



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

I Suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Part 3

by James Glaser

When I started this series I gave the following definition for what Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is, but there are hundreds if not thousands of definitions to choose from if you search them out. I learned from other veterans that each person with PTSD has symptoms that appear to be the same, but when you get to know vets well, you find that their symptoms and their methods of coping with them vary just as much as the traumatic events that caused their stress in the first place.

The definition of PTSD is: “A debilitating condition that often follows a terrifying physical or emotional event causing the person who survived the event to have persistent, frightening thoughts and memories, or flashbacks, of the ordeal. Persons with PTSD often feel chronically, emotionally numb. Once [referred to](#) as ‘shell shock’ or ‘battle fatigue’”.

I have met vets who have lost limbs, are scarred up, limp, or walk with the white cane of the blind, and you don't have to even wonder what caused their troubles. Others have physical wounds and scars you don't readily see, but they are affected the same way. As an example, I met a vet who had to jump into a small pool of water during a firefight. A couple of hours later, when the battle was over, he found that his body was covered with leaches, which left permanent scars all over him from his chest down. While swimming in our lake in Minnesota, I found how hard it was to notice a leach on my foot and what a nasty looking creature it was. A little salt made it let go, but even having it on there for just a little while left a small scar on the top of my foot. Having hundreds of them on his body for a few hours would not only freak a man out when he saw them, it would leave his skin looking very bad.

I saw one vet with his shirt off when we were playing basketball, and he had a huge chunk out of his back with a series of scars across his chest that looked as though someone had taken an ice cream scoop and made holes all over him. I know every time this guy looked at his body, the memories of his being wounded would flood back.

Veterans have every kind of wound imaginable, and many that no one could imagine. It seems understandable that veterans with these wounds could suffer from combat stress for years, maybe for a lifetime.

There is another group that suffers the same combat stress as those I just described, but this group has no physical scars to remind them of their time in combat. I think a good example is the corpsman who had to deal with the Marine who had all the leaches on his body. Remember, corpsmen in the Marines and medics in the Army are not doctors; they are just soldiers and Marines who have been sent to a course in advanced first aid. In wartime, that course can be as short as six weeks, and they are expected to deal with sucking chest wounds, blown-off limbs, intestines coming out of the stomach, and, who would guess, a body covered with leaches.

Then there are young men and now women in combat who have to deal with wounded in their unit. The best corpsman or medic can deal with only one person at a time, and so there are many times when a soldier or Marine who is not trained as a medic is put into a position in which he has to administer first aid to keep his comrade alive.

American troops are constantly dealing with wounded civilians. Helping the severely wounded child is hard. In a tour of duty in a combat zone, there could be many times that any one soldier will have to deal with dead bodies or parts of them. That would be our dead and the enemy's dead.

Somebody has to put our dead into body bags to get them to the rear, and then Graves Registration personnel have to take those bodies back out of that body bag, clean them up, identify them, and get them ready for the trip home in the flag-draped coffin.

So knowing all of this, because of the year I had already spent working with Dr. Russell at the Minneapolis VA PTSD unit and talking to fellow vets in the clinic's waiting room, I was wondering what the vets would be like at Tomah.

Like most vets, I thought I was in pretty good shape, but all these other guys were really sick. I just needed a tune-up; these other guys needed a complete overhaul. Of course, all of them were thinking the same about me.

Arrival at Tomah

I am not going to give you a day-to-day report on the Tomah PTSD program, but I will let you see a bit of what they did for me. There were eight guys in my group, and we stayed together almost to the end. One guy dropped out.

Starting out, they gave us a complete physical and a few of the guys were in rough shape after living on the streets for years, but most were healthy and looked to be fit. None of us knew the other, and so we were assigned rooms (two to a room) by luck of the draw. We had one floor on one wing of the hospital along with a group of vets who had started the program four weeks before we came.

The guys who had been there before us seemed to me to be in terrible shape, but I would find that we would deteriorate pretty rapidly in the weeks to come. Bringing out everything about our combat experience — everything we had fought so hard to keep hidden for years — would do that.

So that first week was used to start our group getting to know each other and to get us started on a journal. We could start writing about any time of our life: when we were six years old, or when we joined the service, or when we went to Vietnam, but every day we were supposed to spend time writing in it. Every week the doctors would spend some time reading the journals, and if one of us didn't work on his, he was told to do so. For some guys this was hard because they never wrote anything, and for others it was a way of getting things out that they couldn't talk about in the open. I found a little room that doctors used to write things on medical charts, and they let me use it to write each night after most of the staff had left.

We had one floor on one wing in one of the many huge hospital buildings at Tomah. At one end of the floor we had a smoking/reading room where we could all get together and talk. The coffee pot was always on in there. At the other end of the floor, there was a recreation room that had a bar-size pool table and an exercise bike. I can't remember there being a television.

There were veterans from all over the country, and I remember there being one from Delaware and another from Wyoming in our group, with the rest from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Each of us had been an enlisted man — two of us had been Marines, one had been in the Navy, and the other five all had been in the Army. We had a couple of guys who had been living on the streets, two guys who were corporation presidents, a county veterans' service officer, a carpenter, an accountant, and one guy who would never tell us how he made a living.

After a few hours in the smoking room I noticed that we had all fallen back into talking as though we had left Nam a week ago. Lots and lots of swearing and lots of slang were used. We were kind of feeling each other out, finding out when and where a guy served — I guess trying to figure out if my war was anything like their war and vice versa.

We had to walk what seemed like a mile through connected buildings to get to the cafeteria for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. There was no leaving the grounds, and even if we wanted to go for a walk we had to check in with the floor nurse to go out and come back in. There were two floor nurses on duty 24/7, and if things got hard for us, we could always have a talk with one of them.

That first week was orientation, and after that the fun began. As I look back on it now, the whole program was very interesting. I found some parts to be very helpful and others to be a waste of my time, but I am sure some of the things I thought were a waste, were beneficial to others.

Next month I'll tell you about the structured program we started after that first week of settling in.

[James Glaser](#), a Marine Corps Vietnam War veteran and former commander of American Legion Post 499 and former commander of Veterans of Foreign War Post 3869, both posts in Northome, Minnesota, works to educate the American public on the consequences of war. He now resides in Tallahassee, Florida.

This article was originally published in the December 2007 edition of *Freedom Daily*.