

The Long Walk

Music by Jeremy Howard Beck • Libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann
Based on Brian Castner's *The Long Walk: A Story of War and the Life That Follows*

Study Guide to the Opera



An EOD technician in Baghdad, 2004. Credit: Akram Saleh/Reuters — Corbis



CREDIT: Gary David Gold for Opera Saratoga

LEFT: A soldier straps on an 80-pound protective Kevlar bomb suit with a helmet and face screen.
RIGHT: In the Opera Saratoga production, Daniel Belcher (Brian) guards his sleeping sons while Heather Johnson (Jessie) laments the dark place where he is going.

The Long Walk to Safety and to Home

Brian Castner, a U.S. Air Force Officer who was deployed in Saudi Arabia and in Iraq to lead an Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit, would typically use robots and other remote devices to disarm “roadside bombs” planted by terrorist groups. When remote means failed, he would don an 80-pound Kevlar suit and take “**the long walk**” to neutralize a bomb manually. Castner says that “it is an extremely lonely experience; no one can help you.” When he returned to his family in the United States, he again was alone with his thoughts. He struggled to put his war experiences aside and move on, but “the Crazy” continued in his mind. “**The long walk**” also refers to his efforts to re-integrate back into his former life. His August 2012 bestselling book, *The Long Walk: A Story of War and the Life That Follows*, is Castner’s examination of his struggle and his means of understanding what was happening to him.

In July 2012, American Lyric Theater in New York City commissioned composer Jeremy Howard Beck and librettist Stephanie Fleischmann to create a full-length opera. The two



An **improvised explosive device (IED)** is a bomb constructed and deployed unconventionally. Often used as roadside bombs, IEDs are used heavily by terrorists, insurgent guerrillas, and commando forces. In Iraq and Afghanistan wars, IEDs have been responsible for more than 60% of the casualties.

scoured books, movies, and plays to find a story that demanded to be sung and that would hit the “sweet spot” between the introspective, poetic librettist and the emphatic, thrill-seeking composer. They found the perfect fit when Castner’s book was published. Though the soldier was astonished to be asked permission to turn his book into an opera, he consented and welcomed Fleischmann to meet his family. “**The long walk**” could also describe the creators’ three-year process from inspiration to the creation of an uplifting opera about the resilience of the human spirit and the redemptive power of love.

The Long Walk Synopsis

ACT I

A figure runs along the Niagara River in Buffalo, New York. It is Brian Castner, a former Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Captain in the U.S. Air Force. As he runs, he is haunted by memories of Iraq. Brian's wife, Jessie, recalls her grandmother's prophecy: even if her husband returns from combat, the war will no doubt kill him at home. At dinner with his family, Brian is besieged by another memory of Iraq, imagining that soldiers are invading the Castner family kitchen. Brian's son Martin asks his father to read him a bedtime story. Later that night, Brian wakes in terror, and Jessie urges him to get help. The next morning, Brian struggles to get the kids ready for school. Longing to escape the challenges of the everyday, Brian flashes back to his EOD training prior to his service in Iraq, and the brotherhood he found there, "the Brotherhood of the Crab." That afternoon, at his son's seventh birthday party, Jessie urges Brian to try to be present for the sake of the children. Brian struggles to connect with what's happening all around him, and to remember minute details of his family's past, and fails. He retreats to the garage, where he attempts to arm the family minivan in order to keep his boys safe on their way to school. His son Martin finds him there. Brian takes off, attempting to outrun "the Crazy," but is assaulted by a barrage of memories of Iraq, culminating in the moment he came close to shooting a cluster of keening Iraqi women. When the memories fade away, he finds himself back at home, staring into the mirror. He mounts the stairs and then sits, rifle in hands, guarding his sleeping boys.

Intermission

ACT II

Jessie appeals to Brian to seek help, giving him an ultimatum of sorts. Brian descends into another horrific memory of Iraq, one which persuaded him to go home. Brian visits a shrink at the VA, who gives him a diagnosis. Later, at the funeral of a fallen EOD man, Jessie mourns the loss of the man she married. Back at home, the boys sing about their father. The Shrink asks Brian: Why is the war still in your house? At a yoga class for veterans, Brian, faced with yet another Iraq memory, manages to remain in the present. Some time later, Jessie and the boys are playing before Brian's return from a trip. He panics at the airport and phones Jessie, who talks him down. Brian asks her to remind him of details of the family life he's forgotten. They connect over their shared past. The Shrink tells Brian he's making progress. Brian accompanies his son to the Mite Hockey championship. Seeing his son suiting up, he breaks down, flashing back to the memory of one of his "brothers" suiting up to take the Long Walk. He then has another flashback: The men in their Humvee returning from a mission before dawn. A pigeon lands on the Humvee. Back in Buffalo, Brian runs along the Niagara River, through memories of war and present moments of peace, past his EOD brothers, towards his wife and children, and on, into the future.

Time

2010

Place

A ranch house on the outskirts of Buffalo, New York, overlaid by memories of Iraq. Other "home" locales: a running path along the Niagara river, a minivan in the garage, a funeral, a hockey rink, an airport.

Characters

Brian *baritone*

A returned Iraq veteran. An EOD [Explosive Ordnance Disposal] unit captain, home for almost two years now.

Jessie *mezzo-soprano*

Brian's wife.

Their SONS *trebles*

Virgil Age 10
Martin Age 7
Samuel Age 5



SOLDIERS

in Brian's unit:

Castleman *high tenor*
Ricky *lyric tenor*
Jeff *bass-baritone*

WOMEN *sopranos*

Two Iraqi woman
Shrink
Aunt Sarah
Perneatha
Yogini

SPOKEN ROLES

Senior Airman Kory
Staff Sergeant Leaverton
Master Sergeant Vannes
Airport Announcer

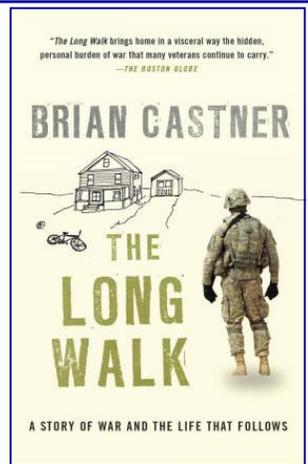
Synopsis adapted from Utah Opera

Brain Injury Glossary

Brian Castner includes this Author's Note in *The Long Walk: A Story of War and the Life That Follows*:

"I served as an officer in the United States Air Force from December 1999 to September 2007. I deployed to Saudi Arabia in August 2001, to Balad in central Iraq in January 2005, and to Kirkuk in northern Iraq in May 2006. This is the story of those events, and the times that came after.

Everything in this book feels true. It's as correct as a story can be from someone with **blast-induced memory lapses**. Nothing was changed to create a moral or to ease discomfort. It's as real as I can make it, though reality and objectivity sometimes have little to do with one another."

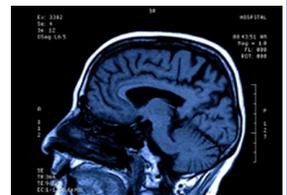


More than two million Americans have served in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Thousands of returning service members carry invisible trauma, many from traumatic brain injury from repeated explosive blasts. Soldiers wear very good body armor and are protected from all but the worst secondary effects of the blasts, so soldiers get hit over and over again. This repeated exposure is comparable to World War I, when soldiers suffered "shell shock" in trench and artillery warfare.

Here is a short glossary to clarify terms and to help understand, respect, and support people who have experienced blasts, traumas, and brain injuries:

Blast-induced neurotrauma (BINT), also known as blast-induced **Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)**, is a debilitating condition caused by exposure to primary blast waves, motor vehicle crashes, or falls. Unlike an automobile accident, explosions send out an incredibly intense shock wave of highly pressurized air that moves at supersonic speeds—the primary blast overpressure. Immediate symptoms of BINT may include brief loss of consciousness, loss of memory, change in mental state, and visual problems. However, veterans who sustain more severe TBIs may, over time, develop:

- Anger, irritation, confusion, or feelings of being overwhelmed
- Attention, cognitive, concentration, memory, motivation, and speech difficulties
- Balance problems, dizziness, headaches, or ringing in the ears
- Impaired decision making, judgment, problem solving, or impulse control
- Sleep deprivation or seizures



Neuropathways are nerve cells that transmit nerve signals to and from the brain. The number of explosions experienced by veterans relates to the amount of lasting changes in brain cells.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event. Fear is a natural reaction and triggers a "fight-or-flight" response. Most people recover naturally, but those diagnosed with PTSD may feel stressed even when they are not in danger, and may experience flashbacks and bad dreams.

Psychiatrist is a physician who specializes in the prevention and management of emotional and behavioral problems with various means, including the prescription of psychotropic medication. **Psychologist** is an academic doctor who works to diagnose, manage, and prevent emotional and behavioral problems.

Sports-Related Brain Injuries caused by repeated head impacts can result in chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), with conditions similar to TBI. Researchers are concerned that young service members and veterans might be at risk for CTE or Alzheimer's, similar to the risk for professional athletes like boxers and football, soccer, and hockey players.

For more information about Brain Injury:

- traumaticbraininjury.net/brain-injury-terms/
- ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3743039/
- ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4633584/
- nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/ptsd/index.shtml
- scientificamerican.com/article/veterans-of-iraq-afghanistan-show-brain-changes
- warrelatedillness.va.gov

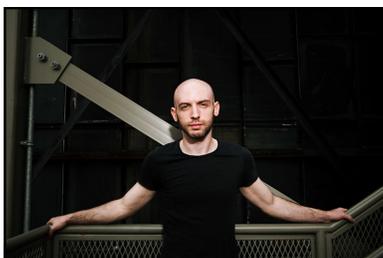
Meet the creators



NOVELIST

Brian Castner wrote the autobiographical book called *The Long Walk*, an account of war during his three tours of duty in the Middle East as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal officer, and the toll the war exacted on the return to his wife and family. He is also the author of *All the Ways We Kill and Die*, a bestselling nonfiction thriller that takes us inside the manhunt for the man who killed his friend in the EOD

“brotherhood.” Castner’s journalism and essays have appeared in prestigious magazines, the *New York Times*, and on National Public Radio. briancastner.com



COMPOSER

Jeremy Howard Beck composed his first opera, *The Long Walk*, with an American Lyric Theater commission. The opera’s 2015 premiere at Opera Saratoga and its performances at Utah Opera

in 2017 were met with glowing reviews. Beck’s music has been described as intense, full of visceral physicality and emotional immediacy, and has been performed nationally at concert halls, conferences, opera companies, festivals, and at NY Comic Con’s Super Week. He studied composition at The Juilliard School with John Corigliano and Christopher Rouse, and at NYU with Mark Adamo and Deniz Hughes. jeremyhowardbeck.com



LIBRETTIST

Stephanie Fleischmann is a playwright and librettist “whose texts serve as blueprints for intricate three-dimensional sonic and visual worlds.” Her opera libretti and music-theater works have been performed internationally. Her MFA is from Brooklyn College. Fleischmann has taught at Sewanee, Bard, and Skidmore Colleges.

stephaniefleischmann.com

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