

# ShopTalk



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Editor, Mario I. Oña, x4-6803

## Story Behind the Walter Reed Story

**D**esensitized is a word often used to describe journalists. It's a backhanded compliment that praises them for maintaining stoicism and professionalism despite emotional subject matter, but also suggests heartlessness and insensitivity.

Every once in a while though, a story is so gripping that it brings out the best in journalists: the ability

to allow themselves to feel without compromising their craft.

On Feb. 18, The Post ran one of the most scathing, front-page stories about military medical care since the Vietnam era. Reporters **Dana Priest** and **Anne Hull** wrote an exposé on the aftercare for outpatients at Walter Reed Army Medical Center titled, "Soldiers Face Neglect, Frustration at Army's Top Medical Facility." Along with the work of photojournalist **Michel du Cille** and author, editor and journalist **David Maraniss**, it evolved into a series with multiple A1 stories grouped as,

"The Other Walter Reed."

Managing Editor **Phil Bennett** noted that from the start, the early reporting by "two of our toughest and most creative reporters" had "explosive material," but then he said, "I don't think anyone could have predicted the immensity and passion of the response to the stories." From top Army officials getting fired to thousands of e-mails from readers, the response was exactly that: immense.

### How They Got the Story

"It was a very typical kind of story," Priest said. A friend of a friend told her about a few families living "hand-to-mouth" in "really poverty-like situations" at Walter Reed. The initial contact gave a few names and those people provided more names.

"Even though there weren't that many anecdotes [at first], the ones I heard were jaw-dropping. I just sat there—with my mouth hanging open—listening," said Priest.

Almost immediately, Priest teamed up with Hull. Priest recounted, "We started meeting with these families and listening to their stories. I walked away from so many of those meetings saying, 'This can't be true.' And then



The Post's A1 on Feb. 18, 2007, with **Michel du Cille's** stunning photograph of Staff Sgt. Daniel Shannon, an Army sniper whose skull was shattered in a gun battle in Iraq and who lost his right eye and has post-traumatic stress disorder. He is pictured with his son Drake, 6.

thought, 'Wait a minute! This isn't what everyone thinks is going on.' It wasn't just that they were being

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Post reporters **Dana Priest** (left) and **Anne Hull**

PHOTO - BILL O'LEARY

IMAGE COURTESY OF EDDY PALANZO

treated poorly, but everyone thought that we were doing right by soldiers and service members this time around compared to Vietnam.”

Hull, who was interviewed separately a week later, added, “We believed what the White House and the Pentagon had told us for four years, that the soldiers are being given the best care money can buy.” Then she pointed out, “While Walter Reed’s been giving good medical care, they’re not giving good aftercare.”

Hull recalled going into a soldier’s room and looking up through a rotted-out bathroom ceiling and seeing the other room’s bathtub. “We thought, ‘This is going to surprise a lot of people, because everyone thinks of Walter Reed as the Cadillac of Army medical care.’”

Both said that it was important to establish that the problem was systemic and widespread. They gathered as much evidence and anecdotes as they could to ensure that they were not dealing with a case of one soldier “falling through the cracks” or one with a “cranky personality being treated badly,” as Priest explained.

The accompanying photos by du Cille were taken once Priest and Hull essentially had their story. “We wanted to make sure the people I photographed were sure bets and would not be lost in the editing process,” said du Cille.

The three did not conceal their identities to get access to Walter Reed. They went directly through patients

rather than through official channels. Priest said that if they had metaphorically gone through the “front door,” the real story would have eluded them.

“It’s really not that different from how we normally do our job. You present the story you think is there to the government agency and say,

‘What about this?’” she said.

Hull, who had experience chronicling the lives of soldiers and who had spent almost two weeks “embed-

ded” in Walter Reed’s amputee ward after the war in Iraq began in 2003, said that spending time inside the gates of the medical facility (particularly the now-infamous rodent-infested, moldy Building 18, a run-down hotel-turned-barracks) was important in order to witness some of the problems firsthand.

Once they were done with their reporting and writing, they sent 30 questions based on their reporting to Walter Reed’s public affairs office. Maj. Gen. George W. Weightman, commander at Walter Reed, and his staff met with Priest and Hull the Thursday before the story ran. “They addressed every question we had and when it was clear the story was going to be negative, we had a very professional conversation about it,” said Priest. “They were very



PHOTO - MICHEL DU CILLE

*Spec. Jeremy Duncan’s display of the mold in his room became the most significant visual representation of the conditions at Walter Reed’s Building 18. Photographer Michel du Cille called the mold a “metaphor” not only for the conditions at Walter Reed’s Building 18, but for the substandard aftercare that injured veterans are receiving in general.*

responsive to the issues and gave us their best shot at explaining why these problems existed. They thought some of the problems were not as bad as we described them, because they were trying to put the best face on that they could.”

The reporting took approximately four months to complete, in part because Priest and Hull had to gain the trust of injured veterans and their families, who were worried about the consequences of speaking to the reporters.

### Team Effort and an Alignment of Stars

Bennett, who oversaw the project, summed up the collaborative effort: “This is often the secret of great jour-

nalism: put talented people in contact with the right story, and get out of the way.” Priest and Hull formed an ideal journalistic team. Priest, who approached Hull with some questions after she first got the tip, said, “I’ve spent my life digging into government agencies and holding them accountable for the programs they put in place. Anne’s spent a lifetime chronicling the lives of people.” Hull, immediately told Priest that she would “love to team up” for the story. She said that they’re both “lone wolves” and that it is rare for either of them to partner with people. “Dana tends to focus on power and authority and the abuse of it, while I tend to focus on people who are suffering and on the receiving end of that abuse. So this was a kind of a perfect union,” Hull said.

Apart from Priest and Hull, the story had two more heavy hitters: du Cille, who captured the powerful images, and Maraniss, who tightened up the piece with sharp editing. Among the four journalists, they’ve earned four Pulitzers and have been finalists on 12 occasions.

Priest and Hull felt that photography was crucial to the story, but they knew getting great photos would be a challenge. They approached picture editor **Keith Jenkins.**



PHOTO - JULIA EWAN

Post photographer Michel du Cille

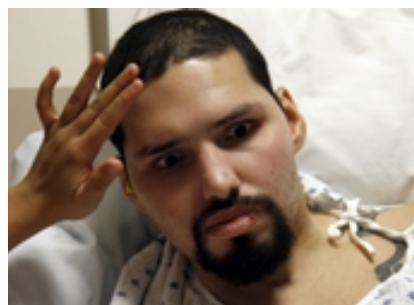


PHOTO - MICHEL DU CILLE

*Michel du Cille said that photographing Spec. Roberto Reyes Jr., a “once vibrant young man,” was “difficult” because it made him think of his 23-year-old son, who serves in the National Guard and may be called up to go to Iraq.*

Jenkins said that du Cille was a good choice because he had spent the early part of 2006 “navigating through Walter Reed for a variety of stories.” Then Jenkins said, “Du Cille’s knowledge of how the place worked and the issue of wounded vets allowed him to be both invisible and to build levels of trust with the subjects that led to some very intimate photographs in the series.”

After determining what Priest and Hull needed, du Cille started taking the photos. He knew photographing Building 18 inside and out was critical and said that mold wasn’t visually a “big deal.” But du Cille and Priest said that the mold had become a symbol for a much bigger problem: how the soldiers were being poorly treated essentially under the government and public’s noses.

Despite having decades of experience shooting grisly and emotionally provocative photographs, du Cille said photographing Spec. Roberto Reyes Jr.—“a once vibrant young man” who was now partially blind, paralyzed and brain-damaged—was “difficult.” “It made me think of my 23-year-old son, who serves in the military and who we don’t know if his name will get called up,” said du Cille.

Maraniss



Author and Post editor **David Maraniss**

PHOTO - BILL O'LEARY

joined the project at Bennett’s request. Though Maraniss, a longtime Post writer and editor, is now writing books, he

occasionally gets called on to edit stories. Bennett said, “David and Anne had worked together in the past with great success, and David—one of the best editors in the business—has written with insight and poetry about the lives of sol-

diers and veterans. He was the ideal editor for this piece.”

Hull added, “David was instrumental in making it have a unified voice. He has a book about Vietnam titled, ‘They Marched Into Sunlight.’ He knows a lot about war and veterans.”

### Aftermath

The story and overall series, which grew as more people were willing to come out and tell their stories, has led to some high-level firings in the Army, hundreds of similar investigations around the country, and an apology by President Bush to the troops, with a pledge to “fix the problem,” when he visited Walter Reed on March 30.



PHOTO - MICHEL DU CILLE

Wendell McLeod, an Army National Guardsman who suffered a massive head injury, in Silver Spring with his wife, Annette. For Picture editor **Keith Jenkins**, who assigned Michel du Cille to the story, this photo had the most impact, because it captured “how alone and out of place these vets must feel.”

Hull said, “The reaction of official Washington was huge: an Army surgeon general [Lt. Gen. Kevin C. Kiley, who resigned on March 12], a secretary of the Army [Francis J. Harvey, who was fired on March 2], the commander of Walter Reed [Weightman, who was fired on March 1]—it was like dominos falling.”

She added that the reaction among readers across the country was “phenomenal.” “We’ve received thousands and thousands of e-mails from people simply saying: ‘Thank you for doing this,’ or ‘Walter Reed is not the only place that has problems—you should see the barracks at Fort X.’” Noting that the story has expanded to encompass the 24 million veterans in the country, she said, “It tapped this huge population of people that is usually neglected.”

Executive Editor **Len Downie** provided some context: “The Walter Reed stories are among the most important accountability journalism we’ve published recently, because treatment of wounded Iraq war veterans is such an important priority for the country and of great interest to readers everywhere.” He added, “The Internet quickly brought the story

to the attention of many, many readers beyond our circulation area, resulting in an immediate and extraordinary impact, which moved the government to quick action and provided us with many tips via phone, e-mail and mail that have expanded our reporting.”

Priest said, “We both were angry and sad. It was definitely one of the more emotional stories that I’ve covered. Of course, you can’t tell anyone that when you’re doing this, so it was good to have each other to talk about it.”

Hull, whose sister-in-law served in Iraq last year concluded, “Writing about the soldiers was so important to us. They march off to serve, come back wounded and who’s their advocate? No one.” ■

### Quick Timeline

- Oct. 2006** – Investigation begins.
- Feb. 18** – Post breaks A1 story.
- Feb. 23** – Defense secretary orders Walter Reed review.
- March 1** – Walter Reed commander fired.
- March 2** – Defense secretary fires Army secretary.
- March 5** – Hearings begin; Soldiers talk; Army apologizes.
- March 12** – Army surgeon general resigns.
- March 30** – President Bush visits Walter Reed, apologizes.

Read entire series at [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com)

**Vince Rinehart, Maurenia Clark and Pam Kendrick** contributed to story.



PHOTO - MICHEL DU CILLE

The Walter Reed hearings took a toll on Lt. Gen. Kevin C. Kiley, Army surgeon general, who resigned a few days later. According to Michel du Cille, Kiley sounded a “bit cocky” at first, but all the “body blows” had worn him down.



## Education Fund for Bill Grant's Sons

Anyone interested in honoring the late *washingtonpost.com* Sports editor **Bill Grant** can donate funds for the college education of his twin sons, Andrew and Christopher. Bill and his wife **Tracy Grant** (KidsPost editor) set up a savings plan and donations will be deposited into that account. Cash or check donations should be sent to **Lexie Verdon** or **Rajiv Chandrasekaran** in the newsroom. Checks should be made out to T. Rowe Price. The Post has agreed to a one-time match for any donations from Post employees, but you do not need to fill out any matching gifts forms. Although this is a big help to a Post colleague, this is not a tax-deductible contribution. Contact Lexie at x4-7458 with any questions.

## New Benefit for Post Newspaper Employees: Electronic Edition Available At No Cost

Soon all newspaper employees will have free access to the electronic edition of The Post, which is distributed by NewspaperDirect. It is an exact digital replica of the home-delivered print newspaper available each morning in the District of Columbia.

This week you will begin receiving a daily e-mail alert announcing the availability and arrival of the electronic edition. A link within the e-mail will open your browser to the front page of our most recent issue. To login, simply enter your Washington Post e-mail address and temporary password - available on *Intranet*.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the service, please contact NewspaperDirect customer support at [thewashingtonpost@newspaperdirect.com](mailto:thewashingtonpost@newspaperdirect.com).

## CommonWealth One Federal Credit Union Notes

- Take advantage of April car sales. Rates as low as 5.49 percent APR (60 months) lowered exclusively for these sales.



- No haggle-no hassle car sale on April 13 and 14 at George Mason University Patriot Center. Get a \$50 Gas Card with pre-approval and purchase.
- Credit Union auto loan network sale during April. Visit [www.cualn.com](http://www.cualn.com) for list of participating dealers.
- For more information visit Hiba Abdelkarim at the Northwest Building branch site or call: 703-823-5211 (x7675).

## EAP Tip Sheet

Laughter and humor are two powerful tools that help people cope and get through threatening situations. Looking at life's situations with a sense of humor and laughter provides perspective and helps keep things in balance when life seems unfair. As part of APS Healthcare's continuing effort to promote the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), a promotional tip sheet titled, "Build Humor into Your Life" is being distributed throughout The Post. Ask your managers, if you would like a copy or email ShopTalk:

[shoptalk@washpost.com](mailto:shoptalk@washpost.com). Remember, EAP is committed to being "healthy together" and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week at toll-free (800) 765-0770.

## PostPoints Opportunities

There are literally hundreds of ways to earn PostPoints, but none is probably more rewarding than getting points for doing something you do anyway: helping out your community! Got to [washingtonpost.com/postpoints](http://washingtonpost.com/postpoints) (you don't need to be a subscriber to register) and check out all the different community service events that will win you some PostPoints:

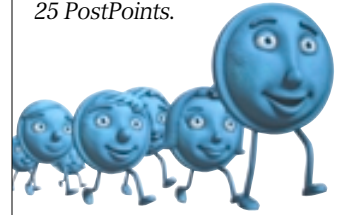
This is just one example:

*The Kiwanis Club of Washington D.C. has been providing support to needy children and senior citizens in the nation's capital since 1917. They will be hosting their D.C. Charter School Beautification Project event in April and need volunteers to assist with school cleanup, painting and minor renovation. For more information visit <http://www.kiwanisdc.org>.*

*On the day of the event please look out for the PostPoints sign showing a code to*

*write down. Then go to "Claim My Points" and enter your code on [washingtonpost.com/postpoints](http://washingtonpost.com/postpoints).*

*Attend this event and earn 25 PostPoints.*



## Walking for Cancer

**Marjorie Bado**, a part-time nurse at College Park's health center will be participating in the Washington D.C. AVON Walk for Breast Cancer on May 5 and 6. The event raises funds designed to find an early diagnosis for this disease that affects one in eight women. Bado is walking in memory of her cousin who died last year at the age of 48, leaving behind a husband and three young children. Bado is looking to raise \$1,800 required to participate. Anyone interested in sponsoring her can do so directly through the website: [www.avonwalk.org](http://www.avonwalk.org). After clicking on "donate" and Washington, D.C., type in "Marjorie Bado" as participant. Contact Marjorie at [mbado007@hotmail.com](mailto:mbado007@hotmail.com).

## Marketplace

**FOR RENT:** Woodbridge (Va.) townhouse: 3 BR, 2 full and 2 half baths, finished basement with fireplace, large deck, patio, fenced backyard, washer and dryer. Security deposit required. Available now! \$1,600 per month (includes cable). Contact Bernard at 703-307-1800

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