



Photo Credit / Susan Heffner

THIS IS MY FIGHT SONG

For Some Veterans, the Real Battle Has Just Begun

“It’s a Cold and It’s a Broken Hallelujah”*

Veteran PTSD – The Struggle for Peace (Part II)

By Susan Heffner

“War is not polite. It is a Hell that has no boundaries, a Hell that takes no prisoners. Just when you think you’ve reached the edge, the bottom drops out again.” ~ SD, USMC

Last month, we busted down the door and showed what ‘Hell’ feels like to many vets struggling with PTSD. The article struck a chord. This month, with input from several vets, we tackle some of the tougher questions they grapple with and delve deeper into the abyss.

“How do you talk about ‘self’ when you were trained to be ‘selfless’?”

“When you’ve married someone who’s been at war, there is nothing you can do that compares to that level of selflessness and bravery.” ~ John Oliver, comedian (complimenting his wife, a former Army medic who served in an Iraqi war zone)

Love of one's country and being truly selfless is one reason a person enlists in the first place. One of the hardest concepts a vet must grasp is the difference between 'self' and 'selfishness.' Talking through trauma and understanding it are critical in transitioning back into a healthy and fulfilling civilian life. But how do you explain how you feel when you're not even sure yourself? Where do you begin?

It takes a significant amount of introspection, trust and brutal honesty to let someone else in, especially after combat – to allow them to really see the darkest corners of the mind and soul, without fear of judgment or retribution. Talk about a reality check! It is far easier to shut out the world around you, including those closest to you, and bury old memories than it is to bring them out in the open and relive the loss/horror in order to move forward. This is why so many vets suffer in silence.

Well-placed trust in supportive friends and family members is crucial to breaking the PTSD cycle. However, a spouse will carry the greatest burden and therefore must be strong enough to fight for the vet and, even moreso, for themselves as the tentacles of PTSD extend to them, as well. Col. David Hackworth might have been referring to soldiers when he stated, "Bravery is being the only one who knows you're afraid," but it certainly applies to military spouses, too.

"Tell me, what am I supposed to do when I can't stop the nightmares or the 'daymares'? Like when I wake up in bed screaming, and you're looking at me like I'm 50 shades of crazy? What if all YOU heard, and all YOU remember, were explosions and the sounds of battle!?"

The brain, as beautiful as it is, can be a terrible thing. It is a key component in what makes us 'whole' or what tears us apart. It is what makes us human. Though one can never unsee what has been seen, nor undo what has been done, there is truth in Nietzsche's observation, "*That which does not kill us makes us stronger.*" But the path to peace can be a minefield seemingly impossible to navigate.

"We had more bodies than wounded, and the sub I served on became a floating morgue. As a medic, it became my responsibility to remove weapons from corpses, many times having to pry them off after rigor mortis had set in. Most of the casualties were late teens or early twenties. During one particularly grisly day, I was on deck when a chopper carrying more wounded repeatedly tried to land in gale-force winds until it got caught in a downdraft and plunged into the sea. There were no survivors.

After my tour ended, I married my high school sweetheart, worked 40 years as a senior engineer, earned a few patents and paid cash for my kids' college. Everything seemed perfect. Six months after retiring, the nightmares started, followed by the drinking. Even my wife didn't recognize the wreck I'd become and moved into a separate bedroom. Why, after more than four decades, was I now reliving my war experiences when I hadn't before?" ~ RC, USN

The psyche of a soldier still serving can differ greatly from a combat vet on the home front. One exists within a 'regimented' society; the other does not. Lack of structure, as well as respect, compounded by a profound sense of loss, creates the perfect cocktail for PTSD. Some vets are temporarily able to stave the onset of symptoms by throwing themselves into their careers. However, when not properly confronted, suppressed memories can rush to the surface with a vengeance, as evidenced by 'RC's' account.

Although dreams are unavoidable, they can be diminished with medication having few side effects, such as *Gabapentin* (a nerve blocker for pain) and *Prazosin* (used for decades to treat high blood pressure and diabetes). *MDMA*, also known as 'Ecstasy' (but **NOT** the dangerous

street version, which is laced with chemicals and often has no *MDMA* in it at all), has recently been tested with extremely promising results.

During the day, PTSD can be set off by unexpected ‘triggers’ – loud noises, crowds, smells, even music or the sound of heavy rain. While some can be avoided, others cannot – much like the events that caused them in the first place. Many vets practice ‘avoidance,’ but what they really need to learn are proven and healthy coping skills.

“Can you tell me where I’m supposed to find ‘peace’? Or how I’m supposed to do that when all I believe is I should’ve gone down with my guys? Can you explain to me why they’re dead and I’m not!? Tell me how I’m supposed to deal with ‘survivor’s guilt’?”

Without a doubt, the ‘Powers That Be’ will always have their own agenda, but to a soldier, it is never about politics. It is – and always will be - about people. Soldiers serving together often become closer to one another than with their own families. They depend on and trust each other completely – their very lives depend on it. Losing any one of them is devastating.

“It was my second mission. Mortar rounds exploded all around us, followed by automatic weapons fire. They literally rose from the mossy floor. Our ‘trail guide’ disappeared—the whole thing had been a setup!—and we ducked for cover anywhere we could find. There was no such thing as air support. It was a ‘kill-or-be-killed’ situation. We held them off, but odds were not in our favor.

Our LT, a seasoned vet of 25, and I were cordoned off between the enemy and a stinking bog. After ordering me deeper into the swamp, he hoped to flank them. Instead, I took a round in the shoulder and he took a hail of bullets in the gut. He died in my arms. I felt a rage build up within me, unlike anything I had ever felt before. If this was how it was going to end, so be it!

When the firefight ended and the silence settled back in, I realized I was the only man left. Our entire team was dead. I’ve relived that mission for years like it happened only yesterday. It never gets any easier.”

PTSD manifests differently. Some individuals may exhibit one or two symptoms, while others may have more. With treatment, there is no such thing as ‘one size fits all.’ When that approach was taken in the past, most vets dropped out and self-medicated instead.

Today, great advancements have been made in understanding trauma and ‘survivor’s guilt.’ There are new and promising, as well as proven, treatments available, and the VA is filled with inspiring success stories.

“What if I told you I’m a ‘liar’? Because I can’t tell you where I’ve been? What I’ve done? Who I’ve known...especially the great ones?”

“There is solace in knowing other vets can get help through the VA or other organizations, such as VPAC (Veterans Plus Assistance Corp.), but many cannot. I’ll never be able to talk about the guys I lost, including my best friend. I don’t need any reminders either – I think about them every day. How am I supposed to ‘heal’ or talk about my feelings when most of what I did never ‘happened’ in the first damned place? I wish I could say more, but I can’t.”

PTSD is being discussed much more openly these days, and help is readily available for those willing to seek it. Yet, Delta/Special Forces vets who took part in clandestine ops do not feel they have the same luxury because much of what they did remains classified.

“What about faith? And core Christian values? Like ‘Thou shalt not kill’? What if I told you I’m scared to death I’m going to Hell?”

“I will never question my God, nor His existence, though I wish He’d been a little more open about His plans for me.” ~ TM, USMC

One commonality among veterans is the belief in a Higher Power. As the saying goes, *“There are no atheists in foxholes.”* At some point, most vets question why they survived while others did not. Those who’ve been able to work through their demons will tell you that although war is a hell unto itself, it is, without doubt, a battle of epic proportions played out not just on the battlefield but within the human psyche, as well. The soldier will interpret, but faith is key.

It is equally important to believe in the power of forgiveness. Asking others for forgiveness is the easy part. Forgiving one’s own self for what are often self-imposed burdens usually proves the most difficult.

“What if I said that although I was once a great soldier, this is one battle I can’t fight on my own?”

“I was heading home, having just completed my second tour in ‘Nam, where I’d lost my best friend. Limping through the airport, I was accosted by a group of protestors chanting, ‘Baby Killers!’ and waving signs. One SOB stepped directly in front of me, called me a murderer and spat in my face. I laid him out. I remember thinking, ‘So this is how it’s gonna be....’ As soon as I got home, I poured myself a drink and kept ‘em coming for many years.”

As a result, many vets from that conflict never sought help. Instead, they pulled away from society and commiserated with other vets, never asking for anything because they already knew ‘where they stood’ in the public’s eye – a public that could never understand their courage, selflessness and overwhelming loss, or the unseen scars that festered just beneath the surface. That is *heartbreaking!*

Community awareness and support for returning soldiers impacts heavily on their healthy transition back into civilian life. The ‘reception’ Vietnam vets received from ignorant protestors, who rechanneled their anger at the war and redirected it at our military, was a despicable moment in American history.

A soldier may choose to enlist, but they follow orders, just as employees of any other company, with one significant exception – they put their life on the line for all of us every day. Their ‘co-workers’ don’t quit – *they die!* To disparage them because of politics or perceived governmental infractions is dead-ass wrong.

“What if I admit...I’m terrified!? Not just of opening old wounds, but of losing you?”

“I self-medicated for years and knew I wasn’t well but thought I had things under control – until my wife started having nightmares, too. When I asked what was bothering her, she literally screamed, ‘YOU’!! That was my wake-up call. What I did to myself was my own choice, but I never meant to hurt her. That was enough to convince me, and I got the help I needed.”

There are no easy answers except that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Recognizing and admitting that one needs help is the first of those steps. It is as simple and as complicated as that. If you tried but failed before, you owe it to yourself and your loved ones to try again. Establish a solid support network, and learn about new treatment options. Then take heart knowing that other vets have successfully blazed the trail for *you*, and that you have the opportunity – and ability - to do the same for those who will follow in *your* footsteps.

“In the military, you learn the essence of people. You see so many examples of self-sacrifice and moral courage. In the rest of life, you don’t get that many opportunities to be sure of your friends.” ~ Adam Driver, USMC

From a civilian standpoint, the end of war signifies victory, for we cannot possibly comprehend the struggles faced by returning soldiers, those who can never celebrate going home because they know far too many who did not. To a veteran, it is a sign of the cost, and the memories of all who were lost, as they face a more formidable and ambiguous foe. They may have survived the war, but can they survive the battle with PTSD?

It is, indeed, a cold and broken *‘hallelujah.’*

Footnote:

* Article title: lyric from Jeff Buckley’s song, *“Hallelujah.”*

“EAR – Express, Address, Resolve.” Please contact me at Susan.Heffner.ForTheVets@gmail.com with your feedback, your stories or anything else you’d like to share. Together, we *will* make a difference.