

Surviving the "Killer Instinct"

Group and individual psychotherapy is a valuable, and I feel, the main healing therapy for chronic combat post-traumatic stress disorder.

I will refer to this in future reference as Combat Adaptive syndrome (CAS).

However the participants in group therapy have to be appropriately screened for this to be truly beneficial.

Every war is made up of soldiers with different MOS (military occupational service).

After basic training, every soldier is assigned a specific MOS and then sent to the appropriate school for that specialized training.

Some of the MOS have multiple schools to be attended to reach the adequate level of training for that soldier to perform efficiently.

For example, a graduate of boot camp may get an MOS of cook or motor transport, or infantry.

They may be sent to infantry training and then more training in a particular weapon or weapon system.

Selected individuals may be selected to go into special operations training or Special Forces.

These are the most highly trained soldiers in the world.

Every war has designated areas where a soldier may be stationed to serve during their enlistment periods.

The term Vietnam veteran is a very broad term.

This term means a veteran who served in the armed forces during the Vietnam War (1965-1975).

This takes on even more significant importance when looking at those soldiers who return to civilian life after their period of service.

Vietnam era veterans are those veterans who served in the military during the time frame of the Vietnam War but not in Vietnam.

These soldiers could have been stationed stateside or at any number of military bases throughout the world during that period.

For example, a soldier could have been stationed throughout his/her full enlistment in Germany, Korea, Alaska, etc.

Vietnam support veterans are those veterans who served in Vietnam or in support of military operations in Vietnam without actually being in Vietnam.

They could have been administrative personnel in DaNang, or Saigon.

They could have been doctors, nurses, air wing personnel including mechanics, fueling and munitions specialists.

They could have been pilots who flew bombers out of Guam or Thailand.

I could go on with examples but these veterans may or may not actually be in combat.

These veterans do have the possibility of being killed in their minds and there are situations where they may actually be under siege as in the periodic shelling of DaNang or Saigon.

The Vietnam combat veteran is the next category and the one that will be given the most discussion.

This is the veteran who is usually assigned a MOS concerning infantry.

This will most likely consist of members of the Army and Marine Corps.

In this category will also be the combat medic or corpsman assigned to an infantry company.

Also in this category will be the combat chopper pilots who were directly part of an assault force or were responsible for going into a fire zone to take out the wounded and dead.

The communications MOS is also in this category.

These were the individuals whose MOS were communications but were assigned to infantry units as field radio operators.

They traveled as part of an infantry unit in combat to relay information for air support, artillery strikes and other tactical information between different infantry units.

I was trained in the Marine Corps as a basic infantryman and as a specialist in the infantry with the M-60 machine gun.

I can't comment on the Army infantry specifics as I didn't go through their training.

I do know that the CAS in the Marine Corps starts when an individual enters basic training or boot camp.

The Marine Corps calls these bases recruit depots. There are two recruit depots for Marines.

Generally, young men entering the US Marine corps from the eastern part of the United States go through their basic training at the US Marine recruit depot at Parris Island, South Carolina, and those entering from the western United States go through their basic training at the US Marine Depot at San Diego, California.

From these locations, the Marine infantryman goes through further infantry training at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, or Camp Pendleton, California respectively.

The basic Marine Corps infantry company is made up of four platoons.

This includes three rifle platoons and a weapons platoon.

In Vietnam, the Marine Corps weapons platoon consisted of the 60 mm mortar crew teams, M-60 machine gun crews and the law rocket crews.

Each platoon was made up of four squads and each squad was made up of 3-4 team members.

From the entry into basic training and all the way into combat the emphasis is on a team interaction.

The units were not made up of individuals but of a team acting in unison.

It was quite amazing to observe a Marine rifle company operating in combat.

It was far more coordinated than any professional sports team.

This technical operation and performance came through extensive mental training mostly in basic training.

Basic principles of brain re-education or "brain washing" were used to take away the individuality of each person and make everybody act as ONE.

The techniques were quite simple and employed with Prisoners of War to manipulate their mind.

These techniques centered on isolation, focus on central authority and being totally dependent on that authority for everything.

There was absolutely no communications with other basic trainees.

The only communication was with one individual, a drill instructor, who told you everything.

There was punishment for everybody if one person messed up.

It didn't matter if 99% of everybody did exactly what was commanded of them; only what mattered was that 1% didn't put their jackets on fast enough.

Everybody would be punished with extensive calisthenics including jumping jacks, push-ups, etc.

Sometimes everybody may be told to hold their rifles over their heads for 1-2 hours or stand at attention for 3-4 hours at a time.

There were hours and hours of marching, with the attending drill instructor constantly criticizing everything that you did wrong.

A mental focus to try and please the drill instructor was always in the recruit's mind.

You were told when to go to the bathroom which was regimented three times a day.

You were timed on everything from going to the bathroom, to eating in the chow hall, to such simple things as putting on your clothes, cleaning up your living area, etc.

Again, if one or two people were slow in doing these basic things, everybody was punished.

This made everybody totally dependent upon each other.

Also there was extensive physical training that revolved around all the mental conditioning.

This included daily physical training of running three to four miles, calisthenics and the obstacle courses.

One of these was called the confidence course which had obstacles that challenged things you may have feared, like climbing a forty foot tower and then reaching out to grasp a rope and sliding down that rope to the ground; or sliding down a rope on your stomach suspended thirty feet over water.

Some of the obstacles were designed so that you could not get over them without the assistance of another recruit.

This was another subtle way of stressing the importance of teamwork.

There were several weeks of close combat training.

This training taught the combat veteran bayonet techniques.

The combat veteran would then run the bayonet course attacking a mannequin.

Those who showed the most aggression were praised and awarded.

There was the Pugil stick competition and training.

Recruits were put in padded gear including helmets with a face guard.

They were given pugil sticks which were sticks with padding on both ends.

Then recruits were paired off and put into a circle.

They were instructed to attack each other. The drill instructors encouraged and awarded aggression.

The same principles were employed in hand-to-hand combat.

When teaching in training different types of choke holds, those recruits who choked out their partner were praised and rewarded.

Aggression was emphasized and rewarded.

Throughout basic and infantry training there was constant reminders everyday that most of us would not come back alive from Vietnam.

The enemy was constantly pictured as less than human.

It was also emphasized repeatedly that death was better than dishonor.

The mission was the primary focus, not the individual's survival.

It was continually emphasized that total loyalty, love and dedication was to the Corps.

When the combat infantryman entered the war zone, those mentally engrained principles were reinforced and sharply honed with the actual reality of combat.

No matter what was going on around you, the unit acted as ONE.

There was no questioning of any command or judging moral consequences.

The command was to be followed and no second thought given to anything but carrying out that order.

The infantryman in Vietnam became predators.

They went into the jungle and sought out the enemy to kill them. It was their mission.

As a pack of wolves hunting for food and acting as one, so was the Marine Corps infantry unit.

This involved living in the jungle for days at a time, with little to eat.

This involved living with amebic dysentery, malaria, leeches, athlete's foot and any other condition found in such primitive surroundings.

This involved sleeping on the ground in pouring rain or heat with suffocating humidity.

Everyday was involved with seeking out and killing the enemy in the most deplorable conditions.

The laws of nature applied to man, as much as it was studied and written about animals, by behavioral biologists, evolutionists, ecologists, and anthropologists.

The combat infantryman would be a perfect field experiment in observing these biological principles and laws.

In the bush, survival of the fittest was well observed.

Those who didn't work with the team or ignored their orders were killed.

The filtering process left a group of predators that functioned as one.

Each one would lay down their life for the other in the group.

The death of one was a small price to pay for the attainment of the mission.

Dishonor to the unit or defeat in battle was worse than death itself.

Those who survived had their warrior skills nurtured by the environment of combat.

The thought of dying every day was gradually replaced by the principles of killed or be killed.

Senses such as smell, vision, and hearing were heightened to a level indescribable.

A lot of times the enemy could be smelled long before seen.

The emotional expressions of grief, empathy, sorrow and compassion were replaced and

dominated by rage, anger, aggression and will to survive.

A sixth sense developed of going with your intuitive feelings over logic.

Things that didn't seem right were usually bad.

A trail or area that had bad feelings usually was either full of booby traps or an ambush.

When a new replacement came into the unit he was ostracized until his worthiness was proven to the seasoned survivors.

The intuitive sixth sense of impending danger a lot of times would let everyone know whether a new soldier would live or die.

You developed intuitive skills about other people.

Most of these skills were perfected by being alive after so many months in combat.

The bond between each member of the team was so strong that no other force in nature could forge such emotional and physical interaction.

No biological siblings or family could hold such bonding.

The feeling of belonging and knowing that the unit was self protecting of the whole was stronger than anything felt in life.

There was no place for liars, half-truths, innuendos or phonies.

Such character flaws would get you killed in Vietnam.

These intuitive traits followed a lot of combat veterans back into civilian life after military service.

This would cause them to be loners and not comfortable around people.

It would make them take a strict attitude towards liars and people who couldn't be trusted.

Vietnam was the first non-conventional war ever fought by the United States.

Wars in the past clearly had lines of demarcation between the good guys and bad guys.

There were clear and designated lines where engagements were eminent and areas where it was safe.

In Vietnam, the United States entered into a guerilla war.

A war with tactics that were unknown to the trained military personnel.

The military infantryman was faced with two enemies in Vietnam.

There were the hard-core North Vietnamese communist soldiers (NVA) and the guerilla fighters (Vietcong).

The NVA were trained soldiers that wore uniforms, used military weaponry and were trained in military tactics.

The Vietcong were civilians sympathetic to the communist North Vietnamese.

These were civilians that farmed or ran businesses in South Vietnam.

They didn't have the conventional weapons or modern warfare or training in a traditional manner.

But what they did have was years of experience fighting and learning guerilla tactics.

Rather than direct engagement with the enemy, they would strike and retreat. They would use booby traps with amazing creative genius.

They could take very basic materials and construct traps that could seriously maim or kill.

They would blend in to the environment using tunnels, caves and the jungle, or rice paddies to appear from nowhere to inflict an attack.

These same people during the day may be simple farmers living in small villages with families.

They would seem friendly, even polite and more than willing to cooperate.

These same people during the night would slit your throat while you slept or give you a gift with a booby trap.

One hardcore principle that was learned early and it was learned to stay alive, was to not trust anyone.

The only trust was with your brothers (those combat soldiers in your unit or other combat units).

This distrust was obsessive at times but it was necessary and reinforced by seeing fellow combat brothers killed or maimed for life because they trusted the wrong person.

This is an extremely important principle that carries over with the combat veteran coming

back to the United States (real world).

Trust nobody, unless another combat veteran, and then only after finding out if he/she has those survival skills to survive in combat.

The implication of cognitive therapy for combat veterans has to take this into serious consideration.

Whether a combat veteran is seeking individual counseling or group counseling there has to be total trust.

Before a combat veteran starts to talk about suppressed emotions, lost comrades, or his personal emotional struggles or ability to engage in functional relationships, he has to be in a safe and trustful environment.

The Veterans Administration started to implement in-patient programs for combat veterans in the late 1980s.

The more accredited programs had a screening process before a veteran would be accepted into these intense and lengthy programs.

When the veteran was accepted into the program, then he was with 25-30 other combat veterans who had CAS.

When those veterans sat down in a three hour group therapy to talk about combat situations they could feel that trust there.

They could feel and know that, as in Vietnam, they had nobody to help them survive but each other.

They could start defusing suppressed anger and rage by talking with other veterans who had those same feelings.

They knew they were not going to be judged or misunderstood if they talked about such things as thoughts of killing, or the helplessness of a fellow warrior dying when there is nothing you can do, or the survival guilt of that accompanies the loss of that sacred bond with another human being.

This is an extremely important and vital principle that must be understood to have combat veterans deal with CAS.

When programs are implemented without considering this principle, the combat veteran will leave.

He feels the same way about those individuals as he does about society in general: "They can't comprehend me and will judge me."

" As a combat veteran I can say with 100% certainty that CAS or combat PTSD is one condition that to totally and unequivocally understand it, you must have been there! You have to have the predator/warrior mindset to understand this very complex condition.

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