

The Demons of War are Persistent: A Personal Story of Prolonged PTSD

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Forty years have passed since my deployment to Vietnam as a combat Marine. But it was only a few years ago when I acknowledged my inability to continue suppressing the demons. Like many veterans, the “demons” have haunted me through nightmares, altered personae, and hidden fears. Even as many veterans manage the demons’ onslaught successfully, millions survive in destitution, finding only solitude and social disconnection. Many consider themselves cowards. Should they concede to the demons’ hold? Countless live in denial and loneliness, protecting their warrior’s pride. The most vulnerable—tormented by guilt and feeling forever alone—often choose to end their lives.

As friends and family gather to celebrate another joyful holiday, I am melancholy, saddened by vivid memories of lost friendships and battlefield carnage that erratically seep through a vulnerable partition of my mind, from a cerebral hiding place where I concocted, decades before, mechanisms to survive in society. I unwittingly clutch at a profound loneliness as I avoid searching through memories of my youthful years. If I dare to gaze into my past, I transcend through a cloak of darkness weaved to restrain the demons from so many years before.

My pledge to God, Country, and Marine Corps was more than four decades ago. As a young, unproven warrior, I consented to the ancient rules of war. At eighteen, like many others, I was immersed in the ageless stench of death and carnage in the mountains and jungles of Vietnam. However, my journey began much earlier, on a sixty-mile bus ride with other nervous teenagers to New York City’s legendary Induction Center at 39 White Hall Street.

We went through lines of examinations and stood around for hours, recognizing one another's bare asses before we learned each other's names. We did not realize so many of us would remain together in squads and fire teams, building deep-seated bonds of friendship along our journey. Our initial shock indoctrination began immediately at Parris Island. Intimidating Drill Instructors (DIs) scrambled our disoriented butts off the bus, organized us into a semblance of a formation, and herded us into the barracks for a night of hell. Anxiety, second guessing our decision to join, and apprehension was our welcoming. Following what we thought would be sleep (actually a nap), we awoke to explosive clamor. DIs banged on tin garbage can lids next to our bunks, yelling, "Get up, you maggots!" Even the largest recruits trembled.

We remained maggots for the next few weeks and began intense physical and mental training, slowly recognizing the importance of "the team" instead of "the individual." The former had been entrenched into our minds. In less than sixteen weeks we were proud United States Marines. It was a short celebration, though, as we loaded our gear and headed, in order, to Camp Lejeune, Camp Pendleton, Okinawa, and then the Philippines, where we continued to enhance our stealth and killing skills. We would soon execute these talents on the already blood-soaked fields of Vietnam.

We argued and fought among ourselves as brothers often do. Still, we never lost sight of the bonds we shared: We were United States Marines, with an indisputable commitment to "always cover each other's back." Crammed into the bowels of Navy carrier ships, we slept in hammocks no more than three inches from the brother's butt above you. The sailors laughed as these self-proclaimed "bad-ass Marines" transformed into the wimpy "Helmet Brigade." We vomited into our skull buckets on our way to Okinawa, where we would engage in counter-guerrilla warfare training for days. Aware that we were going to Vietnam, we partied hard in every port. The first of our battles were slugfests in distant bar rooms.

Conversely, our minds were opened to the poverty and living conditions of famous islands in the Pacific. Their reputations preceded them. But John Wayne-style stories about the war in Japan were not what we found. Instead, we found overpopulated, dirty cities. We were barraged constantly by poor children seeking any morsel of food. In the fields, families lived in thatched huts with no electricity or sanitation. While training, I experienced the horror of being chased by a two-ton water buffalo (I had only *blanks* in my rifle). Moments before, this same beast was led around by a ring in its nose by a five-year-old boy. Worse than the chasing was hearing the laughter of brother Marines who watched me run full speed as I tried to find something to climb. I certainly did not feel as though I was playing the “macho” Marine and we were still thousands of miles from Vietnam.

In confidence, we spoke about our fears, hardships growing up, family, girlfriends, times of humiliation, prejudice, and what we planned to do in our lives once our tour of duty in Vietnam ended. We knew each other’s thoughts and spoke as though we would all return home alive, never considering death or defeat. We had not learned that lesson, yet. Moreover, we dreamed of going home as respected American warriors who had defended democracy in a remote, foreign land, standing proud, feeling a sense of accomplishment, and having experienced life, things that none of our friends at home would understand. “Our country called and we answered,” we thought.

We transferred to a converted WWII aircraft carrier that transported helicopters and Marines instead of jet planes. We were to traverse the coast of Vietnam and deploy by helicopter into combat zones from the Demilitarized Zone—the imaginary line separating North and South Vietnam—to the provinces and cities of Chu Lai and Da Nang. Then we were to go farther south, to the outer fringes of Vietnam’s largest city at the time, Saigon.

Within sight of land, we heard the roar of artillery and mortars as well as the familiar crackling of small-arms fire. We were accustomed to these sounds from

the months spent preparing ourselves for battle. However, for the first time we found that the sounds did not come from playing war games. Someone was likely dead. Anxiety, adrenaline highs, and fears of the unknown swirled within my mind. *Was I prepared? Could I kill another man? Would another man kill me?* From that point forward death was part of my life. We would eventually load into helicopters, descending into confrontations assured that we were young, invincible warriors. We were convinced that the South Vietnamese people needed us; many of them did. Thus, our mission was simple: save the innocent and banish the enemy to Hell!

The first time we touched down on Vietnamese soil we mechanically spread out in combat formation. Immediately, everything I was taught to watch out for rushed through my mind: *Was the enemy around us? Was I standing near an enemy grenade trap, or stepping toward a punji pit filled with sharpened bamboo spikes?* Seeing our company walk through the low brush gave me comfort until an unexpected explosion deafened our senses. We immediately hit the ground and went into combat mode, engaging our zones of fire. There was nothing to think about except engaging the enemy. We were ready for battle.

We waited but heard no gunfire or rockets exploding, only a few Marines speaking several hundred feet away. One yelled, “I can’t f’n believe it!” We learned, soon afterwards, that our first meeting with death was due to one of our brother’s grenade pins not being secured; we assumed it was pulled out by the underbrush. Regardless, he was dead. I felt the loss of youthful innocence gush away.

One engagement began with us being plunged into chaos from helicopters hovering a few feet off the ground. We anxiously leapt—some fell—into the midst of an already heated battle. The enemy sprung a deadly assault upon us. I became engrossed in the shock, fear, and adrenaline rush of battle. It was surreal! It was also not the time to ponder the killing of another human being, recall the rationale behind the ethics of war, or become absorbed in the horror of men

slaughtering each other. Thoughts of war's demons certainly were not on my mind.

When the killing ceased and the enemy withdrew, I remained motionless, exhausted from the fighting. With only a moment to think about what had just occurred, the shock, hate, and anger were buried under the gratitude of being alive. I had to find out which brothers did or did not survive. As I turned to view the combat zone, I witnessed the reality of war: dreams, friendships, and future plans vanished. We knelt beside our brothers, some dead, many wounded, and others screaming in pain. A few lay there dying silently.

As I moved about the carnage, I noticed a lifeless body, face-down and twisted abnormally in jungle debris. I pulled him gently from the tangled lair, unaware of the warrior I had found. He was masked in blood. I was overwhelmed with disgust and a primal obsession for revenge as I realized the he was my mentor, hero, and friend. I shouted at him as if he were alive: "Gunny, you can't be dead! You fought in WWII and Korea. Wake up! Wake up, Marine! I need you to fight beside me!" Tears flowed down my face as I held him close and whispered that he would not be forgotten. I placed him gently in a body bag and slowly pulled the zipper closed over his face; he was engulfed in darkness.

Navy Corpsmen, our extraordinary brothers, worked frantically to salvage traumatized bodies. We did our best to ease the pain of the wounded as they prayed to God Almighty. "With all my heart I love you, man," I told each friend I encountered. However, some never heard the words I said, unless they were listening from Heaven. I was unaware of the survivor's guilt brewing deep inside me. In two or three weeks our mission was completed and we flew by helicopter from the jungle to the safety of the ship. None of us rested, instead remembering faces and staring at the empty bunks of the friends who were not there. I prayed for the sun to rise slowly and delay the forthcoming ceremony for the dead.

Early the next morning, we stood in a military formation on the aircraft carrier's deck. I temporarily suppressed my emotions as I stared upon the dead.

Rows of military caskets—identical in design with an American flag meticulously draped over the top—made it impossible to distinguish which crates encased my closest friends. As taps played, tears descended. For the first time I understood: In war you never have a chance to say goodbye. I pledged speechlessly to each of my friends that they would never be forgotten, a solemn promise I regretfully kept over the years as nightmares and hallucinations.

Combat is vicious, rest is brief, and destroying the enemy was our mission. We fought our skillful foes in many battles, until they or we were dead, wounded, or overwhelmed. Engaging enemy troops was horrific in both jungles and villages. We had to either accept or build psychological boundaries around the terror. Nonexistent were the lines of demarcation; we constantly struggled to identify which Vietnamese was a friend and which was a foe. The tormenting acknowledgement that a woman or child might be an enemy combatant had to be confronted; it was often an overwhelming decision to make.

I was not aware of the change in my demeanor. In time, I realized I had adjusted emotionally to contend with the atrocities and finality of war. I acquired stamina, could endure the stench of death, eliminate enemy combatants with little or no remorse, suppress memories of fallen companions, and avoid forming new, deep-rooted friendship. I struggled to accept the feasibility of a loving Lord. I never detected the nameless demons embedding themselves inside of me.

At the end of my tour, I packed minimal gear and left the jungle battlefields of Vietnam for America, never turning to bid farewell and in no way wanting to smell the pungent stench of death and fear again. Within seventy two hours I was on the street I had left fourteen months prior, a street untouched by war, poverty, genocide, hunger, or fear. I was home. I was alone. Matured well beyond my chronological age of nineteen, I was psychologically and emotionally confused. I had to transform from a slayer back into a (so-called) civilized man.

Except for family members and several high school friends, returning home from Vietnam was demeaning for most of us. There were no bands or cheers of



appreciation or feelings of accomplishment. Instead, we were shunned and ridiculed for fighting in a war that our government assured us was crucial and for an honorable cause. I soon found that family, friends, and co-workers could never truly understand the events that transformed me in those fourteen months.

I changed from a teenage boy to a battle-hardened man. I was not able to engage in trivial conversations or take part in the adolescent games many of my friends still played. For them, life did not change, and “struggle” was a job or the “unbearable” pressure of college. It did not take me long to realize that they would never understand. There is no comparison between homework and carrying a dead companion.

The media played their biased games of criticizing the military, never mentioning the thousands of Vietnamese saved from mass execution, rape, torture, or the other atrocities of a brutal northern regime. They never showed the stories of American “heroes” who gave their lives, bodies, and minds to save innocent people caught in the clutches of a “controversial” war. For years, my transition back to society was uncertain. I struggled against unknown demons and perplexing social fears. I abandoned searching for surviving comrades or ever engaging in conversations of Vietnam.

Worse, I fought alone to manage recurring nightmares. I locked it all away in a chamber of my mind labeled, "Do not open! Horrors, chaos, and lost friends from Vietnam." However, suppressing dark memories is almost impossible. Random sounds, smells, or even words unleash nightmares, depression, anxiety and the seepage of bitterness. I still fight to keep these emotions locked away inside me.

Today, my youth has long since passed and middle age is drifting progressively behind me. Still, echoes of lost souls seep through the decomposing barriers fabricated in my mind. Vivid memories of old friends, death, guilt, and anger sporadically persevere. There may be no end, resolution, or limitations to the demons’ voices. They began as whispers and have since

intensified in my mind. "Help me, buddy!" I still hear them scream. Nightmares jolt me from my slumber. I wake and shout, "I'm here! I'm here my friend," and envision their ghostly, blood-soaked bodies. Even today, I wonder if more Marines would be alive if I had fought more fiercely. "I had to kill!" I tell myself.

Visions of lost friends and foes hauntingly reappear at inappropriate times. Guilt consumes my consciousness as I wonder why I did the things I did. I also question why I survived. More dreadful, however, is the conflicting torment I feel when I acknowledge that I am thankful it was me instead of others.

Regardless of the war a person fights, I am sure many of the memories are similar to mine, as many of mine are similar to others'. I never recognized the persistency of the demons. I did not notice as they matured each time I thought I had beat them. No, they were simply hiding deep within my soul. Disguised and deep-rooted, these demons caused anxiety, loneliness, depression, alcohol abuse, nightmares, and suicidal thoughts, traits that haunted most men from our war. For thirty-five years I would not admit having these demons in my mind, believing medical assistance was a weakness among men.

It was not until the first Gulf War began that I sensed the demons bursting from within. No matter how hard I tried to avoid them, I saw vivid images of my own war within the news coverage, in every aspect of that war. The bodies and faces in the media were not strangers to me. Instead, they were my brothers from a much older and forgotten war. I sought refuge with VA doctors and peers. Today, they help me understand that PTSD is real. Asking for help did not make this warrior less of a man.

Semper Fi!