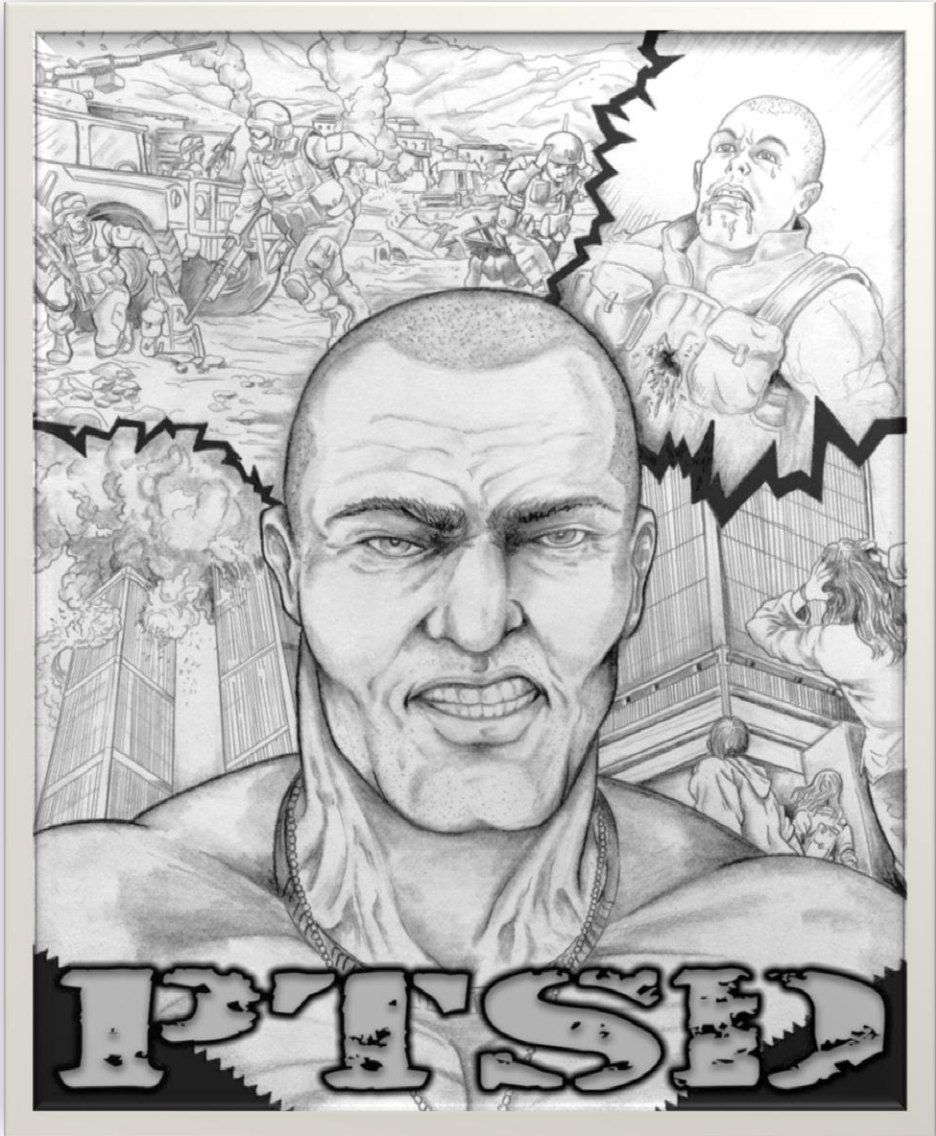


Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder  
Patrick Thibeault



The Journal of Military Experience

Some soldiers bury it deep inside their soul. Others discuss it like they are on some kind of talk show. Some guys drink massive amounts of alcohol. I drank to mask my pain while I was in the service, and drinking was encouraged by the command, just not the consequences. The military shunned people and called them scumbags if they were arrested for drunk driving or had a drinking problem. Still, I would get as drunk as everyone else did, the kind of drunk where you see double and don't remember things the next day. It was therapeutic, momentarily calming the rage inside me, rage that felt like fire was constantly shooting out of my hands and burning around me, the kind of rage that makes you want to rip someone in half for looking at you the wrong way.

This rage developed a few years after Desert Storm, but I didn't attribute it to post-traumatic stress disorder for many years; I just thought I was a person who was mad at the world. I thought maybe it was a growing pain that I had to go through. Psychiatrists tried to label it as anger, and I would flat out tell them no, it's not anger, it's rage. Anger is a short-term reaction to something that has occurred in the environment. Rage is a long-term reaction, accumulating over months or years.

*Why did I have this rage?* I talked to my father, who was a Vietnam veteran, about the rage that I felt. He had no answers for me. No one did. I had to find the answers on my own. I tried finding those answers in a bottle of beer; the answers were not there. I hate to say it, but religion could not answer why I have rage. I thought maybe I had a demon inside me and blessed myself with Holy Water. No, no demon. I was not possessed, at least. I first realized it was rage during my psychiatric nursing clinicals at Eastern Kentucky University while sitting in on group counseling for combat veterans, not as a veteran, but as a student. The insight that the counselor provided for the members of the group worked for me as well. I had been dealing with this shit for the past several years my own way.

Along with the rage, I have flashbacks. One includes several wounded people screaming with arms and legs missing in the back of a helicopter. *The heat. The*

*moaning*. It all pops into my head and plays in slow motion. I learned early on to avoid triggers so I would not have as many flashbacks. *Crowds*. I don't know why, but I hate crowds. I hate the sensation of being crowded, so I have learned to avoid them. Sadly, this affected my social life in my twenties. I could not go to dance clubs to socialize and meet women, or anywhere else there were crowds. When I am stuck in a crowd, I become a nervous wreck. I have tried to drink alcohol to relax me, but even when I'm intoxicated, that dislike of crowds doesn't go away. I go out to events early when they are not as crowded. If I dare go to a bar, I go early when the bar just opens, when there are fewer people. It always helps to have a table in the corner of a room overlooking everyone.

I hate loud noises like I hate crowds. Fireworks freak me out. I realized this back in the spring of 1995 during an annual event called Thunder Over Louisville, held two weeks before the Kentucky Derby. I hated it. I hated watching the fireworks. I hated listening to the sounds of the fireworks as they went off into the air. They reminded me of explosions from the war. I can't tolerate loud noises, so I isolate myself. During 4th of July, I go to bed early and I put in earplugs. If possible, I work the holidays at the hospital. No loud noises at the hospital, most of the time anyway.

But it's not just the loudness. The wounded Syrians I worked on during Desert Storm screamed in Arabic. I don't know what the hell they were saying, but I have a general idea. When I hear a person speaking in Arabic, some of these memories flood into my head. One time, during a medical emergency at work, one of the physicians of Middle Eastern origin and with an Arabic accent started barking orders without getting a history of what we had done already. No one was listening to him so he started flailing his arms around. I had to get away from the situation. I told one of the nurses standing by that she needed to take over; I was done. It did not help that we had a mild earthquake several hours earlier. Since the hospital is a federal building, my first thought was that it was being bombed. The sad thing is that I thought terrorists were doing the bombing.

Certain groups of men trigger my flashbacks as well. Many of these men don't use any deodorant, or they flood themselves with cologne. The sad thing is that these men are good, honest people who just want to get by in the world like I do. It's not the skin color; it's not the culture; and I am just as dark myself with Greek heritage. A lot of these people do their medical internships at Veterans Hospitals. They are there to help. It's not politically correct to say this, but imagine a Vietnam veteran going to a VA hospital and being treated by someone who is North Vietnamese. Would they feel safe or welcome during treatment?

Oddly enough, the sight and smell of blood doesn't bother me, even though it is a central component of my flashback where the wounded bleed out. Maybe it's because dealing with blood is a part of what I do for a living, but I have always considered blood to be sacred. Every medic is taught to save as much blood as possible. Blood sustains life. Treating wounded people does not trigger my flashbacks, either. Seeing a gaping head wound with massive bleeding doesn't trigger bad images. If anything, I get excited because I know that I can do something good to help a person who has that injury.

Like many veterans dealing with PTSD, I have nightmares, too, bad dreams of events that have happened to me. The dreams are different, though; it's like I am an angel looking down at what is going on, outside my body yet having the same experience. Typically, if I have a nightmare, the next day is shot. I wake up feeling more tired than I was before I went to sleep. I cannot function. I feel sick and exhausted like I have a bad case of the flu. My neck is tense and my body aches. I even get a low-grade fever for no reason.

I've tried just about everything to cope, from the self-destructive to the productive, from getting into fights and overeating to going to school and meeting with other veterans or connecting with them through online groups.

I used to walk downtown in Indianapolis at night, hoping someone would start some shit with me. I never packed a gun, but I did carry small, blunt objects that could be used as weapons. A small piece of metal can be used as a striking

object; a piece of metal is stronger than my fists. Getting into fights was one way to feel alive, but I realized that I would get myself killed doing this. It takes only one bullet to end it all.

Food brought a sense of euphoria similar to that of the strongest narcotics. But it would wear off quickly, replaced by guilt and depression. To combat the guilt and depression, I promised myself I'd eat better next time, as soon as I finished eating something else to make myself feel better. I deal with this cycle of destruction to this day.

A more positive way to deal with PTSD was going to school. If I had to learn something new, then I could focus on that instead of the PTSD. I started with my associate's degree, then my bachelor's degree, and am currently working on my master's degree. Reading medical books takes away the pain that I feel for a while in the same way that drinking did, but with more positive consequences.

Animals can be therapeutic, too. I don't know why or how it works, but having them around makes life much easier to deal with. I remember when I came home from the war, one of my cats jumped into my arms; she had not seen me in almost a year. She is not one of the cuddly kind of cats, but on that day she was. I now have two cats and a dog and I am thankful for these animals taking away a little bit of my stress.

I tried going to group therapy. It didn't work for me. I was with a bunch of older Vietnam and World War II veterans, and I felt unwelcome. One of the Vietnam veterans said to me that I came home as a hero and he came home as a baby killer. It bothered him that certain elements of society shunned him when he came home from Vietnam, which was not my fault. The media and the public portrayed us as being heroic. I certainly did not feel heroic, nor did I feel any shame for what I did in the Middle East.

I heard about another group called Modern War Veterans and thought that might be just what I needed. Maybe I would feel at ease with people more my own age. But I had nothing in common with them. To me they were just feeling

sorry for themselves, blaming every bad choice that they made on the war or the military. I was in a group with a bunch of crybabies, and I hate crybabies. And there is always the person who wants to talk about how Jesus has saved him. That was fine, but this veteran would insist on asking us if we had Jesus in our lives. Yes, I do have Jesus in my life, but I don't feel like talking about religion when I am dealing with PTSD. Yet some in the group shared similar issues to mine. One soldier was a combat veteran of Grenada. His experiences were real and he had to deal with them after all these years, even though the combat operations in Grenada were brief. He was a paratrooper as I was. We had that much in common. Overall, though, group therapy was not for me.

I joined the Veterans of Foreign Wars, hoping to get that sense of belonging. There is a major difference in cultures between the older veterans and the younger veterans, and while the VFW tries accommodating both age groups, younger veterans like myself feel left out. Online I discovered Second Life's U.S. Military Veterans Group, where I could remain anonymous and belong to a group at the same time. I also interact with a lot of veterans on Facebook. Yes, the internet is an escape, and it is not true reality, but when I am in Second Life and Facebook, I do talk to real people. After I log off the computer, my problems are still there, though.

I feel like an outsider to society. It is hard to say where I fit in, and there is so much the public doesn't understand. Have you guessed the million-dollar question that Joe Public likes to ask a combat veteran? *Have you killed anyone?* I answer that I have saved some people. Then I ask them, "Does that count for anything?" Sometimes I just walk away.

Medication helps me, but it is not a long-term cure. There is no one treatment using medication that can apply to everyone. It took me many years to find the right combination of pills. One helps with the rage, water to douse the fire. Another lowers my blood pressure, raised by my constant stress and high level of alert. A third pill eases the nightmares, and it works, as long as I take it. I am

guilty of taking my medication for several months at a time and then stopping when I start to feel normal. That sense of normalcy lasts a few weeks and then the rage comes back again. But I quit taking the medicine because I don't want to have to depend on a pill to feel like a normal person. It's a cycle of destruction, being hit by the same storm over and over again. Now I don't even know what normal means. It's a joke, feeling normal. I have felt this rage for so many years now that the rage feels normal for me. I would feel abnormal without it. I still feel like I am on the fringes of society. I have isolated myself from most everyone. I go to work to support myself and to enjoy life. *But what is normal?* I really have no idea what normal feels like. And I am not alone. A few of my friends in the military deal with the same issues. Two of us were even taking the same medication. I saw my friend's pill bottle and said, "I bet you have PTSD." He asked why, and I showed him my plethora of medications. He was relieved that someone else was out there struggling to deal with this.

The harshest complication of PTSD is suicide. Some combat veterans cannot live with or come to terms with something that happened in the war. One of my favorite shows growing up was *M\*A\*S\*H*, about doctors at a front-line hospital during the Korean War. Little do people know, the theme song from that show is about suicide. Mental health specialists always ask if you have a "plan." I think that this is a joke. I imagine most combat veterans who are contemplating suicide have a plan. I tell them yes, I do have a plan. This is the truth. Then I am asked if I am going to act it out. It is important to take suicide seriously.

I have read about a pill that could make you forget your bad memories from the war. I don't think this is a good idea, either. It is those memories, both good and bad, that help make us who we are. I would not take that pill if it ever came onto the market. I want to have my bad memories; they have shaped and forged me into who I am as a person. I will deal with my PTSD as best I can. It beats the alternative.