





# Creating Elder Warriors Instead of Victims

A Program for Healing the Psychic Wounds of War  
and the Initiation of the Elder Warrior

---

by: Paul Henderson, LTC (ret.) US ARMY

I am not a therapist, counselor, physician, or psychologist. I am a retired Special Forces officer who served in both active and reserve components. I served in Vietnam during 1969 – 1970. During the mid 1990s, I experienced a complete personal meltdown, much of which was based upon my experiences in combat and my attempts to self-medicate with alcohol. My life nearly ended. In coming back from that abyss, I worked through programs and some counseling with the VA. Much of it was helpful. But, I was never totally comfortable with the victimhood that seemed to be an integral component of the VA treatment model. Being told that my combat experiences left me with a permanent “disorder” that would never go away and the best I could do is learn to manage the symptoms neither sat well nor rang true for me. But, my

symptoms of nightmares, flashbacks, flat emotions, alcohol dependence, and quick anger were real. In 2009, I attended a four day work shop in Colorado put on by Dr. Ed Tick and the Soldiers Heart organization. Ed Tick’s message was clear: The psychic trauma and wounding we call PTSD is as old as warfare itself, and is more accurately and appropriately addressed as an initiation into a new and important identity as opposed to a permanently disabling “disorder.”

That experience changed everything for me. Since then I have served on the board of directors for Soldier’s Heart and trained and served as a workshop facilitator. I have helped conduct workshops for veterans as well as active duty Army and Air Force personnel, including counselors serving the 5th Special Forces Group and members of the USAF Special Operations community.

## BACKGROUND

Over the past 4,500 years of recorded human history, there have been approximately 14,000 documented wars. Presumably, this doesn't include countless raids and excursions between villages and tribes in remote areas of the earth. This statistic tells us two things:

1. Wars and armed conflicts aren't going away anytime soon. It's what we, as humans, do. No matter how much we as a species claim to abhor war and violence, we keep doing it over and over and it doesn't show any signs of letting up. Quite the contrary, actually.

2. Modern America is not the first society forced to face the harsh realities of dealing with the psychic war trauma experienced by its citizen combatants when they return from the conflict. The term "post traumatic stress disorder" has been with us only since 1980. We aren't doing a good job healing the psychic wounds of war. Maybe we can learn something from other cultures about how to do it better.

Armed conflict – war – between nations, peoples, tribes, religions, and persons with different interests has been with us for as long as people have walked the earth. It isn't likely to end soon. While this may be disappointing, it is simply an inescapable fact of life. Also inescapable is the psychic and spiritual effect of the experience of war on those who actually fight it. The shock and trauma of battle, as well as the euphoric adrenaline rush of the experience, leave indelible imprints on the combatant who survives and returns to the society that nurtured and developed him or her.

## PTSD ISN'T NEW

This is not a new phenomenon. Homer wrote of the "rage of Achilles" who plotted to kill his own commander and committed atrocities on the battlefield after his best friend was killed.

David, a warrior king of Israel, prayed:

*"Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with*

*grief. My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak."* Psalms 31:9, 10.

St. Francis of Assisi was a war veteran and a POW. He left his wealthy family home in Italy at age 19 to seek adventure in the Crusades. He was wounded and

**"Also inescapable  
is the psychic and  
spiritual effect of the  
experience of war on  
those who actually  
fight it."**

became a POW. After being ransomed, he returned to his life of privilege but found he no longer felt at home. He re-enlisted and went back to the Crusades. Only later was he able to translate his experience and spiritual woundedness into spiritual transformation that lives on even today through his work.

George Washington had nightmares from the French and Indian War and was prone to fits of rage.

War and military service have been primary rites of passage for thousands of years. Initiation into adulthood with its privileges and responsibilities was integrally connected with warrior training and tradition. With this came certain expected consequences which had to be effectively and successfully dealt with: some deaths, an even greater number of physical wounds, and a certain number of psychic wounds. The society deals with death with tradition and ceremony and with physical wounds by treating them with physical medicine. Traditional societies have addressed the psychic and spiritual

**“The soldier becomes the warrior. The job of the soldier is to kill. The job of the warrior may include killing when necessary, but it is primarily to guide and protect.”**

wounds of war – what we call “PTSD” - with healing processes which allow the warrior to cleanse the toxins of combat and assume a new identity as an elder warrior who is now responsible to share the wisdom, insight and skills learned as a combatant for the benefit of the entire society. The soldier becomes the warrior. The job of the soldier is to kill. The job of the warrior may include killing when necessary, but it is primarily to guide and protect.

Dr. Ed Tick in his book *War and The Soul* (Quest Books, 2005) explains:

“Warriorhood is not an outer role but an inner spiritual achievement. Said differently, attaining warrior status is a matter of character. The development of a mature warrior entails the restoration of moral fiber that \*\*\*\* is undone in combat. With such restoration, the healed veteran embodies high qualities of decency, honesty, kindness, compassion, and cooperation along with strength, courage, clear mindedness, and vision. Ironic as it may seem, these qualities can be born or re-born out of the conflagration of war and developed in direct relation to the wisdom of the survivor has garnered through his sojourn to the Underworld.”

The modern term for the psychic wound of war is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In the past, it has been labeled nostalgia, shell shock, and battle fatigue. During the American Civil War it was called “soldier’s heart,” as we then associated deep soul wounds with the heart rather than the brain.

## **PTSD DOESN'T JUST AFFECT THE VETERAN**

When we give lectures or training workshops, it is common to start the presentation by asking all of the veterans in the audience to please stand. They do so and there is typically some applause from the rest of the audience. I then ask the veterans to remain standing and invite the spouses – current or former – of veterans to stand and remain standing. Usually there is another smattering of applause. Then I ask the children of vets to do the same. Then parents and siblings. Then cousins and close friends. Then counselors, therapists or ministers who work with veterans. By this time, usually the entire room is standing. I then ask people to look around and remember what they see.

The point is that psychic war trauma doesn't just affect the combatant. When the warrior brings the war home with him or herself, everyone is affected by the experience.

Many spouses and children particularly suffer tremendous effects from being close to a veteran whose psychic trauma leads them to violence, emotional distance, anger, and substance abuse. When the veteran is able to transform that trauma into a positive experience, the entire society participates and benefits from that healing.

## PTSD IN MODERN WESTERN CULTURE

Particularly since the Vietnam War, Americans have been forced to deal with the condition labeled Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in many of its combat veterans. With the loss of the tradition of initiation and the wisdom of many cultures, Americans did what seemed to make the most sense: they turned the problem over to the medical/psychiatric establishment, which accepted it. The medical establishment then approached the condition as it would a disease. It was given a clinical name: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and classified as an “anxiety disorder.” The message was clear – if you had PTSD, there was something “wrong” with you. You were not “normal.” Those afflicted were diagnosed according to strict, objective criteria (DSM III, IV etc). They were then rated based upon the percentage of a complete and “normal” human being they happened to be (50%, 100% etc. disabled). The various treatment plans were then formulated with the goal of restoring the veterans to “normative behavior;” meaning that they could function as if the experience of combat never happened. As the problem grew and multiplied since 9/11 and the ensuing wars, the treatment of choice (or necessity, based on the numbers) has become drug therapy. It is not unusual for Iraq/Afghanistan veterans to be on several medications simultaneously for sleep, stress, anxiety, and so on. Vietnam veterans came late to this drug emphasized approach but the medical establishment has included

them in this regimen as well.

This approach has largely failed. This is quite obvious when we examine the number of American combat veterans who are living a medicated life and are now fully invested into the culture of disability. This doesn't include those incarcerated, living on the streets, and victims of suicide. Every person who experiences combat is forever changed by the experience. Some recover without serious long term problems. Others are severely disabled.

Perhaps the biggest tragedy, both for the veteran and for society, is that we have undermined and largely erased the tradition of the mature warrior who becomes a seasoned, calm, and wise elder for the society. We have ignored and bypassed the complete process of initiation through military service that has for millennia provided a meaningful and fulfilling life for the veteran who becomes fully integrated into the Warrior Archetype. That – not victimhood and permanent disability – is the true destiny of the veteran.

## THE MILITARY EXPERIENCE PERMANENTLY TRANSFORMS THE INDIVIDUAL – YOU WILL NEVER BE THE SAME PERSON

So, what is wrong with trying to get the veteran to a psychological place where they can function as though the experience never happened? It denies one of the most basic truths of military service: Being

**“The point is that psychic war trauma doesn't just affect the combatant...everyone is affected by the experience”**

in the military transforms the person permanently. The veteran is never the same as before entering the service. The transformation is even more pronounced and profound for the combat veteran. It is a mistake to believe that the transformation has to be a negative thing. The transformation, if properly handled, becomes an initiation for the veteran into a new and positive identity that benefits the veteran and the society as a whole. Traditional societies<sup>1</sup> have recognized that phenomenon and sought to reintegrate the veteran while channeling the transformative experiences into something that is beneficial both to the veteran and to the society. Our current societal view of the path in and out of the military and out approach to treatment of PTSD is based upon this model:

First you are a **CIVILIAN**

Then you are a **SERVICE MEMBER**

When you leave the service you are a **VETERAN**

And then you reassume the role as a **CIVILIAN**

This is how it is supposed to work according to current doctrine. The military experience is compartmentalized as something that just “happened” between the dominant experience and identity as a civilian. Anything that interferes with the return to civilian status is viewed as counterproductive. The vet should be able to function and relate within the society as if the military and combat experience never happened. Psychic trauma from the experience is pathologized and treated in the same manner as a disease process or, more specifically, as a psychological disorder. Of course, this approach hasn’t worked. But, since 1980 when the term “PTSD” was first coined, the medical and pharmaceutical industries have become heavily invested in the current model.

In the traditional and Soldier’s Heart approach to PTSD, it is emphasized that the experience of military service provides a basis for a new life paradigm for the veteran. Instead of the CIVILIAN – SERVICE MEMBER – VETERAN – CIVILIAN model, we adopt the “transformation” model and describe the progression as: CIVILIAN – SERVICE MEMBER – VETERAN – ELDER WARRIOR.

You cannot be the same civilian who first entered military service ever again. PTSD, which is very real, is de-pathologized and made part of a rite of passage – a phase of initiation into a life of service patterned upon the warrior archetype. Psychic stress from war and moral wounding from combat are normal reactions to abnormal situations. But, instead of using the experiences as a basis for a branding of permanent wounding and consignment to living within a culture of disability, we direct the veteran to the status and role of the Elder Warrior. The skills, attributes, values, character, judgment, and ability to perform under pressure gained from military service are unique gifts that serve not only the veteran, but the community and society as a whole. This is the model that has allowed societies to grow and develop in stability for thousands of years. Some important traits of the warrior:

*Willingness to endure hardship*

*Devotion to a higher purpose*

*Tactical and technical proficiency*

*Loyalty*

*Selflessness*

*Tradition of service*

*Physical and moral courage*

These are the qualities needed for a healthy society. It’s what we expect and depend upon from our leaders. Without those qualities, society devolves into contentious culture where selfish, self seeking becomes the rule rather than the exception. Take a look at that list and compare it to what we see in the character and performance of many of our current leaders in government, business, education and clergy. The tradition of military service has declined significantly during recent history. And with that decline we have seen the rise of the uninitiated and untested into positions of influence and power. They bring with them an orientation that is completely self directed. “What is important is that I get what I want when I want it.” And, we are left with a society that is at war with itself.

When we as a society marginalize our military veterans as we have, we not only deny them the opportunity to reach their full potential, we deny

the society the benefit of their experience, judgment, and wisdom. Instead of treating veterans as victims, we should look to them for judgment, courage, and wisdom. Instead of offering a veteran a free fishing trip, why not ask him to conduct an outdoor workshop for young people on survival and land navigation? Instead of offering a veteran a seat in first class on a commercial flight, why not ask her to sit in the exit row because she has proven that she can function under pressure and we can rely on her in a tight spot? During my talks and workshops I often use the example of the baboon troop and a photograph of an adolescent baboon male facing off with a leopard.

When the baboon troop stops to feed, preen, mate, socialize – all the things they do, they set up a security perimeter of young males who spread out and position themselves anywhere from twenty to fifty meters away from the troop. I personally witnessed this while in Africa. When a predator – lion, leopard, wild dog – threatens the troop the young sentry has two jobs: sound the alarm and hold off the predator while the troop makes its escape. Those who survive become elders and leaders in the troop. They have proven their courage, their commitment to the well-being and survival of the group, and their ability to overcome great odds and survive. They have something to offer and the troop knows that and relies upon it.

Suppose instead that the troop took these young warriors and told them: “Well, what you had to go through was just awful and we assume you are permanently disabled from the experience. We want you to now go sit in a safe place with the others who were on the perimeter and we’ll take care of you and give you medicines so that you don’t have to even think about it.”

The young baboons would wither and the troop would not survive. It needs its true warriors and it cannot deny itself that asset. As a society and culture, that is exactly what we are doing to our veterans and to ourselves.

War does create psychic and moral wounds – no question.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes drug therapy is appropriate on a temporary basis when symptoms are acute. I am not a clinician, but I have observed case after case where veterans are simply relegated to a life of drug consumption and dependence. They are told that their PTSD is a permanent condition and the best they can do is learn how to manage symptoms. There is usually a monetary benefit to the veteran in embracing this approach and, eventually, many become deeply entrenched in a culture of disability. PTSD becomes a self-fulfilling diagnosis.

In the Soldier’s Heart model, the psychic wounding is addressed and dealt with. The veteran has to heal

**“The skills, attributes, values, character, judgment, and ability to perform under pressure gained from military service are unique gifts that serve not only the veteran, but the community and society as a whole.”**



the trauma – physical, spiritual, and emotional – from the experience before the mantle of Elder Warrior can be assumed. In the workshops we apply a systematic approach to healing and initiation. One of the most important messages we convey, and the one that is universally received by veterans as a positive and worthwhile concept is: Just because you took off the uniform doesn't mean that you don't still have a mission. Your mission now is to use your skills, experience, and the judgment gained to lead, guide, and set the example for the rest of your people. The mantle of the Elder Warrior has passed to you and it is vital that you assume that role.

## WARRIOR RETURN WORKSHOPS

This program is designed to address the lost tradition and give the veteran and those who care for him or her a context and framework for living that emphasizes the necessity for true healing, the resolution of the combat experience, and the responsibility of the veteran/warrior to the society. Sessions can be as short as a day, although that would generally require no more than five participants and would not be able to fully implement the process. Ideally, workshops consist of 15 to 20 persons, including veterans, spouses, and/or practitioners and will last 3 - 4 days.

The workshops are based largely on traditions and techniques from ancient and traditional cultures, including Native American warrior cultures. Much of the format – as well as a good deal of the information in this article -- is from the work by Dr. Ed Tick who, with his wife Kate Dahlstedt, founded "Soldier's Heart" and continues to conduct healing workshops in America, Greece, and Vietnam. They are the pioneers of this work. As a former board member of Soldier's Heart, I participated in the development of the organization and continue to conduct workshops, both within and without the Soldier's Heart organization. My own workshops borrow heavily from their work, but I also offer my own techniques and insights including the emphasis on the tradition of initiation and archetypes and the incorporation of breathwork into the experience.

I also emphasize the importance of the initiation process to the former service member who is not a combat veteran. The status of warriorhood and the tradition of initiation into the vital role of "elder" is important and available to those who served and were willing to put themselves into the crucible of combat, even if that situation never developed for them. They had trials and fears as well and often have to overcome



Register of Copyrights,  
USA

SFA Military  
Magnets Available

SFA Chapter 51  
Ladies Auxiliary

Phone:  
(702) 433-3663

E-mail:  
[jumpjky@aol.com](mailto:jumpjky@aol.com)



a sense of guilt because they were not tested in combat as others were.

Lastly, it is important to emphasize that the tradition and status of “warrior” is unique and vital. But, it is not superior to the other archetypes. Others serve and contribute in their own unique ways and follow the traditions of other archetypes – priest, mother, artist, inventor, healer, builder, scholar, father, and so on. The warrior has a unique set of skills and traditions including the willingness to endure hardship, devotion to a transpersonal purpose, physical and moral courage, duty, loyalty, and willingness to sacrifice self to protect others, that serve the society and act as a model for others when needed.

The emphasis throughout the workshop is on healing, growth, and positive transformation. The military experience and the experience of war are viewed as difficult but important portals that provide strength and wisdom to the individual as well as the society. War creates psychic wounds in nearly all its participants. Victimhood and permanent psychological wounding are rejected in the approach to these workshops. While recognizing that some individuals may need certain medications and conventional medical/psychological treatment, we believe that persons in this group are a small minority. We seek to develop wise and mature Elder Warriors who can provide valuable knowledge and insight to the society. I believe that most veterans are fully capable of assuming this role.

In workshop, I often tell the story of the rush to go to war in Iraq by America in 2003, based upon what later proved to be flawed and inaccurate intelligence. The only member of the President’s war cabinet to advise caution and refrain from immediate attack was the only combat veteran present – General Colin Powell. It turned out that his assessment – the assessment of the elder warrior – was correct. That is the kind of wisdom and counsel the society needs from its veterans. Other examples abound and need to be studied and emulated by today’s veteran.

That approach is not emphasized or encouraged by today’s treatment practitioners or the society as a whole and the role of the veteran as a leader in America has diminished. Our last true warrior

President was John Kennedy who died over 50 years ago. We like to talk about “The Greatest Generation” – the service members who won WWII and then came home to rebuild America – but we don’t have a modern counterpart nor do we try to foster one. The only difference between the veterans who returned from WW II and those who came home from later wars is the perception of them by the public and, as a result, by themselves.

So, how do we reclaim this tradition that creates elder warriors instead of victims? The veterans have to do it themselves – individually and collectively. The rest of society is never going to completely understand

**“The veteran has to heal the trauma – physical, spiritual, and emotional – from the experience before the mantel of elder warrior can be assumed.”**

the experience of military service or combat. The best they can do is project out their commonly inaccurate perceptions onto the veteran.<sup>3</sup> We, as veterans, have to identify ourselves with Colin Powell or Joshua Chamberlain, a college professor who accepted a commission in the Union Army in 1862. In July, 1863, he broke the momentum of the Confederate advance at Gettysburg by leading a bayonet charge down Little Round Top directly into the advancing enemy forces.

The bayonet charge was a matter of necessity as his troops had run out of ammunition. For this action he was awarded the Medal of Honor. He rose to the rank of Major General. After the war, he served four terms as the governor of Maine as well as serving as a faculty member and president of Bowdoin College.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. is another example. Holms enlisted in the Army in 1861 during his senior year of college. He was commissioned as a First Lieutenant and participated as a combatant in numerous battles from The Peninsula Campaign to the Wilderness. He was wounded three times and nearly died from dysentery. When he left the Army at the end of the war, he was wounded and ill. He went on to a career in the law and eventually became a US Supreme Court Justice and probably the most quoted jurist in the world. His war time experiences greatly influenced the rest of his life, including his legal philosophy that embraced “legal realism” as shaped by the horrors of war he witnessed.

Other examples are plentiful including the actor Jimmy Stewart, who joined the Army Air Force in WW II and became a B-24 pilot (as did Senator George McGovern). This was after he had already been awarded an Academy Award. He flew twenty combat missions and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. He resumed acting after the war but stayed with the USAF Reserve, eventually retiring as a Brigadier General. His last combat mission was in a B-52 over Vietnam during the 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

The point of all these examples is that these

veterans were all truly transformed by their military service and war time experiences and were able to build on the transformation to become leaders, guides, and examples to all.

We, as veterans, can embrace these models and throw off the stigma of irreversible damage that dominates the modern approach to PTSD. If we fail to do that, we will suffer individually – trapped in a paradigm of disability. And, our county and our society will suffer from the loss of our participation as Elder Warriors.

## CONCLUSION

Psychic trauma from war is real and common. It has been with us as long as humans have walked the earth and practiced organized violence against one another. It is not going away. But, as with many painful life experiences, it can be a doorway to a new and more meaningful and productive life. The tradition of initiation into the archetype of the elder warrior has long transformed the crucible of combat experience into a new identity and mission as a leader and guide in the society, as well as a role model for the finest and most noble human traits.

We can regain this tradition with the right approach. We owe this to ourselves as veterans, to our families, and to the society we serve. ✂

---

### Resources

1. By “traditional societies” I am referring to many varied cultures throughout history including the ancient Greeks, many Asian cultures, ancient and more modern European and African societies, and the warrior tradition of American Indian tribes.

2. Often it is difficult for Special Forces soldiers to accept this. PTSD has a very negative stigma that is particularly strong among elite forces. It is seen as “unmanly” and contrary to our perception of ourselves as able to handle anything. It is important to emphasize the truth – PTSD is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. Humans experience fear, horror, and guilt in predictable ways and PTSD is one of them. Lack of those reactions is usually found only among sociopaths.

3. The Vietnam war was tremendously unpopular and so the young soldiers who fought in it became “bad” people and “baby killers” to the civilians. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, at least in the early stages, were very popular and viewed as an appropriate and necessary response to the attacks on 9/11. Hence, the service members who served during that time were universally “heroes” and treated with great deference and honor. Neither depiction was completely accurate except for a very few cases but that didn’t stop the civilians from clinging to them.

4. Stewart refused to act in any war movies after his return from WW II, saying that they were all phony and he wasn’t going to personally involve himself in a fraud. He made one movie about the Air Force called “Strategic Air Command” that was about the development of the B-47.