



A U.S. Army sergeant provides security in the early morning during an operation intended to hinder insurgent activity in Zhari district in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan.

Photo by U.S. Army Spc. Daniel P. Shook

# a soldier finds refuge Christ brings healing after the trauma of war

Story by Carmel Palmer

Staff Sergeant Bobby Frisina dropped to his knees inside his tent. Stationed in Zhari district in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, with the U.S. Army 101st Airborne Division, Bobby's brigade faced daily danger and many casualties. Having returned from a memorial service for three comrades, he needed a private conversation with God. He recalled, "When you're in combat, life becomes very simple. I said, 'Lord, if I'm going to die here, I need to know so I can be at peace until I go.'" He felt God assure him that this was not his time or place to die. He recalled, "I only told my chaplain, but I lived in peace until I returned home."

By that time, 56 soldiers in Bobby's brigade were dead; 170 were amputees. The only South Carolinian in his

unit, Bobby boarded his flight to Columbia alone. The only passenger in fatigues, he walked alone through the airport to his family. As they joyfully embraced him, they had no idea that a new battle was just beginning.

## Home Front

Bobby's father, Pastor Michael Frisina of CC Northeast Columbia, SC, remembers watching 6-year-old Bobby marching beside the West Point parade field, pretending to be a cadet. Raised in a military family with military history on both parents' sides, Bobby's career choice surprised no one. Yet Bobby's sudden deployment caught his family off guard. He began training on Valentine's Day and deployed on his and Stefini's wedding anniversary, leaving her pregnant with their first child.

insurgency," he explained. "My job is classified non-combat, but we're on the battlefield every day, so we experience it like everyone else." No one could be trusted: The villagers Bobby planted crops alongside of one day could be paid by the Taliban to kill him the next. "I called it the 'Wild West,'" Bobby said. "Once, while the police were interrogating a 15-year-old insurgent, he looked up at me; I was shocked by the depth of hatred in his eyes for someone he didn't even know. I've never seen hatred like that."

The Frisinas shielded Stefini from the severity of Bobby's situation in Afghanistan but were very aware themselves. Skype conversations were interrupted by mortars; communication dropped off suddenly during dangerous missions. On Christmas morning, Sue received a video clip in her email and opened it expecting Christmas wishes. Instead, a man in Bobby's unit had uploaded helmet-cam footage, and amidst explosions, screams, and gunfire, she was shocked to glimpse Bobby's face. "Often, Michael and I would wake up from the same dream," Sue recalled. "We were kneeling before God's throne begging Him to bring Bobby home safely. I remember telling Him, 'Lord, I know You gave Your Son for us; I just can't give You mine.'"

*Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.* PROVERBS 13:12 (NIV)

Stefini confessed, "Having my first child without Bobby had been my biggest fear. We learned Bobby was deploying shortly after learning I was pregnant. It wasn't easy." During Bobby's deployment, difficulties abounded—she had to euthanize his beloved dog; she injured her hand; lightning struck the house while she was on vacation, so she returned, eight months pregnant, to a refrigerator full of rotten food. She related, "Being married is supposed to mean you have a partner with you through these hurdles in life, a shoulder to cry on. But those hard days strengthened my walk with the Lord. I had to rely on Him to walk through this with me, knowing He was there even though Bobby was not." In the end, Bobby's 15-day pre-scheduled leave aligned miraculously with Maggie Ann's birth. Their

Bobby's mother Sue related, "We were blindsided. I'd been a military wife for 20 years, but it's quite different when it's your child in danger. It stretched the limits of our faith."

Bobby worked in Civil Affairs for the Army, rebuilding infrastructure and helping restore society. "We work to create a stable environment because instability breeds

**"I went willingly for my country; I would still go. The important thing is that wherever I go, Christ is at my side."** Bobby Frisina

brief time together made Stefini anticipate his homecoming from deployment even more. When it finally arrived, Stefini admitted, “I was so ready for us to be a family; I thought it would go seamlessly.”

### A Gradual Homecoming

The changes in Bobby were so subtle that it took Stefini a while to realize he wasn't fully back yet. “It's not like he returned an angry, awful person,” she said, “I was so excited he'd come home, it never occurred to me it might be hard for him. I had no idea what he'd faced, and he didn't know how to tell me at first. It came out bit by bit in his comments—he didn't like being around large groups of people; he felt weird not carrying a gun. Bobby had always been great at switching between Army mode and home mode. I gradually realized he was stuck in Army mode; he couldn't switch it off.”

“To function in Zhari,” Bobby said, “I'd had to become emotionally numb. When I returned, I allowed myself to feel again. Reliving all those memories was worse than when they originally happened because I was no longer numb. Post-traumatic stress (PTS) manifests in a multitude of ways for different people. For me, it's hard to describe. I had missed my wife and daughter so much, yet I felt so ‘un-normal’ that if the Army had offered to deploy me again, I would've gone. I'm not the only veteran who's felt that way. It's not that we're not happy to see our families or be in our churches. We just feel uncomfortable in our own skin. Combat flips your life upside down, then suddenly you're back in ‘Normal Land.’ The lack of chaos feels weird.”

*I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust.”* PSALM 91:2

Overseas, IEDs—homemade bombs—were a constant threat. Bobby related, “They were so well hidden that if you found one, it was usually because it blew up.” Once, a soldier who switched assignments with Bobby was killed by an IED. The memory haunted him. A few months after returning home, Bobby was rounding a corner on a

neighborhood run when he glimpsed a wire sticking from the ground. He dove to the grass, bracing for the explosion. It took a moment to remember where he was and to realize the wire wasn't from an IED but a path light on the suburban lawn.

Bobby's father, Michael, whose medical and military backgrounds uniquely equipped him to help his son transition, explained, “God designed the human brain so that when you face threats repeatedly, you don't think—you just respond. That split second can save your life. Realigning those pathways to normal takes a long time. You must recognize what triggers your body's fight-or-flight response. For Bobby, we learned, it was wires.”

Michael continued, “Before, Bobby's theme song would be, ‘Don't Worry, Be Happy.’ Now he could be quick-tempered; I walked on eggshells around him. Soon after coming home, he started working with me in our church and business. Having experienced some of the same things to a lesser degree, I coached him on how to respond. Our daily time together was like informal counseling.”

Bobby added, “Having a strong community in my natural and spiritual families was crucial. The best thing I did was go to church. They pointed me toward Jesus when the Veterans Administration could only offer a prescription. My faith was the grounding point that allowed me to re-immers in society. But it takes time.”

### Healing Process

Talking is a necessary part of PTS rehabilitation,” Bobby stated. “But I'd been through terrible things I didn't want my family to pity me for or have to experience.”

Stefini expressed, “I felt shut out and helpless. I'm supposed to be his helpmate, but there was no way I could help him. All I could do was pray.”

After six months of struggle, Bobby met U.S. Army Chaplain Jeremy Lytle while serving with the Army Reserves. “He'd seen combat; he knew what it was like,”

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Bobby Frisina

Bobby recalled. “He assured me this was normal. That was what helped most.” Over many visits, he helped Bobby wrestle through his survivor guilt. “If I'm a Christian, I have to accept God's sovereignty. I must trust there is an outcome ahead I don't see; believe in Who He is even when I don't see His reasons. Chaplain Lytle also helped me realize that those who died would want me to make the most of every day.”

“When the Lord provided that chaplain for Bobby, I felt hope again,” said Stefini. “Healing was starting. He began sharing small things with me.”

Eventually, Bobby related, “I was done talking. I'd lived through it and was ready to move on. But I was held back by the duty I felt to the fallen. If I stopped reliving everything, I felt their memories would fade and I would fail them. Chaplain Lytle told me that it was okay; I could close that chapter in my life and not dwell on the past.”

Michael asserted, “God's Word teaches that it's not what happens to us that matters, but how we respond. War changes you. But though you're scarred, there's healing; though there are memories, they don't have to control you. Romans chapter 12 tells us to renew our minds. If you focus on your hurt, you'll stay broken; but by focusing on Christ, you can live abundantly.”

*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*  
ROMANS 12:2b

Slowly, Bobby's loved ones saw the man they knew re-emerging. He began taking up old hobbies. His tense stance relaxed. On a family beach trip, his parents were delighted to hear his infectious laugh again. Sue explained, “Peace returned slowly. It was almost imperceptible in

process. Like a flesh wound you look at one day, and then the next, and it's hard to define what changed. The day comes, though, that you look for the wound and it's gone.”

One Saturday morning a year after returning, Bobby woke up and made coffee. Standing in front of the coffee maker, he related, “I had this sudden consciousness, *This is home. This is where I'm supposed to be.* I immediately told Stefini.”

Four years later, “There are still hard days,” Stefini said, “Every Memorial Day, while others grill out, Bobby remembers those he knew who sacrificed everything. But now that I know what he's feeling and what to expect, I can be there to support him.”

Bobby concluded, “Until Jesus returns, war will be part of the fabric of life. I went willingly for my country; I would still go. The important thing is that wherever I go, Christ is at my side. He's better than therapy or a plethora of medications, and on good days and bad, He is always faithful. He saw me through on the battlefield and when I came home.”



God has brought healing to the Frisina family.