

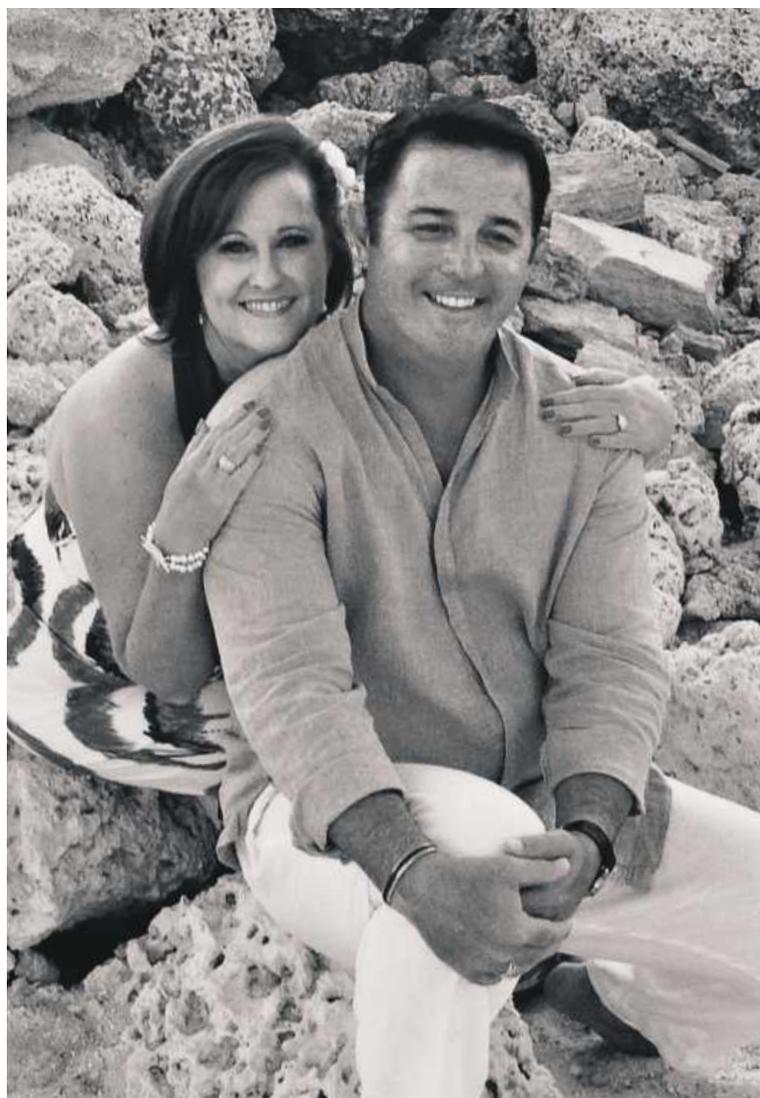
# HERO: A FOUR-LETTER WORD?

Well-meant admiration makes civilian life difficult for some veterans

By Matt Alderton

**D**R. HOWARD WASDIN HATES parades. One parade, in particular: The annual Christmas parade in his hometown of Screven, Ga. In December 1993, two months after nearly losing his right leg in the ill-fated Battle of Mogadishu, he was its guest of honor. "I was shot in the leg three times in the famous 'Black Hawk Down' battle," said Wasdin, a former Navy SEAL Team Six sniper who was injured trying to rescue the crews of two Black Hawk helicopters shot down during a failed military operation in Somalia. "When I came back, they wouldn't have it but to have me a parade. I didn't want it, but I was told by the local founding fathers — the people who are prominent in the community — that it's what the people wanted. They wanted to show me their love and respect." »





COURTESY OF HOWARD WASDIN

**Author and former** Navy SEAL Team Six sniper Howard Wasdin, with his wife, Debbie, lost friends during the “Black Hawk Down” battle in Somalia.

“I FELT SO OUT OF PLACE AND CONSPICUOUS, BECAUSE IN MY MIND I HAD GONE FROM ROCK STAR TO ROCK BOTTOM.”

— HOWARD WASDIN,  
FORMER NAVY SEAL SNIPER

“There was a big sign in the window of the local restaurant that everyone in town had signed, which said, ‘Welcome Back Howard, the Hometown Hero,’” continued Wasdin, now a chiropractor and author of two memoirs, *SEAL Team Six: Memoirs of an Elite Navy SEAL Sniper* and *The Last Rescue: How Faith and Love Saved a Navy SEAL Sniper*. “I remember sitting in the back of an SUV with the gate down, my leg propped up, and seeing everybody I had ever known lined up on the street, waving at me and blowing me kisses. I felt so out of place and conspicuous, because in my mind I had gone from rock star to rock bottom.”

It was a complicated and tragic feeling. In battle, he was extraordinary. At home, he was just ordinary. Less than that, even: damaged.

“I felt terrible before, during and after the parade,” recalled Wasdin, who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and survivor’s guilt, having lost 18 fellow troops in Mogadishu. “I appreciated that they loved me and wanted to see me — I really did — but it did nothing to help me. If anything, it hurt me. I had been a SEAL Team Six sniper; now, here I was displaying myself, wounded, for all these people to see.”

Wasdin, whose wounds earned him a Purple Heart and his valor a Silver Star, felt alone. In fact, he wasn’t: Approximately 12 percent to 15 percent of all combat veterans suffer from PTSD. Many of them share Wasdin’s sentiments. Although they appreciate the good intentions that drive it, America’s obsession with heroes, they insist, is misguided at best and malignant at worst.

“When you come home and you’re propped up as a hero,” Wasdin said, “it only leaves you one direction to go: down.”

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COURTESY OF HOWARD WASDIN

**Wasdin, talking to** locals in Somalia in 1991, was awarded the Silver Star for his valor in battle but still came home with PTSD.



BUDWEISER

## A ‘HERO’S WELCOME’

Lt. Chuck Nadd insists he’s no hero. The native of Winter Park, Fla., thought he would quietly return home after eight months in Afghanistan, where he flew 250 combat hours in a Blackhawk helicopter. But Budweiser had bigger plans for the 24-year-old soldier.

The beer colossus arranged — and helped pay for — a huge, surprise parade that welcomed Nadd home like a hero. And it was all caught on tape. Nadd went along because his Army battalion chief told him the VFW wanted to include him in a documentary about soldiers coming home. Not quite. More like a Budweiser Super Bowl ad — with Nadd and his girlfriend being pulled in a wagon down Main Street by the Budweiser Clydesdales, no less.

The ad, “A Hero’s Welcome,” aired during Super Bowl XLVIII in February, and took third place in USA TODAY’s 26th annual Ad Meter survey.

Nadd was skeptical when he found out all the patriotic hoopla was for a beer commercial. But he’s hoping the ad will spur other communities to celebrate their hometown heroes. And after eight beer-free months, he downed his first cold one on the way home from the game. Go figure: a Bud.

— Bruce Horovitz

**'NOT A HERO'**

If you call him a hero, Jason Haag, a retired Marine Corps captain, will blush. Then, secretly, he'll blench.

"People call me a hero all the time, and it's honestly a little bit embarrassing," said Haag, who joined the Marine Corps in 1999 and completed three tours of combat duty prior to his medical discharge in 2013. "I'm not a hero. The guys who are the real heroes are the ones who laid down their lives so I could come home."

Haag's feelings are typical of many veterans. So is his story. During multiple tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, he sustained multiple physical injuries, including a machine gun wound and multiple traumatic brain injuries. Over time, however, his mental wounds hurt most.

"I have been diagnosed with extreme PTSD, and it's taken a toll on me drastically," said Haag, a Purple Heart recipient and father of three in Fredericksburg, Va. "After my last tour of duty (in 2010), I isolated myself away from everyone; for a year and a half I locked myself in my basement, abused prescription pain pills, drank myself into oblivion and basically just wanted to end it."

At his lowest point, he was on 32 medications, all of which he mixed with alcohol. "I wasn't a hero; I was a walking drugged-out zombie," continued Haag, whose PTSD nearly cost him his marriage.

With the help of K9s for Warriors, an organization that provides service dogs to veterans, he eventually turned things around. "My service dog, Axel, saved my life," said Haag, who has been narcotics-free for more than 500 days, nearly a year and a half.

His relationship with Axel is healing in part because it's pure. People expect certain things of heroes; dogs don't.

"When you enlist, it's not about being a hero; it's about brotherhood. It's about the guys who are sitting to your left and to your right," continued Haag, who said veterans thrive on purpose, not praise. "Axel takes the place of the guys I had over there; we were completely dependent on each other, and so are Axel and I."

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— JASON HAAG, MARINE CORPS VETERAN



## PERFECTLY IMPERFECT

Although they make up just 7 percent of the U.S. population, veterans constitute 20 percent of all U.S. suicides, 12 percent of the U.S. adult homeless population and 10 percent of the U.S. prison population. Hero worship isn't the cause, but for at-risk individuals, it could exacerbate the effects.

"The so-called 'hero's welcome' can get in the way of a successful transition back to civilian life," said Carl Castro, a retired Army colonel and director of the Center for Innovation and Research for Veterans and Military Families at the University of Southern California. "The word 'hero' conjures up an idea of perfection. If you were successful in the military, it suggests, you can be successful anywhere."

Iraq war veteran and Purple Heart recipient Tedd "Gunny" Weiser sees it all the time. "The term 'hero' creates an illusionary bar that we have to remain above at all times," said Weiser, a retired Marine gunnery sergeant and interim director of Veteran Student Services at Saint Leo University in Saint Leo, Fla. "When you're being called a hero, you feel like you're falling short if you're challenged with emotional, mental or physical problems. That can be detrimental."

Especially when it prevents veterans from seeking needed support. "The military culture is all about taking care of yourself and solving your own problems," Castro said. "Nobody wants to say, 'I let things get out of control and now I really need someone to help me.' That feels like the opposite of success."



CHRIS HONDROS/GETTY IMAGES

**Soldiers take part** in a suicide prevention class at Fort Riley, Kansas.



COURTESY RICH SIMMONS AND SOHO CONTEMPORARY ART

**Rich Simmons' painting** *The Real Hero*, left, plays on the image of soldier as superhero.

Veterans may not feel heroic. But that doesn't mean they aren't, echoed Rich Simmons, a British artist in whose work heroism is a prominent theme. In his 2014 painting *The Real Hero*, on display at New York's Soho Contemporary Art gallery, he depicts a uniformed soldier who casts the shadow of a superhero.

"I wanted to take the idea of a soldier being a true hero, despite the reluctance to accept or believe they are heroes," Simmons said. "While they are wearing their camouflage uniforms and doing what they consider a job they were trained to do, their shadow will tell another story and show their true identity as the Supermen and Caped Crusaders of the real world."

In other words: Heroism is in the eye of the beholder.

Even so, it has repercussions for the beheld, according to Dallas-based author Ben Fountain. In his 2012 novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, he tells the fictional story of Billy Lynn, a 19-year-old soldier and Silver Star recipient whose Army squad defeats an elite force of enemy insurgents during the Iraq War. Caught on tape by an embedded news crew, the battle makes heroes of the squad's surviving members, who embark on a victory tour during which they must reconcile their celebrity with their humanity.

"War is a very complex human experience. I think a lot of soldiers get a sense that that experience has been reduced to a trope, a formula that relies on stereotypes and clichés. It fails to engage with the reality, which is that war is about death and destruction, and those involved in it come out changed in very fundamental ways, often traumatized by it," Fountain said. "This reflexive, automatic labeling of soldiers as heroes is one mechanism mainstream America uses to keep the experience at arm's length. If these guys are heroes — end of discussion — we can avoid having a really serious conversation about the causes of war and the costs."

## TRUTH OR TROPE?

Retired Marine Corps Capt. Mike Starich thinks the word "hero" is overused. "It dilutes its impact," said Starich, who served from 1985 until 1992 and is now president of Orion International, a Milwaukee-based military recruiting firm. "More importantly, (when we call all veterans heroes) I think it takes away from the servicemen and women who actually deserve the title."

While Starich thinks too many veterans claim the hero mantle, former Green Beret Yinon Weiss thinks it's too few.

"Everybody in the military can point to somebody they think is more heroic than they are; nobody feels like they're the one who's the hero," said Weiss, an Iraq War veteran who now serves as CEO of RallyPoint, a Boston-based social network for service members and veterans. "At the same time, a lot of veterans feel isolated from society. They've been through a lot, and they don't always know how to express it. When somebody calls them a hero, it's a form of validation, and that form of validation can be very therapeutic."

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## LESS TALK, MORE WALK

That conversation would be infinitely more helpful to veterans than kneejerk adulation, according to Weiser, who proposes more benefits and less ballyhoo.

"What is most important to veterans is actions rather than words," he said. "They don't need fanfare; they need tools and resources to help them transition successfully back to civilian life."

Wasdin agrees. "The people who showed up to hold me up, emulate me and praise me as their 'hometown hero' were the same people who didn't have a job for me when I needed one," he said. "Not to sound unappreciative, but a better way to help me would have been to hire me, or to teach me how to have a normal conversation again. If we really want to thank veterans, we should give them fewer medals and more support."

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., thinks the country can offer both. In June 2014, he introduced a bipartisan resolution to establish Veterans Day 2014 as a special "Welcome Home" day for post-9/11 veterans. Upon passage of the resolution in September, he and cosponsors Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C., and Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., wrote to U.S. governors encouraging them to plan "commemoration" events recognizing veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Commemoration can be any number of things: a parade, a moment of silence, participating in the Veterans History Project or community service," explained Kaine, who characterizes the "Welcome Home" as a combination of appreciation and advocacy. "By commemorating their sacrifice, we not only give this generation of veterans the recognition they deserve, but can also promote awareness of the challenges they may face when they return home and an understanding of what we can do to help."



LAWRENCE JACKSON/WHITE HOUSE

**Jill Biden, left,** and Michelle Obama stand with Marine Lance Cpl. James Sperry and his daughter Hannah, 5, at the start of the 2011 World Series. Veterans and active-duty service members are often honored at sporting events.



CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

**Alyssa Barker, 14,** of Chicago, thanks Nick Zuras for his service at the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. Zuras was a U.S. Navy rocket boat officer on Omaha Beach on D-Day.

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## RECIPE FOR RESPECT

The line between “praise” and “pressure” is paper-thin.

“A real complex paradox exists with veterans,” Castro said. “On the one hand, they want to be recognized for the sacrifices they’ve made. But at the same time, they want to be left alone and may even be embarrassed to be acknowledged.”

Which begs the question: How should civilians interact with veterans?

If you’re an employer, Castro suggests, consider offering them a job. If you’re a landlord, consider renting them housing. And if you’re just an average Joe or Jane? A simple “thanks” will do.

“The good old-fashioned handshake, looking you in the eye and saying, ‘Thank you for your service,’ is as good as it gets,” Wasdin said.

As for “hero,” a better word might be “soldier.”

“‘Hero’ is a function of the natural American tendency to exaggerate and advertise,” Fountain said. “I think there’s enough honor in the word ‘soldier’ to suffice.” ●