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### The Hotel Aftermath

#### Inside Mologne House, the Survivors of War Wrestle With Military Bureaucracy and Personal Demons

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The guests of Mologne House have been blown up, shot, crushed and shaken, and now their convalescence takes place among the chandeliers and wingback chairs of the 200-room hotel on the grounds of Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Oil paintings hang in the lobby of this strange outpost in the war on terrorism, where combat's urgency has been replaced by a trickling fountain in the garden courtyard. The maimed and the newly legless sit in wheelchairs next to a pond, watching goldfish turn lazily through the water.



But the wounded of Mologne House are still soldiers -- Hooah! -- so their lives are ruled by platoon sergeants. Each morning they must rise at dawn for formation, though many are half-snowed on pain meds and sleeping pills.

In Room 323 the alarm goes off at 5 a.m., but Cpl. Dell McLeod slumbers on. His wife, Annette,

gets up and fixes him a bowl of instant oatmeal before going over to the massive figure curled in the bed. An Army counselor taught her that a soldier back from war can wake up swinging, so she approaches from behind.

"Dell," Annette says, tapping her husband. "Dell, get in the shower."

"Dell!" she shouts.

Finally, the yawning hulk sits up in bed. "Okay, baby," he says. An American flag T-shirt is stretched over his chest. He reaches for his dog tags, still the devoted soldier of 19 years, though his life as a warrior has become a paradox. One day he's led on stage at a Toby Keith concert with dozens of other wounded Operation Iraqi Freedom troops from Mologne House, and the next he's sitting in a cluttered cubbyhole at Walter Reed, fighting the Army for every penny of his disability.

McLeod, 41, has lived at Mologne House for a year while the Army figures out what to do with him. He worked in textile and steel mills in rural South Carolina before deploying. Now he takes 23 pills a day, prescribed by various doctors at Walter Reed. Crowds frighten him. He is too anxious to drive. When panic strikes, a soldier friend named Oscar takes him to Baskin-Robbins for vanilla ice cream.

"They find ways to soothe each other," Annette says.

Mostly what the soldiers do together is wait: for appointments, evaluations, signatures and lost paperwork to be found. It's like another wife told Annette McLeod: "If Iraq don't kill you, Walter Reed will."

### **After Iraq, a New Struggle**

The conflict in Iraq has hatched a virtual town of desperation and dysfunction, months and years in random buildings and barracks in and around this military post.

The luckiest stay at Mologne House, a four-story hotel on a grassy slope behind the hospital. Mologne House opened 10 years ago as a short-term lodging facility for military personnel, retirees and their family members. Then came Sept. 11 and five years of sustained warfare. Now, the silver walkers of retired generals convalescing from hip surgery have been replaced by prosthetics propped against Xbox games and Jessica Simpson posters smiling down on brain-rattled grunts.

Two *Washington Post* reporters spent hundreds of hours in Mologne House documenting the intimate struggles of the wounded who live there. The reporting was done without the knowledge or permission of Walter Reed officials, but all those directly quoted in this article agreed to be interviewed.

The hotel is built in the Georgian revival style, and inside it offers the usual amenities: daily maid service, front-desk clerks in formal vests and a bar off the lobby that opens every afternoon.

But at this bar, the soldier who orders a vodka tonic one night says to the bartender, "If I had two hands, I'd order two." The customers sitting around the tables are missing limbs, their ears are melted off, and their faces are tattooed purple by shrapnel patterns.

Most everyone has a story about the day they blew up: the sucking silence before immolation, how the mouth filled with tar, the lungs with gas.

"First thing I said was, '[Expletive], that was my good eye,' " a soldier with an eye patch tells an amputee in the bar.

The amputee peels his beer label. "I was awake through the whole thing," he says. "It was my first patrol. The second [expletive] day in Iraq and I get blown up."

When a smooth-cheeked soldier with no legs orders a fried chicken dinner and two bottles of grape soda to go, a kitchen worker comes out to his wheelchair and gently places the Styrofoam container on his lap.

A scrawny young soldier sits alone in his wheelchair at a nearby table, his eyes closed and his chin dropped to his chest, an empty Corona bottle in front of him.

Those who aren't old enough to buy a drink at the bar huddle outside near a magnolia tree and smoke cigarettes. Wearing hoodies and furry bedroom slippers, they look like kids at summer camp who've crept out of their rooms, except some have empty pants legs or limbs pinned by medieval-looking hardware. Medication is a favorite topic.

"Dude, [expletive] Paxil saved my life."

"I been on methadone for a year, I'm tryin' to get off it."

"I didn't take my Seroquel last night and I had nightmares of charred bodies, burned crispy like

campfire marshmallows."

Mologne House is afloat on a river of painkillers and antipsychotic drugs. One night, a strapping young infantryman loses it with a woman who is high on her son's painkillers. "Quit taking all the soldier medicine!" he screams.

Pill bottles clutter the nightstands: pills for depression or insomnia, to stop nightmares and pain, to calm the nerves.

Here at Hotel Aftermath, a crash of dishes in the cafeteria can induce seizures in the combat-addled. If a taxi arrives and the driver looks Middle Eastern, soldiers refuse to get in. Even among the gazebos and tranquility of the Walter Reed campus in upper Northwest Washington, manhole covers are sidestepped for fear of bombs and rooftops are scanned for snipers.

Bomb blasts are the most common cause of injury in Iraq, and nearly 60 percent of the blast victims also suffer from traumatic brain injury, according to Walter Reed's studies, which explains why some at Mologne House wander the hallways trying to remember their room numbers.

Some soldiers and Marines have been here for 18 months or longer. Doctor's appointments and evaluations are routinely dragged out and difficult to get. A board of physicians must review hundreds of pages of medical records to determine whether a soldier is fit to return to duty. If not, the Physical Evaluation Board must decide whether to assign a rating for disability compensation. For many, this is the start of a new and bitter battle.

Months roll by and life becomes a blue-and-gold hotel room where the bathroom mirror shows the naked disfigurement of war's ravages. There are toys in the lobby of Mologne House because children live here. Domestic disputes occur because wives or girlfriends have moved here. Financial tensions are palpable. After her husband's traumatic injury insurance policy came in, one wife cleared out with the money. Older National Guard members worry about the jobs they can no longer perform back home.

While Mologne House has a full bar, there is not one counselor or psychologist assigned there to assist soldiers and families in crisis -- an idea proposed by Walter Reed social workers but rejected by the military command that runs the post.

After a while, the bizarre becomes routine. On Friday nights, antiwar protesters stand outside the gates of Walter Reed holding signs that say "Love Troops, Hate War, Bring them Home Now." Inside the gates, doctors in white coats wait at the hospital entrance for the incoming bus full of newly wounded soldiers who've just landed at Andrews Air Force Base.

And set back from the gate, up on a hill, Mologne House, with a bowl of red apples on the front desk.

### **Into the Twilight Zone**

Dell McLeod's injury was utterly banal. He was in his 10th month of deployment with the 178th Field Artillery Regiment of the South Carolina National Guard near the Iraqi border when he was smashed in the head by a steel cargo door of an 18-wheeler. The hinges of the door had been tied together with a plastic hamburger-bun bag. Dell was knocked out cold and cracked several vertebrae.

When Annette learned that he was being shipped to Walter Reed, she took a leave from her job on the assembly line at Stanley Tools and packed the car. The Army would pay her \$64 a day to help care for her husband and would let her live with him at Mologne House until he recovered.

A year later, they are still camped out in the twilight zone. Dogs are periodically brought in by the Army to search the rooms for contraband or weapons. When the fire alarm goes off, the amputees who live on the upper floors are scooped up and carried down the stairwell, while a brigade of mothers passes down the wheelchairs. One morning Annette opens her door and is told to stay in the room because a soldier down the hall has overdosed.

In between, there are picnics at the home of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a charity-funded dinner cruise on the Potomac for "Today's troops, tomorrow's veterans, always heroes."

Dell and Annette's weekdays are spent making the rounds of medical appointments, physical therapy sessions and evaluations for Dell's discharge from the Army. After 19 years, he is no longer fit for service. He uses a cane to walk. He is unable to count out change in the hospital cafeteria. He takes four Percocets a day for pain and has gained 40 pounds from medication and inactivity. Lumbering and blue-eyed, Dell is a big ox baby.

Annette puts on makeup every morning and does her hair, some semblance of normalcy, but her new job in life is watching Dell.

"I'm worried about how he's gonna fit into society," she says one night, as Dell wanders down

the hall to the laundry room.

The more immediate worry concerns his disability rating. Army doctors are disputing that Dell's head injury was the cause of his mental impairment. One report says that he was slow in high school and that his cognitive problems could be linked to his native intelligence rather than to his injury.

"They said, 'Well, he was in Title I math,' like he was retarded," Annette says. "Well, y'all took him, didn't you?"

The same fight is being waged by their friends, who aren't the young warriors in Army posters but middle-age men who left factory jobs to deploy to Iraq with their Guard units. They were fit enough for war, but now they are facing teams of Army doctors scrutinizing their injuries for signs of preexisting conditions, lessening their chance for disability benefits.

Dell and Annette's closest friend at Mologne House is a 47-year-old Guard member who was driving an Army vehicle through the Iraqi night when a flash of light blinded him and he crashed into a ditch with an eight-foot drop. Among his many injuries was a broken foot that didn't heal properly. Army doctors decided that "late life atrophy" was responsible for the foot, not the truck wreck in Iraq.

When Dell sees his medical records, he explodes. "Special ed is for the mentally retarded, and I'm not mentally retarded, right, babe?" he asks Annette. "I graduated from high school. I did some college. I worked in a steel mill."

It's after 9 one night and Dell and Annette are both exhausted, but Dell still needs to practice using voice-recognition software. Reluctantly, he mutes "The Ultimate Fighting Challenge" on TV and sits next to Annette in bed with a laptop.

"My name is Wendell," he says. "Wendell Woodward McLeod Jr."

Annette tells him to sit up. "Spell 'dog,' " she says, softly.

"Spell 'dog,' " he repeats.

"Listen to me," she says.

"Listen to me." He slumps on the pillow. His eyes drift toward the wrestlers on TV.

"You are not working hard enough, Dell," Annette says, pleading. "Wake up."

"Wake up," he says.

"Dell, come on now!"

### **For Some, a Grim Kind of Fame**

No one questions Sgt. Bryan Anderson's sacrifice. One floor above Dell and Annette's room at Mologne House, he holds the gruesome honor of being one of the war's five triple amputees. Bryan, 25, lost both legs and his left arm when a roadside bomb exploded next to the Humvee he was driving with the 411th Military Police Company. Modern medicine saved him and now he's the pride of the prosthetics team at Walter Reed. Tenacious and wisecracking, he wrote "[Expletive] Iraq" on his left leg socket.

Amputees are the first to receive celebrity visitors, job offers and extravagant trips, but Bryan is in a league of his own. Johnny Depp's people want to hook up in London or Paris. The actor Gary Sinise, who played an angry Vietnam amputee in "Forrest Gump," sends his regards. And *Esquire* magazine is setting up a photo shoot.

Bryan's room at Mologne House is stuffed with gifts from corporate America and private citizens: \$350 Bose noise-canceling headphones, nearly a thousand DVDs sent by well-wishers and quilts made by church grannies. The door prizes of war. Two flesh-colored legs are stacked on the floor. A computerized hand sprouting blond hair is on the table.

One Saturday afternoon, Bryan is on his bed downloading music. Without his prosthetics, he weighs less than 100 pounds. "Mom, what time is our plane?" he asks his mother, Janet Waswo, who lives in the room with him. A movie company is flying them to Boston for the premiere of a documentary about amputee hand-cyclers in which Bryan appears.

Representing the indomitable spirit of the American warrior



sometimes becomes too much, and Bryan turns off his phone.

Perks and stardom do not come to every amputee. Sgt. David Thomas, a gunner with the Tennessee National Guard, spent his first three months at Walter Reed with no decent clothes; medics in Samarra had cut off his uniform. Heavily drugged, missing one leg and suffering from traumatic brain injury, David, 42, was finally told by a physical therapist to go to the Red Cross office, where he was given a T-shirt and sweat pants. He was awarded a Purple Heart but had no underwear.

David tangled with Walter Reed's image machine when he wanted to attend a ceremony for a fellow amputee, a Mexican national who was being granted U.S. citizenship by President Bush. A case worker quizzed him about what he would wear. It was summer, so David said shorts. The case manager said the media would be there and shorts were not advisable because the amputees would be seated in the front row.

" 'Are you telling me that I can't go to the ceremony 'cause I'm an amputee?' " David recalled asking. "She said, 'No, I'm saying you need to wear pants.' "

David told the case worker, "I'm not ashamed of what I did, and y'all shouldn't be neither." When the guest list came out for the ceremony, his name was not on it.

Still, for all its careful choreography of the amputees, Walter Reed offers protection from a staring world. On warm nights at the picnic tables behind Mologne House, someone fires up the barbecue grill and someone else makes a beer run to Georgia Avenue.

Bryan Anderson is out here one Friday. "Hey, Bry, what time should we leave in the morning?" asks his best friend, a female soldier also injured in Iraq. The next day is Veterans Day, and Bryan wants to go to Arlington National Cemetery. His pal Gary Sinise will be there, and Bryan wants to give him a signed photo.

Thousands of spectators are already at Arlington the next morning when Bryan and his friend join the surge toward the ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknowns. The sunshine dazzles. Bryan is in his wheelchair. If loss and sacrifice are theoretical to some on this day, here is living proof -- three stumps and a crooked boyish smile. Even the acres of tombstones can't compete. Spectators cut their eyes toward him and look away.

Suddenly, the thunder of cannons shakes the sky. The last time Bryan heard this sound, his legs were severed and he was nearly bleeding to death in a fiery Humvee.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Bryan pushes his wheelchair harder, trying to get away from the noise. "Damn it," he says, "when are they gonna stop?"

Bryan's friend walks off by herself and holds her head. The cannon thunder has unglued her, too, and she is crying.

#### **Friends From Ward 54**

An old friend comes to visit Dell and Annette. Sgt. Oscar Fernandez spent 14 months at Walter Reed after having a heart attack in Afghanistan. Oscar also had post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, a condition that worsened at Walter Reed and landed the 45-year-old soldier in the hospital's psychiatric unit, Ward 54.

Oscar belonged to a tight-knit group of soldiers who were dealing with combat stress and other psychological issues. They would hang out in each other's rooms at night, venting their fury at the Army's Cuckoo's Nest. On weekends they escaped Walter Reed to a Chinese buffet or went shopping for bootleg Spanish DVDs in nearby Takoma Park. They once made a road trip to a casino near the New Jersey border.

They abided each other's frailties. Sgt. Steve Justi would get the slightest cut on his skin and drop to his knees, his face full of anguish, apologizing over and over. For what, Oscar did not know. Steve was the college boy who went to Iraq, and Oscar figured something terrible had happened over there.

Sgt. Mike Smith was the insomniac. He'd stay up till 2 or 3 in the morning, smoking on the back porch by himself. Doctors had put steel rods in his neck after a truck accident in Iraq. To turn his head, the 41-year-old Guard member from Iowa had to rotate his entire body. He was fighting with the Army over his disability rating, too, and in frustration had recently called a congressional investigator for help.

"They try in all their power to have you get well, but it reverses itself," Oscar liked to say.

Dell was not a psych patient, but he and Oscar bonded. They were an unlikely pair -- the dark-haired Cuban American with a penchant for polo shirts and salsa, and the molasses earnestness of Dell.

Oscar would say things like "I'm trying to better myself through my own recognizance," and Dell would nod in appreciation.

To celebrate Oscar's return visit to Walter Reed, they decide to have dinner in Silver Spring.

Annette tells Oscar that a soldier was arrested at Walter Reed for waving a gun around.

"A soldier, coming from war?" Oscar asks.

Annette doesn't know. She mentions that another soldier was kicked out of Mologne House for selling his painkillers.

The talk turns to their friend Steve Justi. A few days earlier, Steve was discharged from the Army and given a zero percent disability rating for his mental condition.

Oscar is visibly angry. "They gave him nothing," he says. "They said his bipolar was preexisting."

Annette is quiet. "Poor Steve," she says.

After dinner, they return through the gates of Walter Reed in Annette's car, a John 3:16 decal on the bumper and the Dixie Chicks in the CD player. Annette sees a flier in the lobby of Mologne House announcing a free trip to see Toby Keith in concert.

A week later, it is a wonderful night at the Nissan Pavilion. About 70 wounded soldiers from Walter Reed attend the show. Toby invites them up on stage and brings the house down when he sings his monster wartime hit "American Soldier." Dell stands on stage in his uniform while Annette snaps pictures.

"Give a hand clap for the soldiers," Annette hears Toby tell the audience, "then give a hand for the U.S.A."

### **A Soldier Snaps**

Deep into deer-hunting country and fields of withered corn, past the Pennsylvania Turnpike in the rural town of Ellwood City, Steve Justi sits in his parents' living room, fighting off the afternoon's lethargy.

A photo on a shelf shows a chiseled soldier, but the one in the chair is 35 pounds heavier. Antipsychotic drugs give him tremors and cloud his mind. Still, he is deliberate and thoughtful as he explains his path from soldier to psychiatric patient in the war on terrorism.

After receiving a history degree from Mercyhurst College, Steve was motivated by the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, to join the National Guard. He landed in Iraq in 2003 with the First Battalion, 107th Field Artillery, helping the Marines in Fallujah.

"It was just the normal stuff," Steve says, describing the violence he witnessed in Iraq. His voice is oddly flat as he recalls the day his friend died in a Humvee accident. The friend was driving with another soldier when they flipped off the road into a swamp. They were trapped upside down and submerged. Steve helped pull them out and gave CPR, but it was too late. The swamp water kept pushing back into his own mouth. He rode in the helicopter with the wet bodies.

After he finished his tour, everything was fine back home in Pennsylvania for about 10 months, and then a strange bout of insomnia started. After four days without sleep, he burst into full-out mania and was hospitalized in restraints.

Did anything trigger the insomnia? "Not really," Steve says calmly, sitting in his chair.

His mother overhears this from the kitchen and comes into the living room. "His sergeant had called saying that the unit was looking for volunteers to go back to Iraq," Cindy Justi says. "This is what triggered his snap."

Steve woke up in the psychiatric unit at Walter Reed and spent the next six months going back and forth between there and a room at Mologne House. He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. He denied to doctors that he was suffering from PTSD, yet he called home once from Ward 54 and shouted into the phone, "Mom, can't you hear all the shooting in the background?"

He was on the ward for the sixth time when he was notified that he was being discharged from the Army, with only a few days to clear out and a disability rating of zero percent.

On some level, Steve expected the zero rating. During his senior year of college, he suffered a nervous breakdown and for several months was treated with antidepressants. He disclosed this to the National Guard recruiter, who said it was a nonissue. It became an issue when he told doctors at Walter Reed. The Army decided that his condition was not aggravated by his time in Iraq. The only help he would get would come from Veterans Affairs.

"We have no idea if what he endured over there had a worsening effect on him," says his mother.

His father gets home from the office. Ron Justi sits on the couch across from his son. "He was

okay to sacrifice his body, but now that it's time he needs some help, they are not here," Ron says.

## Outside the Gates



**Cpl. Dell McLeod** injured his head and spine in an accident on the Iraqi border and was sent to Walter Reed Army Medical Center for treatment. He and his wife, Annette, lived in Mologne House for more than a year, waiting for an Army decision about his future.

The Army gives Dell McLeod a discharge date. His days at Mologne House are numbered. The cramped hotel room has become home, and now he is afraid to leave it. His anxiety worsens. "Shut up!" he screams at Annette one night, his face red with rage, when she tells him to stop fiddling with his wedding ring.

Later, Annette says: "I am exhausted. He doesn't understand that I've been fighting the Army."

Doctors have concluded that Dell was slow as a child and that his head injury on the Iraqi border did not cause brain damage. "It is possible that pre-morbid emotional difficulties and/or pre-morbid intellectual functioning may be contributing factors to his reported symptoms," a doctor wrote, withholding a diagnosis of traumatic brain injury.

Annette pushes for more brain testing and gets nowhere until someone gives her the name of a staffer for the House

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. A few days later, Annette is called to a meeting with the command at Walter Reed. Dell is given a higher disability rating than expected -- 50 percent, which means he will receive half of his base pay until he is evaluated again in 18 months. He signs the papers.

Dell wears his uniform for the last time, somber and careful as he dresses for formation. Annette packs up the room and loads their Chevy Cavalier to the brim. Finally the gates of Walter Reed are behind them. They are southbound on I-95 just past the Virginia line when Dell begins to cry, Annette would later recall. She pulls over and they both weep.

Not long after, Bryan Anderson also leaves Mologne House. When the triple amputee gets off the plane in Chicago, American Airlines greets him on the tarmac with hoses spraying arches of water, and cheering citizens line the roads that lead to his home town, Rolling Meadows.

Bryan makes the January cover of *Esquire*. He is wearing his beat-up cargo shorts and an Army T-shirt, legless and holding his Purple Heart in his robot hand. The headline says "The Meaning of Life."

A month after Bryan leaves, Mike Smith, the insomniac soldier, is found dead in his room. Mike had just received the good news that the Army was raising his disability rating after a congressional staff member intervened on his behalf. It was the week before Christmas, and he was set to leave Walter Reed to go home to his wife and kids in Iowa when his body was found. The Army told his wife that he died of an apparent heart attack, according to her father.

Distraught, Oscar Fernandez calls Dell and Annette in South Carolina with the news. "It's the constant assault of the Army," he says.

Life with Dell is worsening. He can't be left alone. The closest VA hospital is two hours away. Doctors say he has liver problems because of all the medications. He is also being examined for PTSD. "I don't even know this man anymore," Annette says.

At Mologne House, the rooms empty and fill, empty and fill. The lobby chandelier glows and the bowl of red apples waits on the front desk. An announcement goes up for Texas Hold 'Em poker in the bar.

One cold night an exhausted mother with two suitcases tied together with rope shows up at the front desk and says, "I am here for my son." And so it begins.

*Staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.*