KILLER HEALER VICTIM

IN IRAQ, NAVY SEAL CHRIS KYLE WAS A WORLD-CLASS SNIPER. AT HOME HE WORKED TO HELP FELLOW VETERANS. THAT MISSION GOT HIM KILLED. BY MARK THOMPSON

CHRIS KYLE HAD SURVIVED FOUR TOURS IN IRAQ AS A NAVY SEAL sniper, shooting at his targets with enemies all around. At the Glen Rose, Texas, gun range on Feb. 2, there weren't supposed to be any enemies—just Kyle, his friend and fellow veteran Chad Littlefield and a 25-year-old ex-Marine named Eddie Ray Routh.

Kyle, 38, was among the military's most accomplished sharpshooters and had become a best-selling author by writing about his time in combat. He had planned the target-practice outing as a way to help Routh as he had helped other troubled soldiers. But it ended, according to the sheriff, with Kyle and Littlefield both shot dead by Routh.

The tragedy of those killings provoked sadness and anger across the U.S., especially in military communities, where Kyle's work on behalf of ailing vets was widely admired. He had used

Photograph by Erik Tanner for TIME

their common experience as soldiers to connect. He'd pal around with them while they'd shoot. "Chris died doing what filled his heart with passion—serving soldiers struggling with the fight to overcome PTSD," says Travis Cox, a former Marine sniper and Kyle's business partner in a security firm.

There are many questions: Why would a Marine return home only to murder one of his own? How troubled was Routh? And with all that the U.S. military and Department of Veterans Affairs are doing to try to ensure the troops' mental health, how could he fall so spectacularly through the cracks? Was Routh, in fact, suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, and will this unfairly tie PTSD with violent aggression in the public mind?

None of those address the central mystery. Kyle was a killer who became a healer. How could he so suddenly be transformed again, into a victim?

The Killer

CHRIS KYLE, THE SON OF A CHURCH DEACON, grew up in Texas—mostly in a saddle. He couldn't decide whether to become a cowboy or a soldier. He eventually became a Navy SEAL even though he hated the water. "If I see a puddle," he told TIME in an extensive interview, "I will walk around it." But Kyle's backwoods training—he loved hunting, fishing and the outdoors—made him an ideal special operator for the military.

Although his first gun was a Daisy BB model, Kyle's weapons grew as he did. By the time he earned the nickname the Devil of Ramadi for his deadly work in that Iraqi city, Kyle was 6 ft. 2 in. and 220 lb. (188 cm, 100 kg), with a very big rifle. "On my deployments, the .300 Winchester Magnum did become my favorite," he said. "If the shot was a thousand yards or more, I would take my .300 Win Mag."

His mission in Iraq was simple: provide what the military calls overwatch protection so the Marines under his gaze could do their jobs without fear of insurgent ambushes. Kyle, who was credited with 160 confirmed kills, conceded he was in the right place at the right time to become perhaps the world's greatest sniper. "I'm not the greatest shot there is," he remarked. "I just happened to be the one that was put in there, got lucky enough to see plenty of combat and been able to take the shots."

One shot, one kill *In Iraq, Kyle became known as the Devil of Ramadi for his skill as a sniper*

Unlike most troops, the goal of snipers is one shot, one kill. They work stealthily, often in pairs, one spotting for the other. "You just view these guys as the terrorists that they are," he said. "So you're not really viewing them as a person. They're out there, they're bad people, and you just take them out and you don't think twice about it."

But Kyle viewed the troops he served with as people—his people—and felt their pain when they went home less than whole. He resolved to do what he could to help.

The Healer

HE LEFT THE NAVY IN 2009 AFTER A DECADE of service. Kyle wanted to re-enlist, but his now widow Taya said she'd leave him if he did. "She was going to take our two kids and go to her parents," he said. "And I could lose my family." Over the course of his deployments to Iraq, he earned a constellation of medals, including a pair of Silver Stars and five Bronze Stars. Back home, he and some fellow vets founded Craft International, a security company. "Despite what your momma told you," its motto reads, "violence does solve problems."

Kyle loved firearms. His Chris Kyle Academy—one of two training outfits he set up—was planning to hold a handgun-training session for local schoolteachers on April 6 to enable them to qualify for a concealed-gun permit. "He wanted to train 1,000 schoolteachers," Tarrant County constable Clint Burgess says. "He loved guns and wanted to make sure people could handle them safely. He was the first to tell you: Guns don't kill."

Kyle also tried his hand as an author. "It's kind of frowned on," Kyle said of his writing. "I'm not trying to glorify myself. I didn't want to put the number [of kills] I had in there. I wanted to be able to get it out about the sacrifices military families have to make." Readers lapped it up: Kyle's book, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History*, became a nonfiction success in early 2012, with nearly 1 million copies distributed.

That led to TV appearances and speaking engagements and let him harness

For veterans, an invitation to go shooting with Kyle was like being asked to play golf with Tiger Woods

his fame to aid struggling vets. Kyle had created the Fitco Cares Foundation in late 2011 with the goal of helping veterans overcome their struggles through exercise—something he had done when he returned home, though he said he didn't have PTSD. He also began taking vets to shooting ranges. "What wounded veterans don't need is sympathy," Kyle explained in his book. "They need to be treated like the men they are: equals, heroes and people who still have tremendous value for society." He saw shooting as a key part of that process.

For a combat veteran, an invitation to go shooting with Kyle—perhaps the world's best sharpshooter—was like being asked to play golf with Tiger Woods. "I can see being on the range being therapeutic and almost cathartic for people back from war," says Rorke Denver, a 13-year SEAL who served with Kyle and whose book, *Damn Few: Making the Modern SEAL Warrior*, will be published Feb. 19. "Hollywood has made the public think that shooting a weapon is an aggressive act and very intense. But to shoot well is completely the opposite. It's slowing your heart rate down, your breathing down, focusing and taking the time to identify your target."

Others aren't so sure a shooting range was the right place for Kyle to take Routh. "It seems crazy," says Elspeth Ritchie, a retired Army colonel who once served as its top psychiatrist, "to bring a troubled young man to a firing range."

The Accused

THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA) reported last year that nearly 1 in 3 vets returning from Afghanistan and Iraq treated at VA hospitals and clinics has suffered from some type of posttraumatic stress. Routh was one of those, according to his family. His four-year Marine stint included a standard seven-month Marine tour in Iraq in 2007–08 as well as a 2010 deployment to Haiti. Back home, he was jobless except for occasional carpentry work. He was in and out of VA facilities over a two-year period, seeking to deal with his worsening mental health, and spent 15 days in jail after a drunk-driving arrest.

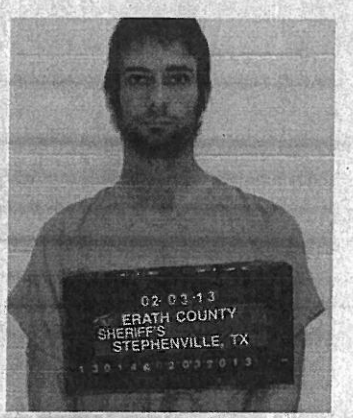
In September, police in his hometown of Lancaster, Texas, apprehended him when he allegedly threatened to kill his parents and himself after his father Raymond threatened to sell his gun. The cops found Routh shoeless, shirtless and drunk. He told them that "he was hurting and that his family does not understand what he has been through."

Routh's mother Jodi reached out to Kyle for help. There was a link between the famous sniper and her troubled son beyond their military service. They had attended the same high school, 14 years apart, in the Dallas suburb of Midlothian. Kyle, friends say, could never say no to a plea for assistance, especially from the worried mom of a troubled veteran.

So Kyle telephoned Routh and invited him to go shooting with him and Littlefield, 35. The trio pulled into the range, in a remote part of the Rough Creek Lodge southwest of Fort Worth, midafternoon on Feb. 2. Precisely what happened next remains unknown. Routh is the only surviving witness, and he isn't talking to anyone, including his family and court-appointed lawyer. Police say Routh killed both men with a semiautomatic handgun shortly after the three arrived. Two hours later, a hunting guide discovered the pair "lying on the ground, covered in blood," according to Routh's arrest warrant.

Routh then allegedly fled the scene in Kyle's big-tired black Ford F-350, a handsome pickup that can cost more than $40,000. Shortly before he was captured, he told his sister and brother-in-law that he had killed the two and "traded his soul for a new truck," according to an arrest affidavit. In a search of his house, police recovered the handgun they believe Routh used.

The Erath County sheriff said "the suspect may have been suffering from some kind of mental illness from being in the military." (Routh in fact remains a member of the Marine Reserve and could be called back to active duty.) The day following the killings, jailers fired a stun gun at Routh after he became aggressive while in solitary confinement. They restrained him and put him under a suicide watch. He is being held on two murder charges and a $3 million bond.



Troubled veteran *Routh is accused of killing Kyle and Kyle's friend Littlefield*

Some say the VA and the military should have done more. "This simply further highlights the dangers of an inadequate treatment system that continues to cost service members, both active and retired, their lives," says Rob Kumpf, who served with the Army in Iraq and Afghanistan and has suffered from PTSD since.

But experts say such violent outbursts are impossible to predict. And a 2012 study found that many things beyond PTSD can set off a troubled vet. "When you hear about veterans committing acts of violence, many people assume that posttraumatic stress disorder or combat exposure are to blame," says a co-author of the study, Eric B. Elbogen of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, School of Medicine. The survey of 1,388 veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq found that poverty led to more reports of aggression than PTSD. Substance abuse and a criminal record increase the chances of trouble. Positive social interactions and jobs tamp down the likelihood of violence.

Post-9/11 veterans are already concerned about a rush to pin the crime on so far unconfirmed reports of Routh's PTSD. "We don't actually know the alleged murderer's mental state or background," cautions Brandon Friedman, who served as a rifle-platoon leader and executive officer with the 101st Airborne Division in Afghanistan and Iraq. "Having PTSD does not signify a propensity to commit murder. There is no empirical correlation, other than what Hollywood portrays."

Still, the tragedy will be difficult to erase from the public's subconscious. Denver, the ex-SEAL, tells himself that his friend's final moments were peaceful. "I'm sure Chris, in that instant, had utter confidence that with another veteran, he was in a safe place and doing right by what appears to be a very troubled young man," he says. "That's what makes it triply sad." —WITH REPORTING BY BELINDA LUSCOMBE/NEW YORK ■

FROM LEFT: HARPERCOLLINS/REUTERS; ERATH COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT/AFP/GETTY IMAGES