

# Ain't No Fortunate Son.

***“It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no fortunate one.  
It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no fortunate son.”***

“Fortunate Son”-Credence Clearwater Revival



So the Iraq war was in the news last week when former President George W. Bush admitted that Iraq was “a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion.” Turns out President Bush “misspoke” and he meant to reference Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine. But W. was right the first time. History has proven that nothing long term was gained by invading Iraq. It was a mistake.

And mistakes have consequences. One American who is still feeling those consequences is Tim Andrews (pictured above).

I wrote about Tim in November, 2004 for the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* in a column entitled “*They’re fighting for us. So why aren’t we fighting for them.*”

On Memorial Day, 2022, I thought it appropriate to take a little time to remember those days. And that war. And some of the consequences. The column is re-printed below.

**“*They’re fighting for us. So why aren’t we fighting for them.*”**

*Now that the elections are over I’d like to talk about my special interest group:*

*Sara wants to be a teacher. After high school, like many kids she stumbled a bit while away at college. Wasn’t quite ready for all that freedom. But she met Tim, fell in love, grew up and now is more than halfway home towards her degree in elementary education.*

*Tim, too, stumbled a bit after high school, but eventually found a job with a utility company. He met Sara on the day he was leaving to move to Arizona. But he was smitten and soon moved back.*

*Sara, now 22, was the girl he had been waiting for; Tim, now 25, was the boy who could make it all come true for her. They’ve made a home for themselves in a small duplex in Ft. Benning, Georgia, together earning about \$20,000 a year while they wait for January 5th when Tim will be shipped out to Baghdad.*

*Sara’s paying for school herself while working full-time as a bank teller. Their combined income makes them ineligible for most government aid programs. It would have been better for them financially if they were unmarried and unemployed. But Sara knows the value of hard work and responsibility so she does the right thing. This girl who brooded some in high school and got a little lost in college smiles and laughs all the time. She’s carrying a 3.7 GPA and recently earned an “A” in calculus.*

*When the war with Iraq began, Tim felt it was his duty to enlist in the US Army against the advice of his parents-both of whom made careers in the military- and against the advice of his future father-in-law. The future father-in-law, in fact, was not at all happy with this development. “Where is this guy going with my little girl?” he wondered? But after a long talk one night, Tim quieted the future father-in-law with this question: “So who would you send in my place? Your sons?”*

*Now, Tim trains. He has been in the army for a little over a year and has spent eight weeks of basic training in Kentucky, a month training in the California desert, and another two weeks in the Louisiana bayou. He runs about 10 miles a day. He spends his time learning how to drive a tank, jump out of an airplane, shoot a gun and distinguish between an Iraqi friend and an Iraqi enemy.*

*He’s physically strong and mentally tough. He’s confident in his abilities and would walk through hell with a can of gas to rescue a member of his tank unit. He wears a beeper or cell phone whenever he leaves his base in case his unit gets its deployment orders suddenly. Last week, he got shots in preparation for going overseas. His arm filled up with infection and he vomited for three days.*

*Tim says he's not worried, but he bought a Labrador puppy, so Sara won't be lonely when he's away. He treats Sara like she's the only reason for being alive, and he's not far wrong.*

*So they wait for January 5. And they laugh, love, work, have fun, go to school, train, talk on the phone. Most of all they enjoy being newly married and in love.*

*They don't worry about Jan 5; they put it out of their minds. When they speak of the future, it's always "when Tim gets back from Iraq." They love their families, their country, baseball, their kitten and puppy and each other. Tim and Sara are the kids who make this country the strongest on earth; the latest greatest generation.*

*Sara and Tim are my special interest group. Sara and Tim and all the other kids in their position. I think it's time we started paying attention to the needs of the kids we're sending out to fight our battles.*

*Where are the Washington lobbyists for these kids? I don't see their spokespersons on "Larry King Live." I haven't seen any advocacy ads on TV. Has the Catholic church spoken out for these kids as it has the priests accused of molesting children? What's the religious right's position on troop support? I haven't seen any of their literature on it. Hey, you right to lifers: Don't these kids have as much right to life and a future as a day old embryo?*

*I ask the same of the gay-rights groups, the environmentalists, the ADA, the AARP, the women's rights groups, the National Rifle Association, the NAACP, the unions...all the special interest groups. Shouldn't the interests of these kids, who are protecting our way of life, come before everything else on the agenda?*

*Hell, a lot of the troops heading to the front have to buy their own armor for the flak jackets they wear. Their enlistments are being extended without their permission. They're driving tanks designed to fight the Russians, not in urban guerrilla warfare. In the latest campaign in Fallujah they're being asked to control an insurgent-infested city without sufficient troop strength by teaming with Iraqi locals who may or may not be on their side. And even if their Iraqi partners are loyal and speak English, their radios are programmed to different frequencies.*

*Is anyone looking out for these kids, protecting their interests? I sure don't see it.*

*I do see, though, that voters told exit pollsters that moral issues-encompassing things like gay marriage, stem cell research, abortion and sex in the media-swayed their decision more than any others. The war in Iraq-which should include the issue of troop safety, exit strategy and future deployments, came in fourth.*

*Amazing.*

*This doesn't seem very moral to me. But maybe my priorities are mixed up because I have a special interest, and I don't care about much else. Sara is my daughter, Tim is her husband and excuse me if I don't get too worked up about gay marriage and Howard Stern.*

*Come home safe Tim. Our country's counting on your service. But don't count on a whole lot of support.*

*St. Louis Post Dispatch - November 24, 2004*

So I wrote that column almost 18 years ago. What's happened to Tim in Iraq? And what kind of support did Tim receive from his country when he returned?

Below is an update:

**Regarding Tim:**

Unlike the 8,343 soldiers and contractors who died serving in Iraq, Tim did come home alive. And, unlike the 31,994 soldiers who were injured, Tim did come home in one piece. But Tim's time in Iraq was not easy.

Tim was part of *Charlie Company*, of the 1-15IN Infantry, assigned to a platoon of 16 soldiers and 4 tanks. They called themselves the *Grim Reapers*. Their duty was to patrol the main supply routes northeast of Bagdad and support the infantry. The biggest danger came from improvised explosive devices (IED's). These devices consisted of abandoned artillery shells, buried face-up in the sand and triggered by the enemy with a sort of home-made detonator. During one particularly dangerous four day period in 2004, two of *Charlie Company*'s tanks were blown up by IED's. Tim suffered traumatic brain injuries in the explosions. A few month's later, on another mission, another tank in Tim's unit was destroyed by an IED resulting in the death of six soldiers.

Tim's duties also included working near one of the 230 "burn pits" in Iraq. Tim's duty, of which everyone in his unit took turns, was called "shit burning detail." SBD consisted of lighting multiple 55 gallon drums of human waste on fire with diesel fuel. The remnants from these fires were then transported to the burn pits for further incineration. These burn pits used jet fuel to burn garbage, which included human waste, medical waste and known carcinogens. Tim was not alone on "shit burning detail." The VA estimates 250,000 (out of 697,000) Iraq veterans were exposed to toxins from the burn pits.

It did not get any easier for Tim when he returned home after his tour of duty. A tour of duty that was extended without his permission.

Because of the trauma inflicted while watching his Army brothers being blown up, Tim was one of the estimated 15.7% of all Iraq war veterans who developed and was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). But, according to Tim, the VA's mental health care was (and is) "completely inadequate" and consists of "them filling you with drugs that turn you into a zombie. And the psychiatric counseling from the VA is either non-existent or third rate."

Perhaps because of his exposure to the "burn pits," Tim also developed cancer. He's on his seventh round (21 weeks total) of chemotherapy now.

In spite of all this, Tim has moved on from his time in Iraq. Tim doesn't blame anybody for his troubles or want any special treatment. And outside of the VA's "pathetic" mental health department, he is generally complimentary of the VA's medical care. Unlike a lot of vets, Tim feels he has "received very good care, I have not had to wait for appointments, the doctors are excellent."

Sums up Tim: "Please don't feel sorry for me. I made my choice and did my duty. Nobody made me go to Iraq. I'm proud of my service. At the time, I thought we accomplished our goals. We made sure democratic elections took place, and watched a new government get installed. That would not have happened if we weren't there. Of course now, with the benefit of perspective, I see it was all about money, oil and politics. But I still think we made a difference."

### **Regarding support for veterans:**

Although Tim is not looking for any special treatment as a veteran, and is generally satisfied with the VA, I think his country's treatment of our veterans remains a disgrace. And the facts back me up.

One example is the treatment of veterans exposed to the toxins from burn pits.



*A soldier tosses unserviceable uniform items into a burnpit at Balad Air Base, Iraq, on March 10, 2008*

As a *60 Minute* story exposed, and that the VA does not deny, in order for cancer stricken veterans exposed to burn pits to get cancer treatments covered, they must prove that "your cancer was caused by your exposure to the burn pits." To make claim approval even more difficult, the VA has not completed the necessary research to determine if a person can get cancer by being exposed to jet-fueled fumes of toxic waste. The VA further claims that there has not been "sufficient time to make an informed decision." The military started using burn pits in World War II. So, since 1944 there has not been sufficient military research on burn pit exposure as it relates to traceable cancer. As a result of this *Catch-22*, 78% of Iraq war veterans have had their medical claims denied.

Fortunately in Tim's case, he was approved for full VA medical benefits because of his previously documented traumatic brain injury so his cancer treatments are covered. Consequently he is not required to prove his cancer was linked to his burn pit exposure. So, in a way, I guess you can say that Tim's brain injury was a good thing.

The "burn pit" issue is just a symptom of a larger problem on the treatment of veterans in this country.

We've had four presidents, two Democrats and two Republicans, since the Iraq war. And, in this time, both Democrats and Republicans have taken turns controlling congress. Surely Bush, ("a *reformer with results*") Obama, ("yes we can") Trump, ("make America great again") and Biden ("build back better") delivered on better programs for veterans? Surely all the folks and politicians wearing flag pins on their lapel have helped deliver an improved VA?

Well, it turns out, not so much. Let's hear from the Secretary of Veteran's Affairs, Denis McDonough, who was recently interviewed by NPR, on the treatment of veterans.

- "The benefit claims for veterans is a little like a legal game of Chutes and Ladders."
- "We've used jet fuel in burn pits since 1991. And I think it is a failing of the US government that it took until October, 2021 that anybody in that 30 year window has gotten any payment or benefit for any maladies that they suffered. However, people must understand that if burn-pit care were expanded, the volume of patients would create enormous costs. We're still in the process of study."
- "We all have friends who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Almost to a person they tell me it was three months, six months before they felt like they could actually breathe normally again. And so I found when I got here is the existing way of making those decisions (to approve care) was too narrow and sufficiently urgent and sufficiently publicly responsive."
- "Yes, in too many cases, a suicidal veteran who reaches out for an initial psychiatric evaluation has a six month wait for an appointment. The cause of the back log is under investigation."
- "It takes month, even years, to get an appointment at a VA care center in rural parts of the country."

And, of course, this is just the problems that the VA admits. The reality for veterans, and veteran's families is much worse. According to the US Bureau of statistics:

- 80% of combat veteran's marriages end in divorce or separation. This compares to 50% of the general US population.
- The suicide rate for veterans is 31.6 per 100,000. That compares to 16.8 for the general US population.
- 29.9% of veterans have disabilities.

- 1.4 Million veterans live in poverty.
- Veterans are 50% more likely to be homeless than the general population.

Of course it is easy for most Americans to be willfully ignorant to the plight of American veterans; America's heroes. Nowadays most Americans have not served in the military; only 7% of current US citizens are veterans. The rest of us are fortunate sons and grandsons, daughters and granddaughters, of veterans who fought the wars and did their duty to help keep us free.

But this Memorial Day Monday, we'll fly the flag. We'll sing the *Star Spangled Banner* at our athletic events with our hands over our heart. We'll visit the cemetery and remember the fallen soldiers. We'll watch a John Wayne war movie. Barbecue. Have a beer. Watch a ball game. Shop a Memorial Day sale.

Then on Tuesday we will return to our willful ignorance. A majority of us so comfortable in our bubbles, so fortunate in our lives, so shielded from the realities of military service that we don't choose to acknowledge or remember that we sent our soldiers off to fight an unnecessary war. Then knowingly exposed them to the toxins of the burn pits without proper safety measures. Extended their deployments without permission. Provided body armor without proper inserts. Supplied tanks without the necessary bottom plating to protect against IED's.

Then when our soldiers came home, we failed to provide proper mental health services, made it difficult to file medical claims, and rejected 78% of cancer claims from burn pit exposure because of budget concerns.

We do give some of our veterans medals, call them heroes, and Chick-Fil-A gives veterans a 10% discount. So there's that.

Tim Andrews will celebrate Memorial Day like the rest of us; he has certainly earned it. And he passionately wants all Americans to celebrate in the traditional way. It's why he enlisted in the first place, to protect the American way of life.

But Tim will also be taking time to remember the men of Charlie Company, his brothers in arms. Men like:

- **Chicago Mike**, Tim's best friend from the service, dad to Chris, Morgan and Kyle, who was a truck driver for Amoco in 2001 and enlisted after 9/11 because "he felt he should" and "wanted to do something greater for his country than drive a truck."
- **Thaddeus (Shrek) Monholan** from Kansas City, a tank driver, bear of a man, and father of Madison and Gabriel.
- **Sean (Red) Williams**, who suffered the first reported injury of the Iraq war during his tour in Kuwait and "went a little crazy."

- **Lieutenant Culpepper**, at 25 years old, a platoon leader who was “as cool as a cucumber.”
- **Staff Sergeant Smoke**, who was a “father figure and mentor.”
- **Brian Mitchell** from Philadelphia, a big Eagles fan, who enlisted because “he didn’t want to go to college.”
- **“AK” Akinson** from Columbus Ohio, 21 years old at the time, on his 2nd tour of duty, who enlisted because “I never met any girls in Columbus even worth talking to.”

And, of course, on Memorial Day, Tim will be remembering the six members of his unit that died from the IED explosions, including **SFC Alwyn Cashe**. **SFC Cashe** retrieved six Soldiers, and an Iraqi interpreter, from the burning tank, receiving burns on nearly 72% of his body. **SFC Cashe** died on November 8, 2005, and received the *Congressional Medal of Honor* for “conspicuous gallantry at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty.”

You see Tim, and the rest of our veterans, don’t have the good fortune of forgetting the war, forgetting those who served. They can’t and won’t forget the soldiers who came home damaged and were offered little or no support from their government. They can’t and won’t forget the kids whose bright futures became the consequences so much malfeasance.

And in particular, they can’t and won’t forget the soldiers who never came home.

They ain’t no fortunate sons.

**That's all I'm sayin'**

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**If you would like to e-mail Tim Andrews, and thank him for his service, Tim's e-mail is:**

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**If you would like to learn more about SFC Alwyn Cashe, click the link:**

**<https://www.army.mil/medalofhonor/cashe/>**