

Not Alone



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Just before I entered the small meeting room for my fourth group therapy session at the VA, my psychiatrist motioned me to his office. This was not unusual. He often spoke to me before my session when his schedule permitted, and I appreciated those brief moments. After several months of one-on-one therapy sessions, I had gained a level of trust with him that I have shared with very few people since the atrocities of war in Vietnam.

But this time I sensed I was about to receive a suggestion I may not be ready for. In his normal reassuring demeanor he shook my hand and asked me to sit down. I immediately felt my anxiety build, not from fear, but anticipation. "Art," he said, "it is time for you to move to the next level of therapy."

"And what is that?" I asked, as if I did not know.

During the previous group sessions, I had listened to other veterans' stories and participated in several meaningful conversations, but I had not yet told my own story. "It is time for you to begin disclosing the agony lodged within you with the rest of the group," he told me.

He rose from his chair and patted me on my shoulder and left his office, leaving me to sit in silence for the next few minutes to absorb the full meaning of what he asked me to do.

I knew it would be okay with him if I delayed discussing my personal struggles for another session. At fifty-eight years old talking about my nightmares, panic attacks, and depression with a fine psychiatrist doing his best to help me cope was not the same as engaging others who had experienced the emotional conflicts of combat. I would wait to see how the session was progressing before making my decision.

I looked at my watch and realized I was going to be a few minutes late for our group session. My anxiety level rose. Ever since my experiences in combat, I have been obsessed with being on time. I have demanded it of myself, and expected it from family, friends, and even employees throughout my corporate career. I started every meeting on time and locked the meeting room door for those who consistently showed up late. It was only years later, here in these small gatherings with other veterans, that I understood my fixation on timeliness. The connection was rather simple: in combat not being in your firing position, or flanking the enemy on time, could cause death.

I entered the windowless classroom just as our group leader was closing the door. I knew one of the guys already seated would make a comment, and he did not disappoint. "Hey Mr. timeliness," he said. "You are late!" We all laughed, as I sat down in the open chair in the semi-circle reserved for the "late ass."

Looking around the room at my fellow veterans, who all served in Vietnam, I remembered my reluctance four weeks earlier to join group

therapy. But my psychiatrist had convinced me that the proper group may help to heal the anxiety, depression, and guilt I suppressed in tormented memories. I told him I would try it the following week, and for the next several days I regretted making that commitment. For thirty-five years I had not spoken to anyone about the war and the inhumanities we encountered, or sought out any of my Marine Corps buddies who had made that journey through Hell with me.

I imagined guys sitting in a room telling *Rambo*-type war stories. Old men, telling each other what they could have been, how life screwed them, or arguing that their tour of duty was worse than the others. And I had no desire to listen to someone who had a desk job and was safe throughout his tour telling stories of his war exploits. Nothing against those not in the line of fire, everyone had an important job to do, but I had low expectations that the sessions would help me.

But who was I to know what was best. The VA doctors did a very good job of blending members of our group together. All but one of the eight-person group were in combat in Vietnam. A few lived with physical combat disabilities, and one spent decades in psychiatric care.

The one veteran that did not participate in combat was respectful, did not try to fit in by telling bogus war stories, and spoke very little. It was not until some gentle probing by the group leader, a compassionate sociologist, that he told us about his experiences, which he felt weren't as significant as ours. Speaking softly, he said one of his primary duties was unloading hundreds of body bags a week off helicopters, all holding the remains of kids his age. Later he helped

load the coffins on airplanes for the journey home for those unappreciated heroes.

As I listened, my eyes filled with tears and I saw images of the dead friends I zipped into the same type bags he mentioned. I wondered if he handled any of my friends and if he treated the standard black bags with honor. I also thought about his desolation and wanted to ask him how he felt when he lifted a bag and realized it was unstable, filled with a warrior's body parts rolling about inside, instead of an intact body. But I knew my questions could wait until he was ready to discuss them. That was an unmentioned condition of group therapy. As he continued, I realized for the first time that the agony and haunting memories of war are not felt only by those in battle.

It was never easy to cry or to witness a group of older men crying, especially knowing the emotional pain that had been bound within them for decades. But we respected each other, and our weekly sessions helped us to share our common frustrations, guilt and anger, and happier moments as well.

We did not resolve all of our problems, nor did we expect to, but for that hour I knew that others “had my back.” I realized I had been unconsciously searching for that since I left active duty. It was a special bond I shared with fellow Marines, close friends, or even those I disliked, that was ingrained in us during Marine Corps training, and reinforced time and again in the jungles of Vietnam.

Of course, there have been people since the war that I have considered friends. But only a rare few met my subconscious criteria of someone who would die for me, with me confident that I would do

the same for him. This expectation has had a direct effect on my feelings of loneliness, but my criteria have not changed, nor do I expect they will.

Group therapy is not the cure-all for the aftermath of trauma. But it helped me understand myself, my life's choices, and the rationale for the decisions I made, and continue to make. We were there to help each other fight the common demons of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, deeply embedded within us. Understanding this, we set aside our differences and focused on the current battle we had in common.

During that fourth session it was my turn. The group leader asked me if I would like to speak about my demons, starting with my overall thoughts of my tour in Vietnam, and focusing on what I accomplished, instead of what I lost. I knew my time had come to discuss my feelings with the group. After a long hesitation, I told them my greatest accomplishment in Vietnam was the hundreds of people our teams personally saved from rape, torture, or savage death.

I did not believe the frustration I held inside me would flow so easily, and I continued in a somewhat aggressive manner. "We did not give a damn about the politicians and college students arguing back home, or running off to Canada to avoid the draft," I said. "We were enlisted Marines, on the front lines, protecting innocent people caught up in a horrific war. We lost the war because we were not given the opportunity to win it. It was a political and social farce that resulted in us being branded 'baby killers' and losers!" It was a brief statement, but we would come back to it for several sessions to discuss the agony and humiliation we all shared.

After my emotional start, and aware this topic would not be resolved during that session, the group leader allowed me to sit there silently and compose myself. A few moments later, he asked me to speak about my most positive moment, if there is such a thing in combat.

"My most positive moment," I continued, "was when I lifted a three-year-old girl from the rubble that separated her from her parents, who had been slaughtered the night before by the Viet Cong for giving us rice. Though traumatized and trembling in fear, she reached up to me. I knelt beside her and cradled her gently in my arms. It might be my aging imagination, but I thought for sure for a brief moment I made her smile. I handed her to one of our extraordinary corpsmen, and continued to seek out the enemy who committed these atrocious murders. It was then that I understood why I was in Vietnam."

I had obscured that moment of compassion for decades until this small therapy group encouraged me to glance back and look for positive events tangled within my worst memories of war. I remember several group members telling me, "You have to keep that memory proudly in your heart, when the worst memories overtake you."

The group leader asked me to talk about my post-war years, an area where he knew I had some success. I told them that when I left the Marines after four years, I was youthful and confident in myself. I had no clue what depression and anxiety were, and I thought the nightmares were personal and temporary. I was determined to look forward, not backwards to the war. Unfortunately, today I realize that while constantly looking forward helped me avoid chaotic memories

of war, it also cloaked the memories of my formative younger years, and positive events throughout my life.

I have never relished talking about myself, and wanted to stop, but the group asked me to continue. As peers, they knew I needed to feel a purpose and not to think my life was a second-rate existence. I was reluctant. I knew many of the vets in the room had succumbed to PTSD early in life and did not fare as well as I had. I felt I was about to sound like a wimp, or worse, a self-centered ass.

Awkwardly, I began to tell them about my career after Vietnam. My first recollection was one they all understood. I went through eleven or twelve jobs feeling totally out of place. Sales managers gathered their teams, and with fanatical enthusiasm told us how great we were, and that together we would attain the highest sales, whipping all other regions. To me, compared to combat in the jungles of Vietnam, this was a game.

Feeling extremely frustrated within the environment of civilian life, I was ready to head back to the military. Instead I got married to my current wife of 42 years, who will tell you that living with a type-A personality with PTSD is often a living hell, especially since she had no idea what I was battling. But neither did I. Like millions of warriors before me, I never spoke to anyone about the war, or the nightmares that abruptly woke me, soaked in sweat and tears.

I pursued a career in business and excelled. Initially, traveling to other countries was great, but twenty-one hour flights to Bangkok or Singapore got old quick. The boredom and repetition were major catalysts for my emotional setbacks; having too much time to think was a recipe for falling hard into the bowels of PTSD. Anger,

frustrations, mood swings, and depression were common. I had stopped moving forward, and spent more time battling the memories of the past. It was then that I understood the demons never leave; they simply wait for a sliver of weakness to overwhelm you. They are persistent.

I had dealt with this on my own until the First Gulf War in 1990, when everywhere I turned I saw vivid pictures of death, battles, and impoverished families. I couldn't escape the memories of Vietnam. I still did not accept I had PTSD, but my brother-in-law, who had been treated for it for years, was persistent and talked me into getting a quick check up. Three psychiatrists later, I was diagnosed with PTSD and for the first time understood about the demons I had been fighting alone for forty years.

The road would be a long one, and my demons would continue to haunt me with nightmares, depression, memory loss, anxiety, and the need for solitude. But in that small, windowless classroom of the group therapy session, I was no longer alone.

