

The Survivor
Kresha Richman Warnock
Kresha.warnock@gmail.com

MISSOURI HUMANITIES & GREENTOWER PRESS

PROUD

WRITING BY AMERICAN WARRIORS, VOL 13

TO BE



The Survivor
Kresha Richman Warnock
Kresha.warnock@gmail.com

Marion, Indiana is a struggling rust belt town up SR 69 from Indianapolis. The Mississinewa River is the prettiest geographic feature of the city, and Matter Park stretches for green miles along it. Marion was my home for seventeen years. Most days, I walked along the river, looking for blue herons standing on one leg in the shallows. Then I crossed over a little hill in the park to visit a memorial to the young soldiers who died in Iraq and Afghanistan. I wandered along the curved pathway and said a silent prayer for each of the dead boys represented by the eight plaques that line its bricked sidewalk.

During Christmas break, 2006, on a cold December afternoon, my husband, Jim, and I had gone to see a matinee of Daniel Craig in *Casino Royale*. We just got home and were standing in our kitchen, lavender walls, robin-egg blue trim. The late afternoon winter light filtered through the big window looking out on the giant, leafless hickory tree.

The phone call came to my husband's cell. *"Your son's Humvee was hit by an IED. David has been taken to the hospital here in Baghdad and will be transferred out to Germany tomorrow."*

Jim crumpled... He leaned into me. I was all that was supporting his six-foot frame from falling. *"I knew this would happen. They asked if we had passports. If they fly you over, that means he's dying."* The only time I'd seen my husband cry in our forty years of marriage.

David had been the driver of a Humvee. The force of the blast drove his jaw into the radio on the dashboard in front of him. David's best friend was in a Humvee right behind. He jumped out and cradled my son's head in his arms whispering, "Don't die, don't die" until the medics got there. I only can imagine the twisted rubble, the smell of burning, the screams, the chaos. My boy.

The Survivor
Kresha Richman Warnock
Kresha.warnock@gmail.com

The young Specialist, manning the gun turret, didn't make it. His mother, his father never got to hear from their son again. He was twenty-five. When they rescued these wounded soldiers, his blood was splattered all over David. Maybe that's why they thought my son was mortally wounded.

I wanted to write to the Specialist's mother but didn't know what to say. It's more than fifteen years later. I never even found her address. I do not have the courage to walk into her pain. I tell myself it wouldn't do any good.

That first night, after the phone call, I felt nothing. I could say I knew David would be okay, but that's not true. Jim and I were both still awake, not talking, lying side by side in our brass bed, when David's call came at 4 a.m., groggy but alive. He'd lost his phone and needed his girlfriend's number. He was still teenager in love, as well as a wounded soldier. The next day he was transported to Germany, his jaw broken in several places, shrapnel in his back. His girlfriend's mother fed him soup through his wired-shut jaw until he was strong enough to travel back home. We picked him up in Chicago, drove back down to Marion and put him to sleep in his childhood bedroom, also with a wintry view of the old hickory tree. In three weeks, he was back in Germany, on light duty, until he returned to Iraq for his second deployment a year later.

When I walked through the memorial in Marion, I was thankful that the sculpture of the empty boots didn't represent David's. I know little but the engraved information of most of the Indiana boys commemorated here, but it's a small region, and there are always connections.

The name on the first plaque is Corporal Lance Thompson, a Marine killed in the invasion of Baghdad in 2003. A dear friend is married to his cousin, another Marine. Lance was

The Survivor

Kresha Richman Warnock

Kresha.warnock@gmail.com

twenty when he died. Too young to be a father yet. My friend brings her own two little ones to visit and keep his memory in their hearts.

First Sgt. Collin Bowen's plaque is further along the path. He suffered burns over fifty percent of his body when his vehicle was blown up in Afghanistan a year after David's injury. I felt it my duty to follow his seventy-two-day grueling death march on the website his brother set up for him. They were a religious family. They wanted us praying as Collin's life waned. We heard how he kissed his wife through the bandages that covered him for the last time. Neither prayers nor doctors could save him. He was old enough to leave a little daughter behind.

God willing, I will follow the natural order and die before my children. But I will never overcome that terror when I let myself imagine what might have been. When David was home for those few weeks of R&R, friends would say to him, "*You are really lucky.*" "*If I was really lucky,*" he responded, "*I wouldn't have been blown up at all.*" Luck, fate, God's will, whatever, that IED blast will forever reverberate in my soul. I will always wonder who I would have become if David hadn't made it home.