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Sakura Sunagawa¹

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¹Third-year student in cross-cultural studies

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Hidden Effects of War Revealed: An Interview with Matthew Hoh

Sakura Sunagawa
Okinawa Christian University

This interview is the second in a series on *Surviving War and Surviving Peace*. It comes from an interest in the effects of war on survivors called upon to carry out orders to fight. The suicide statistics for veterans who are called to war and survive to return are tragic, alarming, and appalling. Who should be responsible for these effects? Why are so many people affected by the poor decisions that leaders make, and how can we remake the world where people on both sides of war can live in peace? These and other similar questions motivate my studies and this interview with a survivor. To help address these concerns, the interviewer, a research student in Okinawa, engaged with Matthew Hoh, a veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars a current member on the Advisory Board for World Beyond War.

war | Iraq | Afghanistan | battlefield horror
Okinawa | militarization | PTSD | recovery

Sakura Sunagawa: As you know, Okinawa remains as a place that lives with the past traumas of war. Older people still remember the horrors of the battle and the years that followed with the occupation of the main island and surrounding smaller islands. They remember the local struggle for land rights in the face of military men with bulldozers making way for new bases. As a young woman researching these ongoing effects, I see how the past has affected me. When you were a youngster, maybe high a school or college student, did you ever imagine that you would be going off to war? Did you imagine that you would be fighting in the Middle East?

Matthew Hoh: When I was in my final year of high school, the US fought in the Gulf War in 1991 against Iraq, something I was very opposed to at the time. A couple of years earlier, the US had fought in Panama, and throughout the 1980s the United States was involved in some kind of combat at different times with Iran and Libya as well as in Lebanon. Additionally, the United States was heavily involved in the wars in Central America. So, by the time I got to college in the fall of 1991, I well understood that the United States was a nation that was consistently involved in war. This continued throughout the 1990s with combat in Somalia and in the Balkans.

I joined the Marines in January of 1998. I had graduated college in May 1995 and I worked for a little more than two years in finance. Even though I had opposed the war in 1991 against Iraq, I was bored with the work I did, and I wanted to do something that was bigger than myself. I wanted to be of service, and I also wanted to test myself and have a life that was full of serious, and possibly dangerous, responsibilities. I knew that fighting and going off to war was possible; however, I didn't think wars on the scale of Iraq or Afghanistan would occur.

I thought that more likely the wars would be limited and quick, like most of what occurred in the 90s. I was obviously very wrong.

SS: How did you feel when you were ordered to go off and fight? I am interested in the reaction you had in your gut.

MH: I didn't get to Iraq until May 2004, so the war there had been occurring for 14 months already. The war also had been increasing in its intensity over the previous months, so I well understood the danger of what I was getting into. The night before I went into Iraq I was in Kuwait. I was scared, but not necessarily scared of being killed or hurt, I was scared of failing, of not being able to do my job or of taking care of the people around me. There was also a fear of not seeing those I loved again, including my dog, but after I got into Iraq that fear evaporated.

I know others have felt the same way. Certainly when you are being shot at or when you have been attacked by a bomb there is a great fear that hits you right away. However, that fear is rather instantaneous and you quickly act in the manner in which you have been trained. You sort of go numb and you act in a way for which you have prepared. You also have a lot of adrenaline going through you, and that helps. If there is any fear in that moment when you are fighting, it is a fear of failing or letting down others and that fear helps motivate you to get through what otherwise should be a terribly scary experience.

After the fighting is over and the danger has gone away, I would get tired and the thoughts of what had occurred that day would be sobering. We were usually so busy, though, in Iraq and Afghanistan that we didn't spend much time thinking about what had occurred, because there was usually something else to do right away. Without that constant level of activity, it probably would have been very difficult to cope with what we were experiencing.

Now when I got home from the war, and I wasn't so busy, thoughts of what had occurred were more prevalent, emotional, and forceful. It was also upon returning home that I really began to doubt about whether what we had done in Iraq was right and just (it was not), and I had to grapple with the moral consequences of what I took part in.

SS: So that younger people like me and my friends can understand better what war is about, can you open up a little bit and tell me about the most memorable experiences you had?

MH: I spent more than two years at war, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, so there were lots of experiences, some good, some bad, some very terrible. I made a large number of close friends both Americans and Iraqis, although many of my Iraqi friends were killed after I left. For that reason when I got to Afghanistan, I didn't make friends with any of the Afghans I worked with or came to know.

It's hard for me to speak about certain experiences - I have a very deep pit in my stomach right now as I type this.

I can tell you generally that what was constantly occurring was savage and brutal. Innocent people were killed over and over again, often while just trying to do their shopping or taking their children to school. For the most part, there was nothing joyful or pleasant about what was happening on a daily basis in Iraq when I was there in 2004-2005 and again from 2006-2007 or in Afghanistan in 2009. People were scared all the time and there was a sense of hopelessness unlike anything I'd ever seen before; I hope I never see it again. This fear and hopelessness you would see in the eyes of the Iraqis and the Afghans.

SS: What were the people like where you found yourself in this fight?

MH:: Aside from being scared and hopeless, the people of Iraq and Afghanistan were often very gracious and generous. Hospitality is a major aspect of Islamic as well as Arab and Pashtun cultures and even though the war was so destructive and terrible, the majority of the people tried to remain kind and caring.

That's not to say the people where I was in both Iraq and Afghanistan welcomed our presence; they did not. Nobody wants to be occupied, and the invasion and occupation of both countries brought immense suffering to the people. Nearly every family had someone killed, or at least had a neighbor or close friend killed, so the war was very damaging and very hurtful.

The people were just like the people where you live in Okinawa, and they acted in the way you and your family would act if the same experience was to befall you. I think if you were to speak with any of the survivors in Okinawa of the battle in 1945, their experiences, particularly as they pertain to their emotions, would be similar to what the people in Iraq and Afghanistan would tell you.

SS: After you returned from battle, how did you cope? How did war affect you and your reintegration into civil society?

MH: I returned three different times from war. The first time, from Iraq, in 2005, I was angry and upset about the war. I thought the war was a mistake, but I also thought we weren't doing enough to stop the war and help the Iraqi people. I also had problems with loud and sudden noises, I didn't like being in crowds, so I had to have my back to the wall at all times, etc, I was experiencing PTSD even though I didn't know it.

My second time that I came home, in 2007, again from Iraq, I drank a lot to deal with what I had done and seen. I had trouble sleeping and had incredibly bad nightmares. I developed really strong feelings of guilt and regret. I didn't get help for these problems, so I became depressed, and I relied on alcohol to get me through each day. By 2008, I was suicidal over the guilt I had.

When I came home from Afghanistan in 2009, I began drinking heavily again and the thoughts of suicide returned (when I was in Afghanistan these problems disappeared). The PTSD was still there, of course.

Finally, in December 2011, I went and got help for my problems. I stopped drinking, went to therapy and got on medication. It still took years for me to stop having thoughts of suicide because of the guilt I felt (a problem called moral injury).

Unfortunately, in 2014, symptoms of traumatic brain injury began to surface; just as I was having real success getting past my PTSD, depression and moral injury. So, I now have to live with the brain injury (most likely it is due to being around so many explosive blasts). As a consequence, I take between 19 and 26 pills every day, and I am only 45 years old. I also have not been able to earn a paycheck since 2015, and I rely on government disability payments to survive.

In the Bible, it says "those who live by the sword, will die by the sword." I think if there is anything that you and your classmates should understand about going to war, it is that adage. I've tried to live by peace and work toward a world in which war is no longer the way to solve differences. Veterans for Peace and World Beyond War are involved in these efforts.



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Concluding Thoughts

SS: This interview has changed my feelings about war and veterans in so many ways. Before my investigations, I hastily judged people who join the military and participate without much thought about war and in enacting state violence against largely defenseless nations. I learned from this series of interviews that people join the military for various reasons, not the least of which is to do something helpful for their country, to do something "bigger than themselves," as they say, not because they seek blindly to defeat some perceived enemy that their leaders vilify.

One part of me blamed the military for carrying out orders to fight in what clearly seems like unending war. Engaging in interviews with survivors has helped me, a young person interested in the way to peace, to feel shame for my hasty preconceptions. Survivors leave the battlefield, but the battlefield and its horrors do not leave survivors.

I hope this interview, in the series, changes the preconceptions of young people and to deepen empathy for victims on all sides of conflict.

Biographical Summaries:

Matthew Hoh is a former U.S. Marine officer and government official who resigned from his position with the State Department in 2009 over the escalation of the Afghan War. Matthew is a Senior Fellow with the Center for International Policy, a Veteran For Peace, and an Advisory Board Member for World BEYOND War. Details can be found at <https://worldbeyondwar.org/>

Sakura Sunagawa is a third-year student at Okinawa Christian University studying cross-cultural interactions in Okinawa regarding the ongoing US base presence. She is interested in the history and maintenance of the present social and economic structures in Okinawa.

