

VETERAN

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things like that. Most of my unit’s time we spent with a special forces unit, which I thought was awesome, because there was a mutual respect there. They understood what we did, and we obviously understood what they do.”

He said it was a different kind of mindset.

“It was just the difference of — we were doing our job, and I guess part of what 9/11 for me was, is they attacked civilians 100%, whereas Afghanistan, that’s what we were there for. So... I guess, kind of a different mindset.”

He said his experience in the EOD field is similar to that of firefighters, who brave danger themselves to go and pull people out of life-threatening situations.

“We were trained to take care of devices specifically designed to kill soldiers, and I’m not trying to talk our field up, but we were there to protect soldiers and civilians equally, and it’s... I don’t even know how to begin to explain that mindset it takes to do that.”

He said he’s had people ask him before why he does it, and his response to them is:

“You’ll never understand.”

GRAPPLING WITH THE EMOTIONS

The attacks on the World Trade Center left deep, lasting emotional scars for those who witnessed it. Many who were on the scene that day now suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety, and Baker is no exception.

Various studies document the lasting psychological toll of 9/11, and a review of those studies involving those directly exposed to the attacks from the National Library of Medicine found that PTSD could persist or even emerge years later, especially for those closest to the disaster who witnessed the trauma.

He said it took him a long time to process the emotions of the attack.

“I mean for the most part, I don’t know if it was — I compartmentalized it, and just tucked it away,” he said.

He said after discussing with his squad and realizing he couldn’t watch anything that had to with the attacks, he was likely suffering from PTSD.

“If anything about it pops up, I can’t watch it,” Baker said. “I immediately turn away and I start turning the channel immediately.”

That’s when he said another member of his unit told him it was a stereotypical sign of PTSD.

“You’re avoiding it,” and I still do that today,” he said. “I just can’t do it.”

He said through their experiences, he was forever bonded with the fellow members of his unit.

“We wind up deploying the next year, and then about a year after we got back from our deployment, I got out,” he said.

He said that the rest of his team stayed in the military for several years afterward, and were deployed a few more times.

“I know a couple of them, my old team



Contributed

Baker’s EOD team.

leader especially, Iraq messed him up really bad,” he said. “I try to keep in touch with him best I can, but he cuts people off a lot. I think the last time I talked to him, he was trying to get some actual in-hospital care.”

Baker said he tries to keep in contact with former members of his unit, and while he’s successful with a few, the stress of the job tends to have an effect on those who do it.

“One of the other guys that I was actually at the World Trade Center with hasn’t really cut everybody off — but he pretty well stays to just him and his wife,” he said. “It seems a very stereotypical thing with a lot of the — especially the EOD field... it’s very, very high-stress work, and you have a very specific purpose. And when you get out, you don’t have that anymore.”

He said several members of his unit also tended to compartmentalize their traumas, and shared why he decided to open up about his experience.

“I’m very introverted now,” Baker said. “Doing this — the only reason I do this is because I believe that 9/11 is kind of getting forgotten. People don’t understand just how impactful that really was, and I think it’s important that [it] keeps getting brought up. But otherwise... this isn’t something I would ever even think about doing.”

He said it amazes him that despite how much 9/11 still bothers him, talking about it doesn’t seem to bother him as much as the day-to-day.

“Like some parts of 9/11 — I don’t want to say I see it every day — whether it’s the coming out of the cafe and seeing the papers flying through the air, or the walk back after it all happened,” he said. “Some part of it I see every day, and there’s some parts of it that I don’t like seeing every day.”

He said that the images the general public witnessed through television and media are completely different when viewed in person, and shared a quote he said he’d heard before but couldn’t properly attribute.

“I really wish people could understand what we go through, but I hope they never do, because it’s one of those things. Unless you experience it, you’ll never know it.”

And he revealed a chilling reality.

“Unfortunately, my EOD field, as a whole across the four services, since 9/11, we have actually lost more to suicide than we did to war,” he said.

He said one of the

units members at the World Trace Center that day with him had an especially rough time.

“I do know one of the guys that was there with us, he had a very hard time immediately after it happened,” he said. “He grew up in New Jersey, New York area, so he had a... I guess, closer connection to the community... I think he’s doing considerably better than what he used to — but, and unfortunately, it’s one of those things everybody has to figure out what works for them to kind of get through all of it.”

Baker said that because of the nature of his job, he kept his exact location secret, even from family. So while his wife knew that he was in New York, she had no idea what kind of danger he was truly facing.

“She knew I was in New York, but that’s all she knew. That’s one of those things... for mission security, just in general, you don’t tell exactly where you’re going, what time you’re doing anything.”

He said he remembers they used to have small arguments about him being secretive, but said he told her the truth when he came home.

“How would you have felt if you’d known I was at the towers at that

time?” And I think it kind of brought that a little bit more to light. Like, that’s another reason we don’t tell you what and when we’re doing things. It’s mission security, but it’s also so you don’t know and have to worry.”

REMEMBERING 9/11

Baker said he tells his family everything — including his two daughters, now at the University of Kentucky, who weren’t born when 9/11 happened.

“I tell them the feelings of it... and I also tell them, ‘If you ever have any questions about it, ask,’ because it never needs to be forgotten,” he said. “It was our generation’s Pearl Harbor. But unfortunately, even when I look at it, I don’t know the same feelings of Pearl Harbor as people that were alive during that time stage, and I can see that now. Even with my own kids, they don’t understand the devastation that actually happened.”

He said has no issue talking about it when the conversation casually arises in everyday moments, and said it helps to talk about it — but that it also brings some anxiety to do so.

“If it comes up, yes, I’ll talk about it. In some ways, it helps to talk

about it, but it also — I don’t know if it’s anxiety that comes out from it, but... it also brings all of those feelings back up to the surface.”

Baker shared a few of the images that still haunt his memory.

“The big one was, of course, there [were] papers everywhere... I can remember extremely vividly, there was a very... expensive all-wood desk that, I mean, smashed on the ground in flames... I do know that I can all but picture one particular person’s face falling, and I can almost describe what he was wearing.”

And he shared the experience another soldier, a military dog handler, had coming out of the subway station below the towers.

“He was describing there used to be a subway that went under the towers, and there was a subway station under there. He took the subway that morning, and he told us about as soon as he came out from the tunnel, the blast wave pushed him to the ground, and he said when he stood back up, where just moments before there was a... woman walking away from him, there was a jet engine sitting in that general area instead.”

Though while there was much devastation that day, one good thing that came from the tragedy was how it unified the nation.

“Immediately, what good came of it was a lot of patriotism, and that’s one of the reasons why I see it’s being forgotten more and more. Because you see more and more patriotism being pushed aside.”

He said he’s unsure if that’s because of the modern political climate, or other factors at play, but shared how he saw the country united by tragedy after 9/11.

“That was one of those funny things. I think back now... I remember right after 9/11, you saw American flags everywhere. Everybody’s car had one.”

He shared how he joked with members of his unit how he felt unpatriotic because he never had the desire to fly a flag on his car, to which he said they responded: “Are you seriously asking that?... You do know you joined the military.”

He said he never really thought of it that way, but said that feeling is what brought a divided populace together. While he said he hopes that it doesn’t take another tragedy like 9/11 to unify the nation, in his experience, that’s how it’s historically come about.

“We have it so good as a country that problems have to be made up,” he said. “One of the easiest ones to come up with — and I’m sure it’s controversial — is knowing which bathroom to walk into. Why is this a problem? No other country in the world has this problem. So why do we?”

He said that overall, the United States has a better quality of life than most countries, and shared why he believes division exists today.

“People don’t thrive in a utopian society, so they have to make up problems when there’s not any,” he said. “You don’t see that in countries that have turmoil because they’ve got problems, and I’m sure they look at us and go, ‘Are you seriously fighting over that? Like, we’re wondering where our next meal is going to come from...’ These war-torn countries, like, they’re hoping that their house is still there tomorrow when they come home, and we just don’t have those problems here.”

Baker now works at a chemical plant is Calvert City and said whenever coworkers ask him what he remembers, he says it’s impossible to forget where he was on 9/11.

“I find it kind of humorous because people always around this of the year, [they’re] always like... ‘Can you remember where you were at on 9/11?’ It’s like, unfortunately, I can’t forget.”

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