is. When his boots first touched the dessert surface of Camp Bucca, Iraq, Marshall said, “Holy hell! Where are all the trees?” No fears were present, or a worry on his mind; except for the trees.