

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF PATRICK SMITHWICK



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1. As a youth, Andrew Smithwick loved creating, whether it was writing stories, building sand castles, or in this case, painting “en plein air.”

2. Andrew Smithwick (C) on the day of his graduation from Marine Corps Boot Camp at Parris Island on Oct. 22, 2004.

3. Andrew with his mother in 2009.



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4. A happy mother, Ansley Smithwick, with her two sons Andrew (L) and Paddy.

5. Andrew Smithwick played on the junior varsity lacrosse team at Boys' Latin School of Maryland in Baltimore.

Searching for Andrew

For the father of a homeless veteran who has been missing for years, Veterans Day is a day filled with conflicted emotions

By Patrick Smithwick

What does the fast-approaching Veterans Day mean to me and to the thousands of other parents who are missing their sons? What does it mean to me, the father of a homeless veteran, that the country will be honoring those who have served in our armed forces—those who survived the wars, and those who died in them?

There'll be television, print, and radio interviews with the last surviving veterans of World War II; interviews with veterans who saw action in the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam; and interviews with families who lost their sons in our more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

There'll be stories about long-lost sons and soldiers who were missing in action, now finally found, as their remains are ceremoniously flown back to the hallowed grounds of these United States. There'll be marching bands and military music—the soaring notes of “The Star-Spangled Banner”—and stunning, gripping photographs of Arlington Cemetery—the long rows of glistening white gravestones foreshortening into the distance.

The news will also feature stories on the lone veteran with his cardboard sign out by the entrance ramp to the interstate (“Iraq Vet. Homeless. Every dime helps.”) or the one who loiters near the center of town, holding his sign (“Help a vet. Give a quarter.”), just a few steps outside the city's gussied-up, glistening coffee shop where fast-tapping patrons pluck away at their expensive laptops and sip their expensive coffee, oblivious to it all.

As Americans watch the broadcasts from their favorite news channel, this wave of sentiment will wash across these “Dis-united States,” and for one weekend we will be “The United States”—no red states, no blue states, but rather, a solid monolith. The wave of solidarity lifting and carrying “our boys” to the forefront of our attention will hit its peak at 11 a.m. on Saturday, Nov. 11—the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, when in 1918, an armistice was signed to mark the end of World War I.

In the present, Veterans Day will be a major milepost for many of us on our ongoing odyssey of experiencing “an ambiguous loss” of a loved one—that loved one who progressed through infancy, childhood, and adolescence, then often, almost immediately, at the age of 18, 19, or 20, entered the military. Young and idealistic, upbeat and positive, strong and

razor-fit from his or her training; they return home from war damaged, with no hope for the present and future. These are the homeless veterans with PTSD.

Some of them can be found begging; most of them don't. My son Andrew doesn't beg. Many haven't been seen by family members. Six years we've been searching for Andrew; he's completely off the radar of our modern American life of surveillance, computer cookies, video cameras, medical files, and digital forensics. He's disconnected from even the simplest transactions with state and federal governments. Andrew, along with thousands of other homeless veterans, won't be celebrating Veterans Day.

How many are out there? On Nov. 3, 2022, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced results of the 2022 Point-in-Time Count showing an 11 percent decline in veteran homelessness since early 2020. Out of the total of 582,000 homeless Americans, 33,136 of them were veterans. This is far down from the more than 70,000 in 2010, which was before HUD and the VA began to reduce the number on the streets using the evidence-based “Housing First” approach. Eventually, by 2022, it had provided more than 40,000 homeless veterans with safe housing.

Progress is being made. Nevertheless, there's no end in sight in our search for Andrew, for our one veteran experiencing homelessness. It's been five years since we last saw Andrew with our own eyes, since I knelt in front of him outside a hospital where he'd just been released from the psychiatric ward while the police circled around us—the lights on their cruisers blinking and flashing. Andrew's sister and mother were crying as we pleaded with him to let us help him, before an officer gently gripped my shoulder and pulled me away.

We push on. Other families push on searching for their one veteran. I've just received an email from a reader of my memoir “War's Over, Come Home: A Father's Search for His Son, Two-Tour Marine Veteran of the Iraq War.” This father explained that his son served multiple tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, steadily rising up through the ranks. Each time he returned home, he was in worse shape, treated his wife worse, frightened his two children, lapsing into violence and depression, showing all the signs of post-traumatic

stress disorder. Finally, he was diagnosed with it and was immediately decommissioned (That's the Catch-22. If you're in the military, seek psychiatric help, and are diagnosed with a mental disorder, then you must leave your livelihood and way of life.). Shortly afterward, he was found dead. The father, on thinking back to his son's death, wondered: Would it have been better if his son had died in battle—his body ceremoniously returned home, his service celebrated—instead of going through the long and inexorable descent into depression, schizophrenia, paranoia?

Not one of us in our family wishes that Andrew Coston Smithwick had been killed in action. Each of us has hope—hope that we will find Andrew and get him help. On Veterans Day, we will be continuing our experience of relentless, grinding away, day-after-day ambiguous loss, a leeching of the soul, versus the without-a-doubt worse experience of a final loss, the final loss: clear cut and absolute death.

We have lost Andrew. Yet, we have not.

As of this writing, he was sighted two months ago. We know that he's alive and healthy, living as a homeless survivalist, somewhere in the Southwest. We carry that image forward, project it on the screens of our minds, for one week ... three ... five ... until it fades and we begin to worry again. Where's my son sleeping? What's my son thinking? Does he remember us? Is he in good physical health? When will this end?

“Andrew,” I call out during an autumn hike at dusk. I am imagining him. I am doing a Marine-forced march with him. “Andrew, where are you?” I call out, sending my voice into the blood-red sky and across the country to New Mexico, where he was last seen. I march lock-step with him. “You can't keep living this way day after day, year after year, into your 40s.” And, I think, “I'm in my 70s. I have less and less time left to find you, Andrew. I cannot, I will not, end this life with you still out there camping on the banks of rivers and pushing your bicycle packed with gear down the city streets of America.”

Veterans Day for our family is a vacuum craving to be filled. A black hole in our hearts. This year, it will be the catalyst for a set of simultaneous and yet opposing emotions: We will be proud of our veterans, on one hand, and positive about the attention that they are getting; but we will be disheartened, dispirited, and having a stronger than usual sense of unease and worry about Andrew, on the other. Veter-

ans Day for us is the bull's-eye of a target that the United States hits with perfect aim every year: the horror of war, and the hole in our hearts that only the return of Andrew can possibly fill.

We can't thank Andrew for his service. We can't sit around the dinner table laughing and joking about good old times, as I did with a group of friends the other night on my best friend's death anniversary. That would be awkward.

Talking about him in the past tense would feel as if we were talking about someone who's deceased. And we don't all have the same thoughts and feelings about the future or about what caused Andrew's down-spiraling descent into depression, schizophrenia, paranoia. Some of us have more hope for his recovery than others, and it hurts when a few friends and relatives out there have none. But it doesn't in the least affect my glowing white ball of hope.

What will Andrew be doing on Veterans Day? Will he even be aware of this national day of celebration? How we wish he could be here with us: shaved, groomed, out of his homeless mufti and duct-taped go-fasters. Tall, trim, handsome, in his dark, olive-green Marine uniform; his jacket perfectly fitted; marksmanship badge on left chest pocket; colorful long narrow ribbon bar above detailing his service to our country: Global War on Terrorism Medal, Iraq Campaign Medal, Sea Service Deployment Ribbon, and Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal.

One day soon, we will have Andrew back. In reality, he won't be wearing his uniform—drawing attention to his years as a Marine isn't Andrew's style. He's a quiet and modest man. I'm fine with his thick red beard, his long, healthy hair gathered into a ponytail, and his outdoor hiking clothes.

“Andrew! Are you reading this? I can feel my arms wrapping around your steel-cage of a chest and joyfully lifting you off the ground.

“Andrew—
“War's over; come home.
“—Dad.”

Patrick Smithwick is the award-winning author of “The Racing Trilogy: Racing My Father, Flying Change, and Racing Time,” and his latest, “War's Over, Come Home, A Father's Search for His Son, Two-Tour Marine Veteran of the Iraq War” (Tidepool Press). He and wife Ansley live in Monkton, Md., and are the parents of Paddy, Andrew, and Eliza.



“War's Over, Come Home, A Father's Search for His Son, Two-Tour Marine Veteran of the Iraq War” by Patrick Smithwick.