

WAR

&

GRACE

A PROJECT OF SACRED STORY INSTITUTE

WAR & GRACE PROJECT

Dear Chaplains & Wounded Warriors:

[Sacred Story Institute](#) (SSI) would like you to help us with a holy project to help Wounded Warriors find greater healing and hope. We are collecting experiences of Wounded Warriors whose stories can be both therapeutic to relate and healing for others to read. And in speaking about “wounded warriors,” we know that war wounds can be physical, emotional and spiritual. Sometimes one soldier can have all three.

The experiences we would like to collect in the War & Grace Project include the challenges and tragedies of wounded warriors, but also the miraculous ways God comes to help soldiers in the midst of what appear to be the most hopeless situations.

We aim to gather all the stories that come in to SSI and put them in a book. Also, down the road, there is the possibility of filming some or all of the stories.

We seek stories from the whole spectrum of wounded warrior’s experiences—from the ordinary to the profound—from the humorous to the haunting.

The War & Grace Project wants to give hope, where this is none; to offer peace where there is fear; to show healing where there was only brokenness and to manifest grace, where there was only trauma. In the end, to show that God is with us no matter where we have been, or what we have witnessed others doing, or even done ourselves.

On the following pages is a true account of a Wounded Warrior who offered SSI his story to start this project.

This particular story is very vivid. But there will be hundreds of “true stories “that are very different and seemingly more “ordinary” but no less impactful in the long run. We offer this as simply one kind of story on war and grace.

Thanks for taking the time consider this holy project. We offer you our prayers and look forward to connect with you through military chaplains who are friends, and those who have offered to assist us.

This project has the potential to help a lot of veterans, especially Wounded Warriors.

At the end, you can see the general outline we asked this Navy veteran to follow to give structure to his narrative.

Should you feel called to submit your own story, simply follow the template design at the story’s end as you begin to plan the structure of your reflection.

Please give your story to your trusted chaplain to send to us. All stories will be anonymous so you can speak freely from your heart.

Is God calling you to tell your story for The War & Grace project? We pray that is the case. If yes or you have questions, contact me at: admin-team@sacredstory.net or 206-302-7630.

God bless you!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Fr. Bill Watson, S.J." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Fr. Bill Watson, S.J.

Founder/President

WAR & GRACE



Anonymous

It is said only ten to twenty percent of people who come close to death, experience a near-death experience (NDE). This phenomenon is often recounted with a profound spiritual encounter, and while it is a big interest of mine, I was hesitant to share my testimonial due to the personal nature of it. However, my hope is that perhaps this can encourage other veterans to do the same; and better yet, find some inner peace while working on their own reflection.



Growing up, I heard stories of my family members making a connection with God through not only feeling His presence, but physically seeing Him and hearing His voice. I was always a little uncertain of what they meant by that and, if I'm being honest, a bit jealous of their experiences.

In her early teens, my sister went to a church summer camp for two weeks. When she came back, she recounted an unforgettable experience she had early in the morning on the last day of camp. She woke up from a wild dream in which she was sitting around the campfire with family members who had passed away years prior. As she crawled out of the tent, the first camper awake, she noticed the sunrise. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but something about it was different from the other mornings. As she gazed at the pastel blue and yellow beauty, a warm and familiar presence seemed to come down from the sky, blanketing her. A voice echoed in her ears, assuring her things to come would be alright; she was being watched over. Although she couldn't discern exactly what that meant for her at this time, she fully understood that she had just witnessed the presence of the Lord.

She was so inspired; she immediately went to tell her camp counselors and friends about the experience. While they seemed happy on the exterior, she was surprised to detect the doubt in their minds seeping through their facial

expressions. Several friends even offered suggestions to explain logically why or how something like her experience could have been perceived. Despite the skepticism around her, she remained convicted that what she saw and heard had been real.

The following day, the bus carried my sister and the other campers home. A heavy fog had rolled in that morning, engulfing the forty mile stretch of the two-lane backcountry road. A silver minivan followed closely, jetting out into the oncoming lane a couple times, anxious to pass the cautious bus. With the thick fog impairing the impatient driver's judgement, they eventually decided to just gun it, and began zooming alongside the bus. My sister looked ahead on the road to see two headlights emerging at an alarming speed. She held her breath as the minivan swerved in front of the bus just in the nick of time, narrowly escaping a collision with the oncoming car, and disappeared ahead in the dense fog. Her brief moment of relief was interrupted by the sound of brakes squealing - the minivan had lost control and was actually flipping in front of the bus. As the bus driver braked and adjusted to avoid the minivan, the rear wheels began sliding out from under the bus. They were now sliding perpendicular to the road, the rear bumper grinding against the guard rail. Time slowed and my sister suddenly realized this was what her premonition had been about. This

was the reason behind the reassurance she had felt the morning before. She looked around to see kids wide-eyed and screaming as more lights were approaching from both directions along the road; some of the camp counselors began to frantically pray aloud. Among all the chaos, she remained calm, resting in God's hands.

As the bus completed its 360-degree slide, headlamps flashed past in the oncoming lane. They had evaded a collision just as narrowly as the testy minivan. The bus driver switched on his hazards, pulled over on the side of the road, and ran with a few of the other adults to check on the vehicle that had flipped. They pulled the unconscious driver out and stayed with her until the police and ambulance arrived. Miraculously, she sustained only minor injuries and was otherwise fine once conscious again.

Another time, my father, an esteemed trial attorney, had been finishing a case involving some very bad people. One day, he arrived home late from work and told us he had just "seen" Jesus. He went on to unfold the details of his experience. After an emotionally draining day in court, he was driving home and passed a church. Out of the blue, he felt what he describes as an "overwhelming feeling" to go to confession. He parked on the side of the street and walked up the stairs to the entrance, hoping the priest would be available

for a confession. It just so happened a priest was scheduled for confession during this time; in fact, the priest was only in the confessional for another twenty minutes. My father thought to himself, “Divine timing...”

After his confession, he left the church and pushed open the heavy wooden doors. The evening sunlight hit his face as he looked anxiously to see if there were any parking tickets on his car. Relieved to see his windshield empty, he fumbled with his key, but was distracted by a city bus driving by. As it passed, a lone man appeared across the street. The man locked eyes with him and smiled. My father felt a warm rush of overwhelming love radiate from within himself and gasped. He blinked his eyes and shook his head, pondering the remarkable feeling towards a stranger and wondering if what he saw was real. When he looked back across the street, nothing but the fall leaves remained where the man had stood. In fact, there was nobody on the entire street.

Many more family members shared their encounters with divinity with me throughout my youth. Unfortunately, I had yet to see, hear, or feel such a strong presence as they did. Over the years, I tried repeatedly to invite celestial experiences into my life, but it wasn't until my time in the Navy that I finally experienced my own personal, first-hand connection. I will share three

testimonies from my time in the military in which I experienced a true moment with God.

KNEELING AT THE PEW

After my first week at boot camp, I was really second-guessing my decision to join the military. The recruits came across as cocky, and the instructors were always yelling and putting us down. Their language was negative and they never seemed happy. Several nights around 2 a.m. an instructor had come into the room where everyone was sleeping and made loud noises just to wake everyone up. My lack of sleep on top of the physical demand during the days was wearing on me. It seemed as if we were just toys for the instructors' amusement. I wasn't used to being treated like a lowlife nor did I enjoy it. I became increasingly triggered by the ongoing hazing, pranks, harassment, and silly counterproductive rules. I'd never experienced such strong negativity, especially with no understanding of why I was being treated this way. I had volunteered to be here, to learn how to defend myself and brothers so that I could defend our country. Why was I being treated like a criminal?

I remember wanting to attend Mass to lift my spirits and return to a calm headspace, but recruits had to request permission, which was an alienating

process. So far only two of the one-hundred and fifty recruits had asked to attend, and they had been publicly humiliated upon doing so. The instructors had called all the recruits to attention in a square-like pattern and placed the requestees in the center of the room. They then proceeded to embarrass the recruits who requested to attend a religious service, spouting off multiple degrading comments about the “need to cope”. I knew the instructors would do the same for me. While they couldn’t infringe on our right to religious freedom, they made sure we felt like sissy’s for desiring time with God.

After about a month, I gave in and gathered the courage to request permission to attend Mass the next Sunday along with two other recruits. Once enduring the instructor’s degrading one-liners and the onlooking recruits’ snickering, permission was granted.

I walked to the chapel with the two other recruits, keeping my gaze down to avoid eye contact with anyone on the way there. No need to suffer any more mockery. I remember reflecting in that moment how sad it was to be shamed for attending church. Anxiety overcame me as I finally came to terms with that fact that I was in a foreign place, far from home, surrounded by strangers who did not seem to value spiritual connection. I longed to go home, to be free of

these disrespectful people and their insensitive stipulations. I was tired of being treated like I wasn't even a real person.

When we arrived at the religious hall, the other two went into a different service and left me standing there alone. I continued into Mass. Upon reaching an empty pew halfway to the front, I dropped to my knees and for the first time began to pray with true intent.

What am I doing here, God? Have I made a terrible decision in becoming part of this call to arms? What role do I have here? Give me strength to not hold bitterness for my instructors. Give me strength to continue training alongside my brothers. Show me I have a purpose here and lead me as I fulfill my call.

At this time, I heard the priest light the thurible and begin chanting. With my eyes still closed, I forgot about the others in the room. I suddenly became aware of every single hair on my body raising goosebumps, my spine tingling. A warm hand rested on my shoulder, and in the midst of the chanting I heard someone whisper, "This too shall pass." I smiled and looked up to see who was kind enough to offer these words, but the pews surrounding me were still empty. The warm presence had not left my shoulder. In fact, it washed over my entire body now, but the goosebumps that remained. All thoughts were governed by one feeling - love. A moment later, everything went back to normal. I glanced

around, checking for any signs that someone might have seen what happened, only to find everyone with their eyes closed, following the prayer led by the priest. In that moment, I realized I had finally witnessed the unmistakable presence of God. He hadn't abandoned us, not even with all the negativity around.

My remaining time at boot camp passed by quickly. I was so grateful to have finally made a connection. My encounter with God reminded me of my innate strength in Him, and of the freedom that forgiveness holds.

LIGHTS IN THE DISTANCE

I'll never forget my first Atlantic Ocean rescue mission. Early one cold morning in fall, I woke up to flashing red and white lights and an extremely loud, obnoxious alarm. I jumped out of my bunk, stumbled across the room, and grabbed my gear. A distress call had been placed, and there were lives on the line; I had to act fast. I met my team in the briefing room and learned that the call came from a fishing vessel returning from an Atlantic-bound course. It had crashed into a solo-floating shipping container about 25 miles from us and was losing buoyancy at a rapid pace. We estimated it would sink within the hour. We got into the helicopter and flew to the pinged location. My stomach was in knots and I distinctly remember thinking to myself, "Is this real?!"

As we approached the ship, I noted it had begun to surpass its tipping rate. Cargo fell off as if it were a slow-motion moving picture. It was too late: too much water had filled the ship. The waves from the storm crashed down on the ship's deck, violently rocking the hull from side to side like an unsteady buoy in the water. I watched as some crew members were thrown against the bulkheads, while others were washed away in the big waves passing over the deck.

I took a moment to gather myself and prepare to repel down onto the deck of the sinking vessel. I remember looking down and feeling the cold, salty air; hearing the roaring wind; and seeing the rough blue water with its white caps smash into the hull with such great force. After arriving on scene, I gathered what was left of the crew and began looking for a stable space for them to hold onto. I lifted one man up to the helicopter with the rescue basket and two more with the harness. As the harness was being lowered to me, right before I could grab it, one of the crew members lost their footing and was swallowed by the sea.

I launched into the water and swam as fast as I could after him. As I approached, I could tell his fear was taking control of him. I yelled out to him that I was coming for him, but that he needed to relax. Once I was within arm's

reach, he grabbed my shoulders and pushed me down into the cold water in an attempt to keep his head above water. This man was so fearful of drowning at sea that he lost his rational thinking and resorted to survival instincts. I remember feeling helpless for a split-second as I struggled against the weight of him in all his foul weather gear. A sudden burst of energy moved through me and I mustered the strength to maneuver my body around his. Wrapping my arms around his chest tightly, I swam towards the vessel. The crew members rejoiced and pulled him aboard.

After sending more crew members up to safety, I turned around to see there were only two left. The radio came on, and the pilot told me the helicopter could only hold one more body, two would be pushing it. Not a second later, a wave came and swept one of the men off his feet. He banged his head on the hatch, staggered, and looked at me with wide eyes. I knew right then and there; he had a concussion. I signaled for a basket and turned to instruct the man, but he was no longer there. I frantically looked around, finally spotting him in the water. "This basket will take you to safety," I quickly told the crew member still standing on deck before diving into the frigid waves towards his mate.

I reached him and ever so carefully maneuvered the concussed man into the appropriate position while treading water. He looked at me and muttered

something unintelligible. I leaned closer for a second try, and heard his desperate cry for help. The pilot came back on the radio and asked what the plan was. For a moment, I closed my eyes to focus on my breathing and the sounds around me; the helicopter blades spinning, the wind whistling and howling, the sea waves crashing; while the storm raged around me, somehow everything became calm within. I was flooded with a feeling of peace. I felt tears of joy leave my eyes, and a warm feeling deep in my gut; I felt as if I was bathing in the raw feeling of love. I opened my eyes and looked down at the nearly unconscious man in front of me; I knew what my plan was. I signaled to the pilot to lower the basket, loaded the man into it, and sent him up. The pilot came back on the radio and said to be sure to keep my beacon activated. I watched the helicopter fly off above me into the grey storm clouds. The ship was miles beneath me now, and I was completely alone in the middle of the sea, but I felt ready for my test of endurance.

At first, my situation was fun. It was almost like being in an adult water park. I remember closing my eyes for a few seconds, imagining I was in a really cold and not-so-lazy river. The current was strong and it didn't take much to be drifted away if not paying attention to it. But as my fatigue increased, so did the size and power of the waves. Soon it was much more difficult to keep my head

above the water. Fear began creeping its way into my thoughts. It had been nearly 90 minutes and there were no lights in the sky other than a few bright stars glistening between the storm clouds and the shimmer of raindrops beading down on the sea around me. I began wondering if they had forgotten me, or if my beacon wasn't properly working and they couldn't find me. Every second felt like a minute out there. My legs grew weary of treading water; my adrenaline was diminishing, and I was truly at the mercy of the sea. It was easy to focus on the anxiety. I didn't want to die alone, out at sea. I took a few deep breaths and closed my eyes. I asked God to look out for me and to keep me safe. I could feel my legs giving out and breathing was much more difficult than when I began the rescue.

Just as exhaustion was setting in, I heard a faint noise in the background that resembled a chopping sound. I opened my eyes and saw the reflection of green light on the water that meant the helicopter was approaching. As I breathed a deep sigh of relief, time stood still for what seemed to be several minutes. A burst of bright yellowish-blue light blinded me and a warm chill tingled from the crown of my head to the end of my tailbone. Suddenly, I felt a well of wisdom wash over me followed by a feeling of euphoria as I connected with life itself: the air, the wind, the water, and the light. This connection seemed

to strip all my worries away and affirmed within me the importance of helping others and understanding that we're all connected as children of God. As I was lifted up from the ocean by the helicopter, I was also lifted up by the truth I learned from those few hours among the waves.

A NEEDLE IN THE HAYSTACK

I had just arrived in northern Pakistan, where I was deployed for a temporary duty assignment. One of the rescue swimmers there had an accident and was sent back to the United States for treatment. His unit had been there for nearly five months, and I was the “sub” for his remaining five weeks on duty. It was extremely hot, and everyone was always on edge.

One day we received a transmission about a crash. A pilot and his crew had been gunned down by some local raiders lurking in the nearby mountains. I was on call for the rescue that day, so I geared up and readied myself for the upcoming trial. The helicopter started up and the blades began spinning. I took one more look at the camp and said a quick prayer for safety and protection. Sand flew into my eyes and the sun beat down on me as I made my way towards the helicopter. During our ascent, I looked at the field-medical next to me. His hands were trembling and his chest was rising up and down, as if he was having

an asthma attack, I signed to him asking if he was stable and ready for what we were heading into. He nodded, yet I could sense the self-doubt and fear seeping into him. I met his anxious gaze to let him know he wasn't alone.

As we approached the crash site, the pilot snuck us around the backside of the canyon. The field-medic made eye contact with me, and I tried my best to gather all my courage and look like I was ready to go. In reality, I most definitely was not ready to go. I had no idea I would see combat as a rescue swimmer. We started hiking towards the site with a map and compass in hand. I remember being so terrified there would be someone lurking around the corner. After nearly fifteen minutes of feeling on edge, the smell of a burning metal found my nose. I could see black smoke billowing up from around the bend. The medic and I looked at each other, nodded, and ran to the crash. In the debris, the pilot was wedged in the cockpit between the chair and the central control unit. We arrived in perfect timing, just as the pilot was beginning to regain consciousness.

The field-medic and I began to cut him free of the lines and metal that was encompassing his body. Tugging on so many different pieces of the helicopter felt like working through a puzzle. All of a sudden, I heard something in the distance. Was my mind playing tricks on me? I ran a little ways from the crash

to get a better look at our surroundings. I heard the sound again, this time louder. After a moment or two, I put together the pieces and realized it was voices from people heading this way; and by the sound of it, they were close. I rushed back to the crash and told the field-medical we had little time to spare. We agreed to just yank the pilot out rather than removing the debris.

Once he was free, we threw him onto a stretcher. The yells in the distance became more pronounced and frequent. We needed to sabotage the helicopter and burn the components, so that our technology wouldn't be exposed to the foreign opponent. I told the field-medical to go without me and that I'd be right behind him. He took off, and I began destroying the helicopter from top to bottom. My eyes and throat burned from the fumes of the burning metal and the fried electrical components. As the yells and chants became even louder, I sprinted back to the extraction point as fast as my legs could carry me.

I caught up to the field-medical and pilot just in the nick of time. I called down the rescue basket and strapped the pilot in. He had been crying and mumbling for quite some time now. I leaned in as he was being lifted and told him I couldn't understand him. He grabbed my shoulder and pulled me in with what little strength he had left. He said, "My wife's gonna kill me! My wife's gonna kill me!" I was dumbfounded by this statement and had no idea why his

wife would want to kill him. He never made eye contact with me; he just stared down at his hand. Then it dawned on me; this guy had lost his ring finger in the crash, along with the ring. I told him not to worry and that I'd get it. Me and my big mouth.

I ran back as quickly as I could to the crash site and frantically began to look around what was left of the helicopter. It felt like forever searching for one little ring. I rummaged through the entire helicopter as it burned, praying the finger hadn't been consumed by fire yet. The yelling was now a stone's throw away. I dropped to my knees to look under the helicopter to see if the raiders were within sight and there it was: the ring! As I reached to grab it, BOOM! A grenade detonated in front of me. Ears ringing, muffling everything around me, I stuffed the ring in my vest pocket, got to my feet and with a deep breath, prepared myself for the chase of a lifetime.

I sprinted through the smoke to the tree line and ripped my radio off the Velcro on my chest. "I'm half a click out and being pursued, ready the bird, please advise."

"Affirmative swimmer one, readying the bird" the pilot replied.

I glanced over my shoulder as I ran and saw the vague shape of men on the hunt in the distance. I knew I had to pick up the pace. Finally, I made it to

the helicopter just as it was taking off and jumped in. Shots were flying towards us from below, so I grabbed the sliding door to pull it shut. Before it could fully close, we were suddenly sideways, and I found myself staring at the ground 30 feet below me, one hand gripping the half-closed door, the other on the door pane. The pilot had banked hard to avoid an RPG flying by the rear rotor. “Phew, lucky I didn’t fall out”, I thought too soon. He overcompensated the opposite way to level out the flight, and because I hadn’t strapped myself in yet, I tumbled to the other side and out the open door. Before I could even comprehend what happened, I was lying on my back watching the chopper fly away.

I was flooded with all kinds of emotions: anger, jealousy, sadness, anxiety. It took me a moment to gather myself before trying to stand up. As I pushed off of my hands, I face-planted the ground. I looked over at my arm and saw my bone protruding through the skin. I remember the sinking feeling that came with realizing I must’ve landed on my arm from the 30ft fall out of the chopper. I buried my face into my clothes and screamed. I couldn’t believe what was happening. The thought of dying somewhere remote with no chance of closure for my family terrified me. I was in an unfamiliar, hostile place, unable to speak the native language, alone, injured, and afraid. But I needed to get moving if I were to have a chance at evading the group of men shooting nearby. I took

some slow, deep breaths and began to head in the direction I believed base camp was. As I jogged, I calculated it would be at least a two-day journey and noted that I should search for water as I went.

By my estimation, several hours had passed since I began my trek and there were no signs of anyone following me. I walked until I couldn't anymore, then I collapsed on the warm ground, drenched in layers of sweat. Daylight was fading and dusk was approaching, but the heat wasn't letting up. I was tired and thirsty, and I regretted not eating that morning before leaving. My head began to bob, and after fighting it for as long as I could, I finally succumbed to the exhaustion.

When I awoke, the moon had replaced the sun. I heard a commotion a little way behind me and realized I had been tracked during my slumber. I grabbed the binoculars the pilot had left behind, grateful to have thought to snag them in my haste, and zoomed in on where the noise came from. A handful of men about sixty feet away walked around with rifles, looking into the darkness with flashlights. I took a brief moment to stand and stretch, then once again began running.

I went on like this for hours, stopping for water when I came across a rare skimpy stream and resting when I needed to, limiting each rest to about ten

minutes. Finally, I found a dense tree-covered area. Too tired to continue, I sat under one of the trees that seemed to be out of sight, and allowed myself to sleep again. The sound of men speaking in a foreign language interrupted my rest. Too tired to move, I ignored the noises. Suddenly, I was shaken awake. I was certain someone had just shaken me out of my sleep, but no one was there. I heard tree branches cracking in the distance and jumped to my feet. The men knew they were too loud, because there were no more noises after that, just occasional whispering.

My adrenaline was wearing off now and I could feel the sharp pain in my forearm. It was overwhelming; I had never experienced pain like that before. I wanted to scream or cry, but I didn't dare make a sound now. I took my undershirt off and turned it into a sling for my arm. Using my other arm, I powered my way up a tree, making as little noise as possible. Not a minute after reaching the top, I heard another tree branch crack. This time it was very close. I was terrified I would drop something or a branch would fall or they'd look up and see me. I needed to move into a more comfortable and quieter spot, but they were too close to risk it. I watched as they treaded slowly under my hiding spot, one by one. Shaking with fear and pain, I fought every urge to let out any noise.

After the last man passed under me, I finally exhaled in relief and prepared to move to a different spot and possibly call it a night. As I stood up, I heard a voice and saw the men walking back towards me. They had decided to circle back and double check the wooded area. Trembling with fear and uncertainty, I held onto the tree and closed my eyes tightly. The heavy breeze rustling through the trees caused them to walk past a few more times before finally continuing ahead. I opened my eyes to see a pocket of moonlight over the hill. I knew I was directionally lost, but it seemed like the moonlight was showing me the way. I closed my eyes in belief and welcomed the sense of peace and joy brought to me.

Suddenly, I was home playing games with my family, laughing at jokes and wrestling with my cousins. The smell of pine and fresh baked cookies filled the room. My mom yelled something about watching out for the ornaments as we tussled on the ground...

My eyes fluttered open, and I came back to reality. The bright sun beamed down through the trees around me. I had made it through my first night. Although I was grateful for this, I still wished I could go back into my dream without a care in the world. The heat accompanied by the overwhelming physical pain of my broken arm was too much for me in that moment. I

remembered the moonlight from the night and looked in the direction it had been shining from. Something still nudged me towards that way. I climbed down a branch or two, then jumped out of the tree. Pain shot up my arm as I landed and I stifled a shout. I still could not believe I was in the situation I was in; it blew my mind! Of all the places I could be in the world, I was in a vast plain of hostile unfamiliarity, with a grossly broken arm, no food, and little water. I had to get back to base camp. I couldn't last much longer in this heat with no preparations.

CONSOLATION

As I trudged through the unknown territory, I thought to myself, "This is bogus, why did I put my life on the line for some dude's wedding ring? It's not my problem he lost it. It's not worth dying over. How could I be so naive?" I was consumed with negativity and doubting my decisions. I smashed my foot onto the ground and let out a yell of frustration. I was done, ready to call it quits. I didn't know where I was headed, my arm bone had been exposed for days, I was dehydrated and exhausted, my feet were aching and sore, my back hurt, my head was pounding, and my mind was drifting out of consciousness. One minute, I'd be walking with the sun in front of me, the next minute I'd be walking with the sun behind me; soon the sun was down and it was cooler, then before

I knew it, I was back in the sun and drenched in sweat. I'm still not sure how I auto-piloted my journey.

On my third day, hopelessness truly started setting in. I didn't know how much more I could realistically take. Sleep's sweet embrace tugged on my mind again. I was losing my will to continue on. Dropping to my knees, I began to weep, "Why me!? What am I to do!"

Out of nowhere, the stagnant air around me cooled, the sky darkened, and raindrops began splattering over the dry, cracked ground. Later, I learned this was the first bit of rain that had fallen in over five months. I shivered for a brief moment and the binoculars fell out of my torn pocket. I picked them up and, out of curiosity, peeked through them. What I saw absolutely astonished me; an American humvee was parked just down the hill, sparkling in the downpour like a beautiful shiny present. I looked up at the sky, smiling as tears spilled from my eyes. The life force that had been drained in the past days found its way back to my body. I closed my eyes and a flurry of images from the past few days flashed through my mind; the crashed helicopter, the ring in the burning debris, the breeze in the wooded area as I hid in the tree, the moonlight shining like a beacon, the endless walking, and finally the rainfall. A warm essence enveloped me despite the cool rain as I headed towards the glistening

humvee. I raised my arms as soon as they saw me coming; I knew they might think I was the enemy. After explaining my identity, I was loaded into the vehicle and headed towards base camp. I gazed out the window during the bumpy ride, and recognized a voiceless consolation that God had been with me, protecting me the whole time. This was yet another connection with Him I would never forget.

As the years have worn on and since reintegrating into civilian society, my spiritual encounters have been far less intense, but still unmistakable. Sometimes it's His presence in the breeze as it blows past me on a midday walk, or in the eyes of a stranger smiling at me.



WAR & GRACE

TEMPLATE FOR REFLECTION STORIES

1. Introduction
 - a. Family Background
 - b. Why are you choosing to share your story?

2. Prior to service
 - a. Faith background
 - b. Faith experiences prior to military life

3. Service
 - a. Deployment stories that involve an unexpected encounter with God or spirit
 - b. Hardships, near death experiences, trials, etc.

4. Post service
 - a. How did experiences shape you after your military service?
 - b. Where you stand now with your beliefs

5. Conclusion
 - a. Closing reflection that summarizes your thoughts and experiences