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## For Iraq veteran Brian Castner, a war without end

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When first-time author Brian Castner starts his reading Wednesday night at Talking Leaves Books, he could be pretty comfortable. He is used to being the center of attention,

having people watching his every move, in some cases like their lives - or his - depend on it.

Or, perhaps, even though he wants to be there, even though being published is something he has dreamed of - well, it could feel a little weird. Because Castner is still contending with the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Blast-induced Traumatic Brain Injury.

The book signing at Talking Leaves is his first big local event, but Castner, who grew up in Cheektowaga, is in the midst of a swirl of national media attention over his Iraq War memoir, "The Long Walk: A Story of War and the Life That Follows" (Doubleday).

He also is just a few years removed from standing in crowds of Iraqi civilians, picking out bomb parts from the fleshy debris of an explosion, or coordinating the defusing and/or detonation of an improvised explosive device (IED, otherwise known as a homemade bomb). He writes about it like this:

"The boy continued to stare, and the women continued to shriek, and my anger grew with the volume of their grief. Did they think I liked wading knee-deep through their former cousins, sons, brothers, children? Did they not see I was trying to help? ... And will no one shut these women up? The screams never abated, seared through my earplugs, and branded my brain. I noted my rifle again, heavy in my hand. I can shut these women up."

It has been an adjustment.

"I feel saturated," Castner, 34, said last week from his Grand Island home. "I feel like a stereo speaker that's been cranked up to 12 for the last three days" (since his book was published).

For him, it is a good kind of pressure. He is pleased with how the book turned out, and, despite being prepared by his publicist, surprised by the amount and immediacy of the attention. USA Today, the New Yorker, "Fresh Air" on NPR and the Huffington Post all have taken notice of his extraordinary book.

It is disturbing, strong and revealing, getting deep beneath the skin for Castner, who still has daily struggles with what he calls "the Crazy."

"In the darkness of my bedroom, at night, when I try to fall asleep, the top of my head comes off. My chest fills and floats, the ceiling crushes down, and my head cracks open. ... I can feel it release and open. The spider crawls off the back of my head and runs to the ceiling."

Castner was enthusiastic about the military - a 1995 graduate of St. Joseph's Collegiate Institute, he went into the Air Force after earning an engineering degree from Marquette University - and was sure he had found his calling when he went through Explosive Ordnance Disposal school in 2003.

"[The U.S.] had gone to Afghanistan and it went very, very well, and the initial invasion of Iraq went very, very well," Castner said. "The stuff you were going to do was not IED, it was taking care of all this military ordnance that the Iraqi government had ... We were going to get over there and do nothing but blow up stockpiles."

That all changed once the U.S. military found itself fighting a nearly invisible enemy, one whose weapon of choice was explosives hidden in trash bags, buried along roadways or built into a stripped-down car being driven by someone willing to die in his effort to kill others. For the military men and women dropped into these inhospitable desert cities, it was a new kind of war.

"Since there was no enemy force wearing a uniform, there was no quote bad guy," Castner said, "and everyone was suspicious. You were 'turned on' all the time, because you couldn't tell - not from the way they dress, or even how they acted. You would feel like the whole crowd knows [who set the bomb]."

After months, even a couple of years, of such hyper vigilance, it was nearly impossible to turn it off in "the life that follows," hence "the Crazy."

"The things that are dangerous [in Iraq] are incredibly normal," Castner explained. "You don't encounter tanks, but you do encounter [explosive] trash bags. I stopped jumping at fireworks a long time ago. It's the little things that set [the Crazy] off."

And little things are everywhere. "In being a bomb technician, you really have to pay attention to everything - you learn to pay attention to things other people don't," Castner said, "How many legs are on that chair? No one looks at chairs. I do. I can tell you how many legs are on every chair."

Making the decision to start writing about it came later. After three tours in Iraq, Castner left the Air Force and began working as a civilian consultant, training other recruits in bomb disposal, literally picking up where he left off. But he continued to have trouble with focus, with memory and with relationships (but he points out in conversation and in the book that he gives maximum credit to his wife, Jessica, for sticking by his side through all of it).

At some point, he decided to try writing it down.

Since he and his family returned to Western New York in 2007, Castner has exercised his writing chops by blogging for Western New York Media, where, he said, he received a different kind of feedback. "Commenters would tear apart your argument, tear apart your work," he said.

When it came time to try to sell his book - "The Long Walk" refers to the path from where a soldier climbs into a stifling Kevlar bomb suit to the IED he needs to address - he was ready for just about anything.

What he got was an editor, Gerry Howard, who told him he didn't have a war book, he had a story of true literary quality, one for men and women, for serious readers and for people who want to understand what it really means not only to go to war but to come home, and to continue living with it.

"I've learned that Gerry is right about everything," Castner said with admiration. "Now I feel like he's George Martin and he just walked out of the Abbey Road studios and into my garage."

Because of that influence, those who pick up the book will find a compelling blend of inner terror, gruesome carnage, unbreakable friendships and a determined battle against the things that threaten to take over this soldier's life. He gets counseling, he sees doctors, he runs, and runs, and runs, and he does yoga. He spends time with his children, he weeps suddenly and uncontrollably, and, with help from many around him, he soldiers on into whatever is going to follow.

"There's no cure for the things you learn in wartime," Castner said. "There's no pill you take, all the stuff in my head endures. [What matters] is how you look at it."

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Brian Caster will sign copies of "The Long Walk: A Story of War and the Life That Follows" at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Talking Leaves Books, 3158 Main St.; 837-8554 or [www.tleavesbooks.com](http://www.tleavesbooks.com).