

INTRODUCTION

My purpose in writing this book is to share my personal experiences and continuing battle with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome with those who have had, or will have, the same reaction to a traumatic event, as well as their families and friends. Whether from war, personal tragedy, rape, abuse or other violence, the lasting effects of these harrowing ordeals need much attention. Our society can, and should, learn to better understand and offer expedient emotional and spiritual relief for those souls and minds so deeply wounded.

Even though my own traumatic experience came from the Vietnam War, I do not have a particular interest in that war, nor its history, battles, strategies or politics; all of these are for others. I have no interest in telling war stories, but am including several descriptions of events for the sake of helping to visualize what I experienced, and the cause of the trauma that would take me through years of hiding deep in the jungles of Central Africa. Later, I continued on a thirty year nomadic wandering to almost every state in the US, across Canada, the Caribbean Islands, and Europe, trying desperately to keep my torment hidden behind an emotional shield I had developed to protect my sanity. Most of this wandering would be a futile effort to escape what my mind could not understand nor make into any acceptable rationale. But, no matter where I went and how far I ran, the one person I could not shake nor outrun was myself. I would eventually confront the haunting, eroded emotions and I would have one of two choices: I could stop, face myself, and examine the sensations that were safely hidden behind the protective, fortified barriers of my mind - the facade, the brick wall; or I could choose the eternal one. The second choice, suicide, fought a great battle to be heard; it would become almost a friend, no longer a fear. I convinced myself that if the mental torment got too bad, suicide was there to end it.

When I first realized, through various publications, that more Vietnam Veterans have died by suicide than died in the war, I was utterly shocked. I read where a retired VA doctor estimated that from twenty thousand to over one hundred and fifty thousand people have taken their lives after returning from this war. But these numbers, always rounded to the nearest thousand, are not as daunting to me as the suicide committed by a man who had stood next to me in flesh, blood and spirit. One of my best friends from high school was on Firebase Maryann in Vietnam, in 1971, when the North Vietnamese Army

overran the base, resulting in one of the bloodiest battles during the war. He was twenty-one years old when he endured this horrifying event. With this book, I offer tribute to my friend who suffered such trauma during war that he could not reconcile his mind and soul with the experiences. He recounted this torment to me; later he put a gun to his head to end the suffering. What horrible agony must have ravaged his young spirit to lead him to take his life! For many others as well, it is not about the numbers, but a specific loved one. Imagine the day-to-day, night-to-night emotional torment those lives suffered (perhaps for years) before deciding they could endure no more. And what of the mothers, fathers, wives, sons, daughters and friends who have endured those crushing years and tragedies? Aren't they victims of the war as well? Numerous people still cope with this daily.

The final incentive for me to bring my story forward came as the result of a simple phone call to my construction company requesting an estimate for repairs to a house before putting it on the market to sell. When I arrived, the owner of the house showed me the necessary repairs he wanted taken care of. He somberly explained that his wife of more than forty years had passed; his sad voice seemed to imply it was time to move on. The easy estimate was reviewed and accepted and we arranged a day to begin work. I suggested a Thursday that drew the response, "No, I will be at the veterans hospital that day."

"Oh, you're a veteran," I said in the proud spirit generally offered between vets. "So am I! Which war?"

"Korea," he answered. No sooner had the word left his lips than his eyes filled with tears, and then he began crying. My heart ached for him. Estimates and home repairs forgotten, he motioned me to follow him to another room. Sobbing deeply, he pointed to a small shrine he had erected - a memorial to a war more than fifty years past. While my eyes took in the map on the wall of Korea and the display of service medals on a small wooden table beneath it, he began his story. "I was a combat medic in Korea in charge of twelve other combat medics. I was the only one to come home." That is all he said and all he needed to say; he could only cry more openly now. I felt compelled to hug him and did. While filled with compassion for this man, I could not help but feel enormous anger with the members of the human race that had caused this suffering. He went on to say he had been receiving weekly counseling at the V.A. Hospital for eleven years! I stared at this man, who by all appearances looked like the average guy on the street. "I did the drinking thing," he added. Here was a man who had to be about seventy years old and was obviously deeply

scarred by an activity over fifty years ago. This thought startled my mind.

Later, I would think of the many stories I had heard of WWII vets and their families who spoke of this same hidden suffering from over sixty years ago; the hidden drinking, pacing floors in the middle of the night, nightmares and more. And all of these were men and women who had faced their military duties with honor. These were soldiers who had no shame to hide, only the burden of carrying the fact that they had performed the duties their country asked of them.

I realized this consequence was not just about the Vietnam War but all wars! I knew I needed to write about this if for no other reason than to honor those who still suffer; to let them know it is OK and normal to have these reactions to war; that these feelings need not be hidden in alcohol, anger, anxiety and lonely walks down dark hallways at night. And as a way to give open support to families, letting them know it is OK to talk about their concerns and not an embarrassment to be hidden away in misery.

The term "Post Traumatic Stress" was not even familiar to me until I was diagnosed with it in 1992, twenty years after the cause of my trauma. My story is of the long-term effects after this traumatic event affected my life, and how the trauma was resolved to become a manageable scar.

It is important to me that it is understood, especially after having lived in many countries, that I respect the U.S. Military, and the importance of maintaining a strong defensive military force. The military provides many services around the world, outside those of combat and war situations: There are many different jobs in the military. But to me, the unique aspect of the psychology of the infantry soldier is that he exists for one goal only: to kill the enemy. His is not a supporting role, helping others, as are many military jobs. I actually might have enjoyed making the military a career for its attributes and benefits if I had not met that decision at a time in history when the military was in great transformation, responding to huge social changes from the prevailing attitudes of WWII to those of the sixties. At the peak of these alterations, a controversial war seemed to be both the cause of these changes, and conversely, the result of them. The greatest effects on the military appeared to be expressed in racial and drug-related problems, along with decaying morale. I was especially disappointed and dismayed by the deep distrust, lack of respect, and even murder between officers and enlisted men. Yes, this actually happened, but this is not what history books have revealed. Witnessing all of this destroyed any idea I might have had concerning making the military a career.

In particular regards to the Vietnam War, I have heard every possible explanation, excuse, rationalization, views of the treatments of returning vets, protestors, those who fled to Canada, etc. Though all contain truths, they were not critical issues in the trauma that I experienced. Did these anger me? Yes, but they were not the cause of my trauma, instead they were side issues. There was something else, something internal that I just did not understand at the time. Years of wandering and finally meeting with one important man would help me to first understand the issues that ravaged my soul, and then commence to resolve them. I do realize that for each man who goes to war, there are as many different views of experiences. The guy right next to me in combat might have had a completely different reaction to battle than the one I had. I have met war veterans with a broad range of views, from those who still want to return to finish the war and avenge those who died, to those who put down their weapons but continued to “hump the boonies,” while refusing to kill anyone, on any side.

Also, please note that in my writing I am not attacking the Catholic Church as a whole or an entity. My views and remembrances reflect my experiences with specific churches, clergy and persons, not an entire faith. I do not believe that Catholicism was the main cause of some of my negative experiences, but rather simply the failure of one among many organized religions to come forward to meet my spiritual needs.

Lastly, it was my experiential conviction that lack of fear in combat is an irrational idea: Courage is simply the refusal to let fear control your actions. In the environment of combat, the survival instinct arises and expresses itself in a fury of rage. Later I admitted it scared me to know that I had this rage inside, and may, as a result of my religious and social training, have been ashamed of it. Today I accept this instinctual rage as a factor of “life survival”: the will to live being one of---or the most powerful---emotions I have experienced as a participant in the human race. It is from this knowledge, understanding, and acceptance that I emerge from the hard part of myself to express the true feelings behind the rigid but brittle surface. Of course, I know that as quickly as one can flick on a light switch these survival reactions can resurface. Although I don't like knowing that the rage is a component of me, in a raw way I am grateful for the survival instinct which proves my connection to the realistic part of human nature that is not intellectual nor taught, but surfaces from the genes that were long present before any books were written on the subject. I accept this instinct in myself and must be grateful, for I did survive. I am not

a psychologist. I only want to share my experiences with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome in hopes they can help anyone who knows its torment and suffering; who understands this syndrome steals from what otherwise could be a happier and more spiritually fulfilled life.

West Bend, Wisconsin

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