

Iraq War Veteran Finds Healing In Singing

By [Alison St John](#)

January 5, 2010

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Above: Christian Ellis is a veteran of the war in Iraq, where he served as a gunner on a Humvee. He is now on disability for PTSD. Part of his healing work is taking singing lessons.



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Photo by Alison St John

Above: Christian Ellis sings scales during a lesson with his voice coach, Enrique Tolar.

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Christian Ellis is featured [in this video](#) with other veterans during a recent fly fishing expedition.

Thousands of young veterans returning from Iraq or Afghanistan are fighting a private war of their own as they struggle to deal with the aftereffects of combat. Christian Ellis, a former Marine undergoing therapy for PTSD, has discovered an unexpected source of healing -- singing.

Sitting on the porch outside of the home of his voice coach, waiting for his singing lesson to begin, Ellis talked about his time in Iraq and his life since he got back two years ago. He's in therapy at the VA Medical Center, and talking, he says, is part of the road to healing.

"It's already been a year," he says, "and I've barely got to the point where I can start talking about some of my issues."

Ellis is 26. He's muscular and clean-cut. His shaved head hardly darker than a five o'clock shadow. His eyes are dark and watchful. Scimitar-like tattoos run up and down his arms. In Iraq he was the 50 Cal gunner on a Humvee.

Ellis had at least one narrow escape from an IED.

"We were lucky," he says, "because had they buried it a foot or two higher than normal and closer to the road, we would have been eviscerated. My buddies looked back, they thought all of us were dead, because the smoke and debris were so high in the air they didn't think anybody would have survived that."

Ellis was physically injured in that blast. But the damage he's dealing with now manifested more than a year after he returned from combat. He suffers from recurring flashbacks that happen anytime -- when he's watching TV, reading a book, sitting in a restaurant or driving. Sometimes smells of burning trigger it.

"Driving, smelling it -- it's like a movie just flashes across my eyes," Ellis says. "I don't even realize it until I'm swerving. My temperature raises, my heart increases, I'm sweating and my body's reacting to it."

Ellis was discharged more than a year ago and is on full disability with a diagnosis of PTSD.

"I've tried committing suicide three times in the past year-and-a-half," he says. "I have buddies that have attempted and succeeded."

But then Ellis rediscovered something he loved before he went to war, something that brought him a new sense of hope: singing.

"I started in elementary school," he says, "because my mom was a big influence. She would sing and I would sing in competitions in high school. Then I sang in college and then after college I was like, 'alright, what now?' So I joined the Marine Corps."

Now, a decade later, Ellis is back to practicing scales.

“Mummy may I buy some M and Ms, mummy may I buy some M and Ms” he sings, working his voice up and down the notes with the piano accompaniment.

His coach, Enrique Tolar is impressed with his progress in the past few months.

“He came here barely able to sing,” Tolar says. “He could just barely phonate and make a sound. So the progress that he’s made has been astounding to me.”

They move from scales to songs -- songs that work on his voice and on his feelings.

“I am on my way, I can go the distance, I don’t care how far, somehow I’ll be strong,” Ellis sings, filling the small room with his voice.

Ellis knows this is about more than becoming a good performer, it’s about finding a dream again, a reason to live. And Tolar is working with him on that dream.

“See if you can send these words out to the universe,” Tolar pushes Ellis. “Or better yet, feel that you are singing to some of your friends in the Marines, yea?”

Ellis has chosen one song that is specially meaningful for him called “Anthem” from the musical “Chess.” It speaks of petty nations tearing themselves apart, but that his only borders are around his heart.

Ellis’s voice relaxes into the final note as the song comes to an end.

After all he’s been through, Ellis says, this song is a pledge to the country he still loves.

Back outside on the porch, Ellis says the singing is helping. “It used to be I would never leave my place, I wouldn’t be able to sleep for three to four days at a time. Now I can sleep for three or four hours at a time, so I’m making progress, small steps, and singing helps.”

Ellis’ VA therapist says the singing seems to be having a healing effect, and encourages him to keep going.

Ellis is going back to college with help from the new GI bill, but he knows his singing lessons are as important as his business classes if he’s going to survive in the future.