

**A VETERAN FINDS  
PEACE AND HEALING**

# On the Range

AFTER COMBAT IN IRAQ, MARVIN FRINK LEFT THE MILITARY  
BROKEN IN BODY AND SPIRIT, OVERCOME BY PAIN AND PTSD.  
BUT HE FOUND UNEXPECTED JOY IN A HERD OF CATTLE—AND  
A WAY TO HELP OTHER STRUGGLING VETS

By **EILEEN FINAN**

**People**  
MENTAL HEALTH  
Let's Talk  
About It

Photographs by **KENNEDI CARTER**

**Standing Strong**  
“I talk to my cattle and tell them how I’m doing. And that helps me come in the house and talk to my family,” says Marvin Frink (at his Red Springs, N.C., farm, May 21).

Marvin Frink is walking through a field of bright green sorghum grass beneath a scorching North Carolina sun. He turns toward a nearby pasture where his herd of black Angus cattle are grazing and lets out a loud whoop in their direction. “Whoo-hoo! Let’s go!” he calls. At the sound of his voice, the cattle erupt in a chorus of moos. Slowly, one animal, then another, and finally the entire herd amble across the field toward Frink, surrounding him. He points toward a few at the front and rattles off their names: Grace, Mercy, Daisy—the last one named in honor of his grandmother. “Once I had someone come here who said to me, ‘Man that’s a lot of beef,’” Frink says, reaching out a hand to pat one of the beasts on

the neck. “But I don’t see them like that. These are my counselors. Cows don’t judge us for what we’ve been through.”

It’s been nearly two decades since the cattle rancher was a soldier, but what Frink went through in his three deployments in Iraq and 16 years as a civilian anti-terrorism specialist still haunts him through nightmares, migraines and bouts of hypervigilance. “We’re not designed to see so much death or to bury friends,” says Frink, 53. “But when you’re in the military, you never want to show weakness. You become callous. And when you get out, it hurts.”

Like far too many veterans suffering from PTSD, he was nearly driven to suicide—every day in the U.S., 17 veterans take their own lives. But Frink discovered what he calls “agri-therapy”—working on the land and with animals as a way of healing the psychological wounds left over from combat. In 2018 Frink bought 42 acres of farmland in Red Springs, N.C., and began raising beef cattle and chickens. Since then, he has opened his Briarwood Cattle Farm—located less than an hour south of the sprawling U.S. Army facility at Ft. Bragg, N.C.—to

hundreds of other veterans with PTSD, sharing his story and his land, hoping to show them that healing is possible for them too. “Farming gave me a sense of purpose again,” he says. “And animals gave me a second chance.”

**The nation was at peace when** Frink, who grew up in Melbourne, Fla., the son of a Baptist preacher father and a mother who worked for a NASA contractor, left college early to join the Army in 1990. But just a few months later Operation Desert Storm began, and Frink was sent to Iraq, where he would return

for two more tours of battle duty, the final time in 2003. Combat-training injuries to his knee and back required six operations and forced him into medical retirement in 2004. Less visible were his psychological scars from indelible memories of atrocities he’d experienced: the faces of fellow soldiers at the canteen who were suddenly gone, killed in action; the



**War Wounds**  
“I was like the lion with a thorn in his paw,” says Frink (an Army staff sergeant, 2004). “I didn’t want anyone to see.”



**Sharing Pain**  
“I don’t have it all figured out, but I know the signs, and I want to help others like me,” says Frink (at the veterans’ event).



**Seeds of Hope**  
“Being with my fellow vets—it’s like I’m home,” says Army alum Rose Jones (fourth from right). “They understand me.”

## HELP FOR VETERANS

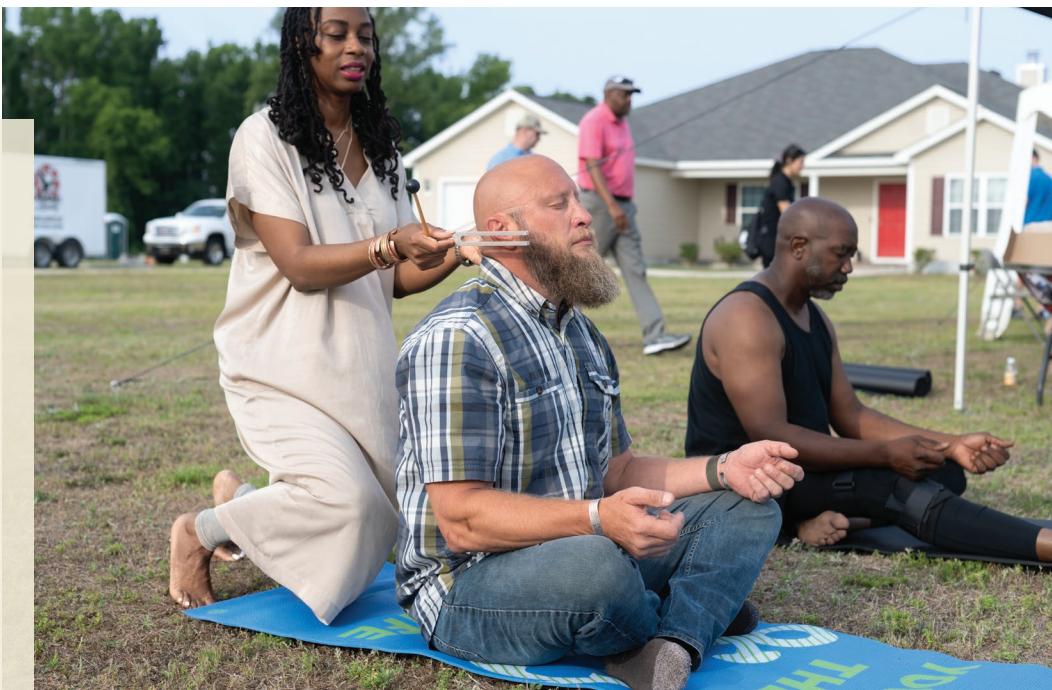
“Leaving the service often means losing a sense of community,” says Tracy Farrell of the Wounded Warrior Project, which partnered with Marvin and Tanisha Frink to host A Day of Healing at their farm for a dozen veterans living with PTSD. “Events like this let warriors know they’re not alone.” It’s a vital message: According to a recent survey, one in four vets say they experienced suicidal thoughts in the past year. Frink hopes sharing his struggles makes it easier for others to talk. “If I’m feeling this way, I know my battle buddies are feeling the same.”



**Building Community**  
Guests on the farm in May listened to fellow vets, mental health experts and agribusiness advisers.



**At Ease**  
Frink and vets including Adam Jeter (center) began the day with yoga, guided by therapist Daphne Fuller (left).



**Rural Benefits**  
“Agri-therapy isn’t a fix-all—it’s a new route,” Frink tells his fellow vets. “This is where I find peace.”



injured animals he saw on the side of the road and couldn’t help because of the possibility that they were implanted with an explosive device; the smell of bodies trapped in burning tanks. “My story is like everyone else’s in war,” says Frink. “It affects you. It sticks with you.”

Talking about it, however, was difficult. “I didn’t know how to ask for help,” Frink says. “I didn’t want to be seen as the weak link.” When he did finally share his struggles with his superiors, Frink was referred to a chaplain and, he says, had to face giving up his leadership duties in his platoon. “It was, ‘Nah, I don’t want to go for that.’”

After leaving the service, Frink stayed on with special operations in Ft. Bragg as a civilian anti-terrorism specialist, a job in which he would “see things, know things, hear things—it was like I was still deployed,” he says. “I was angry all the time, but there was no one to vent to.” Frink’s marriage began to fall apart, and he thought often about suicide. “I felt like I was failing my family,” he says. “I wanted to go back to deployment. You want to put yourself in harm’s way, because that’s where I thought I belonged. I felt if something did happen, it would look as if it was just all part of war.”

**In 2011 Frink confided in his mom,** Minnie—“I was too embarrassed to call my dad,” he says—but it was his father, Rev. Kirby, who immediately responded and told him to come to Florida for the weekend. When he arrived, his dad took him to a cattle ranch owned by a family friend who was also a Vietnam vet. As a boy, Frink had loved visiting farms and rodeos with his dad, who was the son of sharecroppers, so it felt like returning to a happier time. “He spun me around to what I was attracted to as a kid,” Frink says.

Late in the afternoon of that day in the countryside, the farmer told Frink to fill up the troughs in a field with bags of feed. As he walked toward the animals, he recalls, “all I saw was a cloud of dust and a herd of mama cows running at me.” He spread feed pellets around the base of an oak tree and sat on the grass to watch as the cows lay down and chewed their cud. “They looked like they were talking to me,” he says. “And that’s when the therapy began—I started talking to them, and the next thing you know I was feeling better.” When Frink returned

**‘I DIDN’T KNOW HOW TO ASK FOR HELP. I DIDN’T WANT TO BE SEEN AS WEAK.’**

— MARVIN FRINK

to his parents that evening and described his day, his father looked him and declared, “Now, that’s my son. I haven’t seen you smile in a long time.”

Encouraged by his father, Frink began making plans to open his own cattle farm. But just a year later, his dad died of cancer. (He lost his mother to COVID in November 2020.) Frink persevered and leased an abandoned house and several acres near Ft. Bragg and began to grow his own food and raise a few animals. “I’d have friends from the units come out to the house, and we’d chop it up with each other—that’s what we’d call conversation. They’d help out with projects I couldn’t do alone. That was their therapy,” he says. “I found the key to PTSD is in my hands. As long as I can keep my hands busy, I’m okay.” By 2016 he was divorced and living on the farm when he met his future wife, Tanisha, who drove her son, then a high school senior, to interview Frink for a school project about PTSD. “I pulled into his driveway and said, ‘Are you Mr. Marvin?’ and we’ve been together every day since,” says Tanisha, who married Frink in 2019. “God is good.”

By 2018 Frink had purchased the land for Briarwood Farm—named after his former Florida neighborhood—where the couple, who have a blended family of six children, now live. Frink deals with the fact that he’s raising his cows for beef by making sure they’re treated compassionately to the end. “They are loved,” he says. At the processing plant, “I walk the floor so I can see what they will experience or my animals won’t get off that truck.” Soon Marvin and Tanisha were welcoming busloads of veterans from the Wounded Warrior Project on visits to the farm to talk about agriculture—and mental health. “I’m from the city, and I had never seen cattle before,” says Tanisha, 45. “But when Marvin speaks, you can feel his love for the land and for the animals. Anyone who comes here and speaks with him leaves wanting to be a cattle rancher.”

This past May the Frinks hosted a dozen vets with PTSD for a day to share their mental health journeys and connect them with resources. “I’m going to totally open myself up to you. I’m going to give you my everything and be vulnerable,” Frink told the crowd before relating his story. It was, he says, a moment of unburdening. “It was very scary, but I want to move forward, to drop this stuff out of my backpack because it’s just too heavy. I’m tired of carrying that weight.”

For 46-year-old Marine vet Gina Singleton, who has faced major depression and PTSD, it was a powerful experience. “When I came out of the military, I didn’t feel like I could connect

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**United Front**  
“Whatever he shares with me, there’s no judgment. It’s ‘I love you no matter what,’” says Tanisha Frink (with husband Marvin on their farm). “All of his good qualities outweigh the PTSD and anxiety. We get through that. God gives us patience and empathy for each other.”



with people,” she says. “Everything I deal with is internal. But being here is relaxing.”

At the entrance to Briarwood Farm, Frink has planted two palm trees, reminders of his home state of Florida, and of Frink’s father, who once told him, “Son, I want you to be like a palm tree—tall and just and upright.” Palm trees are deeply rooted—they “bend, but they do not break,” as Frink likes to say. The farmer admits he still has days when he feels overwhelmed and tested, bent over with anxiety. “A ‘spiritual attack’ is what we call it,” says Tanisha. “He’ll be so hard on himself. But I give him space, and he’ll go out and talk to the animals, and then he’ll come in, and we’ll talk, no judgment. I’ll let him know everything is not always going to be perfect.”

Some nights, she says, her husband’s nightmares are so gripping that she needs to wake him. “He’ll be out of breath, his eyes are red, and he’ll tell me, ‘It was bad, baby. It was bad.’” The couple avoid crowded parties or movie theaters, both triggers for Frink. “Being an anti-terrorism specialist, you see things, you see someone about to do something,” says Frink. “You can never turn it off. It’s easier for me to stay home.”

Headlines can be another threat: The war in Ukraine and the U.S. military’s violent withdrawal from Afghanistan last

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**Farm Family**  
With his injuries, Frink relies on help from his children to work the ranch when they are home. From left to right: son Devante, 27, daughter-in-law Teveta, 34, son Marvin Jr., 33, Marvin and Tanisha, son Rameriz, 25, and granddaughter La’ Miya, 12, together in May.



**‘WHEN MARVIN SPEAKS, HE SPEAKS WITH LOVE. HIS HEART IS GIVING’**

—TANISHA FRINK

summer both hit Frink hard, he says. “Seeing kids who go over there and don’t make it back, sometimes I wish it could be me instead of them.”

And yet most mornings he has a sense of hope. “I peep out the window when the sun’s getting ready to rise,” he says, “because I can’t wait to get outside.” In a far pasture, in the shade of a line of trees, Frink, who sees a therapist and takes medication for anxiety, has placed a single brown metal folding chair. It’s a place of daily ritual where he can look out at the pastures, his cattle and his mule named 50 Cal (short for caliber), a former Army pack animal that worked overseas. “He’s my intel sergeant,” Frink jokes. “I sit there every day, where I can see the house and the cattle at the same time,” he explains. “It’s peace of mind for me there. It’s where I can think and clear my mind. Being outside helps me realize it’s not that bad anymore.” ●

For confidential support, vets and loved ones can contact the **Veterans Crisis Line** at **800-273-8255** or text 838255.