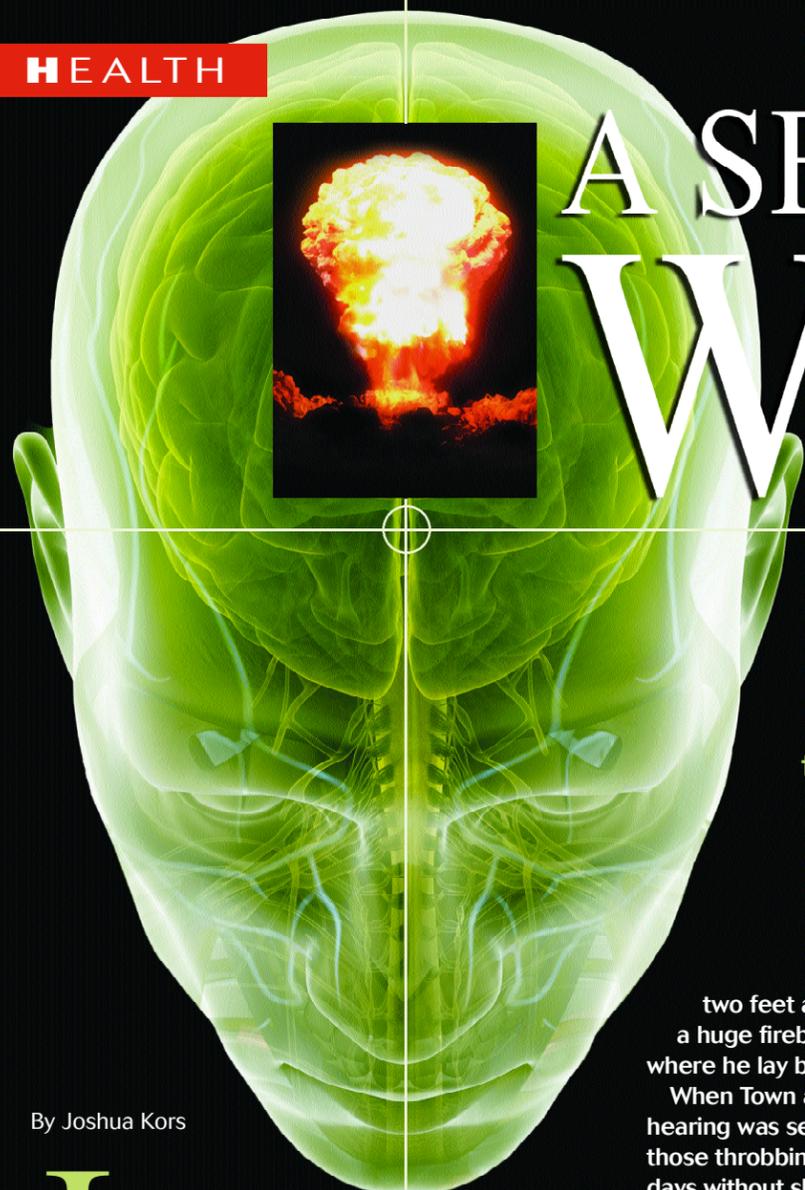


A SECOND WAR



By Joshua Kors

Jon Town sits on the front porch of his suburban Ohio home, nursing a cigarette. With a tired voice and bloodshot eyes, the 27-year-old veteran describes the headache that's been gnawing at him for months.

Town used to be a vigorous, young soldier, a U.S. Army specialist honored a dozen times for his sharp mind and leadership skills. He dreamed of serving in the military for the rest of his life.

That dream evaporated October 19, 2004, the day Town was knocked unconscious by a rocket in Iraq. He was stationed at a base in Ramadi, a city in central Iraq, and was taking his usual walk to Army headquarters to deliver mail. "Suddenly I heard Boom ... boom ... boom!" he says. "I started running as fast as I could." Reaching headquarters, he stood in a doorway, grabbed the door frame, and braced himself. A rocket struck the building

After Army Spc. Jon Town returned from Iraq with a traumatic brain injury, he had to fight the U.S. military.

two feet above his head. The impact sparked a huge fireball and tossed him to the ground, where he lay blacked out in the rubble.

When Town awoke, everything had changed. His hearing was severely damaged. He began having those throbbing headaches. And he started going days without sleep. When he does sleep, he's tormented by gory visions of the battles he witnessed.

Today, Town is still fighting to regain his health. What's worse, he says, is the battle he's also had to fight to get medical care from the U.S. Army.

'EMOTIONS ALL OVER THE PLACE'

Town suffers from *traumatic brain injury (TBI)*, one of the most common injuries of the war in Iraq. It occurs when the soft tissue of the brain is smashed against the inside of the skull, damaging the brain's cells. That damage can produce a host of physical and psychological ailments.

In addition to his headaches and hearing problems, Town is now battling depression and anxiety. The hubbub of parties used to delight him, but now crowds of people make him feel nervous. He doesn't go out much anymore.

Town's wife, Kristy, says that when she married him four years ago, he was "a real goofball. He'd



Jon Town with his family (left) and receiving the Purple Heart for the wounds he suffered during the rocket attack (right)



do funny voices and faces—a great Jim Carrey imitation. When our kids would get a boo-boo, he'd fall on the ground and pretend he got a boo-boo too." Now, she says, "his emotions are all over the place. He'll get so angry at things, and it's not toward anybody. It's toward himself. He blames himself for everything."

When Town returned from Iraq, he was given a job at an Army base in Colorado processing paperwork. But his TBI made even that work difficult. Eventually, his symptoms proved too much to handle, and he was forced to leave the Army.

DENIED BENEFITS

In September 2006, Town prepared to leave Fort Carson, Colo., and return to his hometown in Ohio. He never expected what happened next: His psychologist at Fort Carson concluded that his deafness, headaches, and memory problems weren't caused by the brain injury he'd suffered but were actually the result of *personality disorder (PD)*.

PD is a severe psychological condition. Patients who suffer from it struggle to communicate with others, interact with peers, and follow directions. The condition is so grave that recruited soldiers are screened for PD. Those who have it are not accepted into the Army.

Town had passed two different PD screenings—first when he joined the Army and again before being deployed to Iraq. The sudden diagnosis made no sense to him. "What I wanted to know was, how could a personality disorder cause hearing problems or headaches?" he says.

In the end, though, Town's Army psychologist persuaded him to accept a PD diagnosis and discharge from the Army. Town says the psychologist assured him that if he accepted a PD dismissal, he'd get full disability pay and medical care.

Soon after Town took the deal, he says he discovered that all the psychologist's assurances were

lies. Soldiers discharged with PD can't collect disability pay and aren't guaranteed medical care. "It was a total shock," says Town. "I felt like I'd been betrayed by the Army."

A NEW MISSION

Town is by no means alone. In the last six years, 22,500 soldiers have been discharged with PD. Denying those wounded veterans their benefits is saving the military \$12.5 billion, according to a Harvard study. It's a situation that has infuriated veterans' groups across the country, which have pushed Congress to take action.

Town says he's lucky: After his case was exposed in the media, the military reexamined his discharge and concluded that his hearing, headaches, and memory problems were indeed caused by the October 2004 rocket blast. He is now receiving full disability pay and medical care.

Town now has a new mission: making sure his fellow soldiers aren't fraudulently discharged with PD and denied medical care for TBI. "There are still many, many injured military personnel who have not gotten the right diagnosis or treatment." That, he adds, is an injustice to our wounded veterans. **CS**

