THE GOD SHOT
Can a single injection save thousands of soldiers suffering from severe PTSD? An Afghanistan combat vet goes under the needle to find out if there really is a cure for war.

I would be pissed I didn’t get this shot earlier if I weren’t so grateful I got it at all. I haven’t been quite right since the war, posttraumatic stress and all. Nothing I did in seven years of trying to get back to normal—therapy, meds, madcap schemes—really helped. It turns out a big part of the cure was under my nose the whole time. Well, six or seven inches under my nose and a couple of inches back and to the right, in a cluster of nerves by the spinal column called the stellate ganglion.

Two injections of a couple of local anesthetics—lidocaine, the same thing dentists use, and bupivacaine—into that part of the neck and I was pretty much back to my old self.

Dr. Eugene Lipov, the man who administered my shot and who has pioneered the use of the so-called stellate ganglion block for PTSD, tells me the Navy SEALs call it the God shot. Well, SEALs have their sea stories. Here is mine.

I came back from Afghanistan in the spring of 2007, developed insomnia that was eventually diagnosed as PTSD in 2008 and every few months for the next five years had either a major legal or psychological issue—the kind that led to hospitalization or jail time. As hard as I had to fight in Afghanistan, I had to fight doubly hard to get here, a place where I’m celebrating two years without getting locked in a loony bin or a cell.

During my 16 months as a U.S. Army combat infantryman in Afghanistan, the enemy lived outside the wire and had no face. He hid in plain sight and used IEDs or indirect fire. Back in the States, the enemy also hid in plain sight. The thing is, he wore my face and occupied my brain. This isn’t a war story. This is a postwar story.

Let’s break it down by the numbers.

America has been at war for more than 14 years since September 11, 2001. This is the longest war in American history and the least debated. Most of the U.S. isn’t really at war. It is spaced out in front of glowing rectangles. At any given time, only about one half of one percent of Americans are in the military. That’s about the same number who identify as New Age or Hindu. This number includes all members of the military—from stateside desk jockeys to food-service workers—and most are serving in soft jobs, whether or not they’re deployed. The infantry makes up only 15 percent of the Army, by comparison, older people make up 14 percent of the general population.

Of post-9/11 veterans, 20 percent suffer from PTSD. Only 50 percent say the war in Afghanistan was worth it. And in 2012, 45 percent of the 1.6 million veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq applied for disability benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

“The mental health of our troops is very much a national security issue,” says Dr. Elspeth Ritchie, a former military psychiatrist who held the top mental-health job in the Army. “If we don’t take care of our veterans, people aren’t going to want to sign up and join the military.”

Of the approximately 2.7 million Americans who have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, 7,000 earned Combat Medical Badges, 78,000 earned Combat Infantry Badges and 121,000 earned Combat Action Badges—signifying that these soldiers have faced a degree of...
funeral—in fact, the guards I would have spent more thought I was a lawyer and were about to call in a warrant on me for not checking myself into jail. That was an odd experience.

The next few days are spotty, but I know for sure that I got arrested twice in two days at Reagan airport for being drunk. For running out on a bar tab, I was charged with defrauding an inn and she helped me more than I deserved, bringing my own experiences and what I know from the movies. So what happens when they come home? I can only go by my own experiences and what I know from the movies. I showed up on a childhood friend's doorstep, and she helped me more than I deserved, bringing me in for a few days. It was Baddr who turned things around. He did it. My friend Charlie killed himself a year ago, and he was a trained killer, and I couldn't even manage to tempt him. I was telling the truth. I didn't get it then, but I should have gone back. I didn't get the shot then, but I should have gone back. I didn't get it then, but I should have gone back. I didn't get it then, but I should have gone back. I didn't get it then, but I should have gone back.

For a long time, though, I wished my attitude had been different, but they still train officers in the military to kill themselves. I tried to flip the truck into a river, but that hadn't been successful. Here I was, a trained killer, and I couldn't even manage to tempt him. I was telling the truth. I didn't get the shot then, but I should have gone back. I didn't get it then, but I should have gone back. I didn't get it then, but I should have gone back. I didn't get it then, but I should have gone back.

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He holds up a medical demonstration skull. Lipov asks if this second injection feels any different. "Why?" Kris asks from behind the camera. "What's in your head?" "Lipov croons in his white hospital blanket. "Matt, it's a leading question, but the narrator inside me feels set apart. Priestly, perhaps. I had car trouble. That's a distinction, one that makes me feel separate. Not isolated. Separate."

I felt possessed of some special knowledge, essential to life, that these nerve fibers were pointing at me. It made me a little sad. That's true. But mostly it just made me feel separate. Not isolated. Separate. I brought the show. This whole thing is meta, an out-of-body experience of watching rough-cut video of myself. I watched these kids. They were rich kids. Not my class. They looked at themselves this close. It was a start. I was capable. I was able to tour the museum's German submarine展厅. I followed a bunch of kids dressed in 1925 German military uniforms and studied how I felt. I was sad. I missed my brother. I was angry he was dead. But I wasn't myself. I wasn't in my body."

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