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Katie Dekoker, an Air Force and Army veteran, deliberately placed herself at the end of the table with her back against the wall and her body facing the door. She had a muscular build, blonde hair with pink highlights, red acrylic nails and four large hoop earrings on each ear.

She pressed to know if her name had to be mentioned in the feature, if her photo was to going be displayed, and if the recording would be deleted – she made it clear that her story is not something she normally shares.

Dekoker, 43, was a high-ranking official in the U.S. military. She was honorably discharged six years ago after 16 years of service during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation New Dawn. While she succeeded in the military, she has faced difficulty adjusting to civilian life.

Dekoker described how she became accustomed to the intensity of the military as soon as she arrived at the Lackland Air Force Base in Texas.

“The first day is crazy because you’re grabbing your stuff, and you’re running, and they’re just fussing at you, and they’re banging at stuff. They want to stress you out because they wanted to break down your own personality and then build you up,” she said.

Not everyone dealt with the stress as effectively as Dekoker. Many of her peers couldn’t handle the pressure and quit.

“I was surprised at how fragile people’s minds can be,” said Dekoker.

They key to her success, Dekoker said, was that she set herself apart from the stress of training for war and pretended she was acting in order to not lose her personality.

As a hand-to-hand level three combatant, novice bomb maker, weapons training teacher, expert field medic and high-ranking officer, Dekoker fittingly describes herself as a “badass chick.”

Dekoker was born in 1973 and raised in Virginia to a wealthy family. Out of the five children in her family, Dekoker called herself the “independent black sheep.”

“My brothers and sisters always had their hand out and stuck close to home. I wanted to spread my wings,” said Dekoker.

Dekoker worked several jobs to afford college tuition because she wanted to be independent from her parents’ help, but when she started taking her books to work, she decided to find another way.

As a result, she joined the Air Force when she was 21 to pay for tuition.

Dekoker said she loved serving. Although she had no immediate family that served, Dekoker proudly stated that she was “bred for the military.”

In the Air Force, Dekoker spent 10 years in aerospace medicine. She was an assistant to the flight surgeon and later taught as an academic instructor for medical students in the Air Force.

Dekoker has been in helicopters, small planes and all types of ground vehicles. “You name it, I’ve done it,” she said.

Dekoker left the Air Force at 31 to salvage her second marriage. When that didn't work, she joined the Army.

At first, Dekoker didn't enjoy the Army. She felt like the Air Force provided a better quality of life because it emphasized education. Additionally, she was frustrated that she had to go through boot camp again.

Dekoker was one of the two senior ranking females training among the younger soldiers.

"I was there with the little shaved heads doing the same shit," she sighed.

She moved from the out-of-combat position in the Air Force to the front lines, yet her military success continued.

"I never failed any missions, and I didn't lose any soldiers," Dekoker stated, but it wasn't easy.

"I had to make calls at two and three in the morning to crying mothers who said, 'Promise you'll bring my son home,'" said Dekoker.

Bringing her soldiers home, she said, was far better than receiving any medal.

By the end of her time in the Army, Dekoker realized that she was proud of her hard work and determination. Dekoker said she wasn't sure what to expect from the Army, but she loved it.

"I was like, 'I am never going to be in the Army,' but I also said I was never going to get married and have kids. Now I say, 'I'm never going to win the lottery,' but I need to have more passion with that," she joked.

However, serving in the military comes with sacrifices. Among the other stressors of war, Dekoker experienced homesickness overseas. To serve, she had to leave her two children for 11 years living with their cousins in Virginia without a father.

Dekoker couldn't see her sons for two to four years at a time. When she did, she only had a few weeks to catch up with them. Her son Christian said that he kept a doll with him that he would cuddle with to remind him of her.

Dekoker not only missed her children, but also the greenery. She painted green trees and a blue sky on a rock and kept it in her pocket to stay connected to home.

"You don't see green. There's nothing. I mean there's times where birds would drop out of the sky, it's so effing hot, and I would say 'if animals don't live here why the f- do people?'" she said, slamming her hand on the table.

She would tell herself that it was only geography -- she was there for the right reasons and that she had a job to do to keep her mind straight during tough times.

These difficult times followed Dekoker home. "Freedom's not free," she admitted.

The most difficult thing about war is returning from war.

In her transition back to civilian life, she abruptly came off of the constant state of high adrenaline in combat, returning to sleepy suburban streets and department stores.

"They diagnosed me with post-traumatic stress disorder and I told them I don't have PTSD. I'm not crazy I don't want that on my record. I don't want that. I don't even want that associated with me, but they did it anyway. It took me five years to accept treatment" said Dekoker.

Dekoker began therapy only half a year ago, and it may be a long recovery process, she admitted.

Going back to civilian life can be a nightmare for a combat veteran, she said. Dekoker tries her best to avoid crowds and traffic. Being bottlenecked in groups makes her feel like an easy target for attack.

She prefers to go grocery shopping right before stores close, she parks far away from other vehicles, and she makes appointments at odd hours to avoid contact with people outside of her family.

Additionally, Dekoker experiences great difficulty acclimating herself back into the slow pace of civilian life after experiencing the “go, go, go” mentality of the military.

Dekoker hates the sluggish pace of Oregon drivers, which she said might be because she was in convoys “hauling ass” and had to look out for improvised explosion devices, which are hidden roadside bombs.

“If I’m hit, I’m done,” she shuddered.

“I got really good at compensating with PTSD, but I realized that’s not living, that’s just functioning with a problem. When I finally recognized that I accepted the help,” she said.

Her doctor tries to give her pills to slow her down, but she said it only helps to an extent.

Before war, Dekoker said she was a bubbly person, but when she returned, everyone thought her personality had become abrasive and anti-social.

“Whether you lose your life, you lose time or you lose your character or personality- you lose something... it’s for the patriotism and the love of your country,” said Dekoker.

The most important thing to help with her adjustment to civilian life, Dekoker said, is to stay connected with other veterans after war.

“Now her only friends are other veterans. They’re the only other people she can really relate to,” said her son Christian.

Looking forward, Dekoker is hoping to achieve balance while enjoying life with her family.

“Hopefully I can find me again,” she said.