



# **Life After Combat**

**Ken Jones, PhD**

**In 1967- 68 I was a track commander with the 11<sup>th</sup> Cavalry.**

**I started in the Iron Triangle working with the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne – Operation Junction City. Then we went north to central I Corp and worked with the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, and ROK Marines.**

**In October of '67 we were redeployed to the Cambodian border west of Loc Ninh, working with the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division and elements of the 101<sup>st</sup>.**

**During Tet '68 we joined the 101<sup>st</sup> in retaking Bien Hoa and then moved back into the Iron Triangle. The last time I got blown up was eight days before I was due to come home.**

**The result of these actions for me was a serious dose of combat induced PTSD. I sucked up the pain for 12 years. In 1980 I stopped by the Vet Center in Anchorage, Alaska because I thought I was going insane. It was there that I began the long journey home. [When Our Troops Come Home](#)**

**Along the way I wrote a book, , about what it felt like to try to recover some sense of a meaningful life after combat. I also spent eight years as a volunteer and staff counselor at the Anchorage Vet Center.**

**American troops are again returning from foreign wars. Again troops and their families will struggle to understand and resolve the effects of combat.**

**Across the generations Vietnam veterans are reaching out to welcome troops home – and to make sure that this generation of warriors will not have to endure what we did. *Life After Combat* is one such effort to help.**

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# Contents

<b>An Introduction to Life After Combat</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Cultural Identity</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Traditional Initiation</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Military Initiation</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Immersion in Absurdity</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>The Acute Trauma Threshold - Part 1</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>The Acute Trauma Threshold – Part 2</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Combat Survivor Profile - The Hawkeye</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Combat Survivor Profile - The Grunt</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Love in an Altered State</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Other Time</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Survivor Guilt</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Combat Induced Depression</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>It Will Never Be the Same</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Emotional and Existential Death</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Different Cultural Identities</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>The Journey Home</b>	<b>34</b>

# An Introduction to Life After Combat

**“I’ve had twenty-five jobs in the past fifteen years and every boss I’ve had was a jerk.”**

**“When my son was about six he was attacked by a dog. It took seventy-two stitches to sew his scalp back together. He was alive when they got him to the hospital and the medics were working on him. I remember wondering why everyone was so concerned. I didn’t feel anything.”**

**“I can’t stand it when my wife has to go to the store or to a meeting at night. The whole time she’s gone my stomach is in knots. I keep waiting for a phone call that something bad has happened to her.”**

**“I know lots of people, but I don’t have any friends. I don’t know anybody I’d trust enough to let them walk point.”**

**“Everything is temporary - my job, my marriage, my house. I don’t want it to be that way, but I know better than to rely on anything.”**

**Combat survivors commonly express comments, observations, feelings like these. This way of seeing and being in the world is the result of high intensity, extended duration, life threatening stress.**

**The clinical label for this perspective on the world is Post Traumatic Stress. The clinical terms applied to feelings and behaviors, like those cited above, are words like alienation, emotional numbing, mistrust, cynicism, and expectation of betrayal.**

**For those who have not experienced the trauma of combat it can be very difficult to understand how anyone could have, what appears to be, such a distorted view of the world. What noncombatants sometimes do not understand is that these perceptions, feelings and behaviors are a predictable reaction to intense trauma that is outside the range of normal human experience.**

**All too often the collective social reaction to such traumatized individuals is the technological imperative to “fix it.” The advantage of having a clinical**

**label to apply to someone is that we are able to distance ourselves from the immediacy of the pain the person is experiencing.**

**As long as we can use symptoms to define human beings we can continue the illusion of our own invulnerability. We have the luxury of active uninvolvedness.**

**“There’s something wrong with those men and women. Best leave it to the professionals to treat their problem.” Such an approach to trauma is common.**

**It’s safe. No one wants to be reminded that they’re only one dark night in a parking lot away from being a survivor.**

**The problem with combat survivors is that they have questions - questions that have no simple answers and frequently are beyond the current social context. Their questions are about fundamental human issues of loss, betrayal and abandonment.**

**Far better to label combat survivors with a safe set of symptoms than to listen and consider the implications of their questions - questions that demand personal accountability.**

**What happened to these people we sent to Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam; to Korea, to Europe and the Pacific during the Second World War? How is it that many of them seem to have such distorted views? How is it that they raise such unsettling questions? How is it that our young combat veterans have a personal sense of being so very, very old?**

**One way of understanding is to view trauma as a process. Combat induced trauma is a relentless progression that tears the mind, breaks the heart, and shatters the soul.**

**Years ago, at the Anchorage Vet Center, we learned to describe this process of traumatization in four phases: Immersion in Absurdity, the Acute Trauma Threshold, Survival and “Homecoming.”**

**One way of thinking about this kind of traumatic stress is to look at three related components:**

- Physiological Trauma**
- Psychological or Emotional Trauma**
- Spiritual or Existential Trauma**

**Physiological trauma includes physical injury and conditions like traumatic brain injury resulting from explosions. There are also changes in brain chemistry that occur as the result of extended exposure to combat.**

**Psychological trauma is the result of being emotionally overrun by combat. This often results in things like alienation, emotional numbing, mistrust, cynicism, and an expectation of betrayal.**

**Spiritual or existential trauma occurs when an individual experiences events that shatter the personal beliefs that create a sense of meaning and purpose.**

**Killing the cultural god is one form of spiritual trauma. Another is an intuitive sense of having lost the Self as the result of combat.**

**The thousand yard stare and the feeling of being very, very old in a young person's body are ways that combat troops experience this component of trauma.**

## **Cultural Identity**

**An intuitive awareness that the Self has died is a common result of combat induced trauma. Question: What is it that is lost when we speak of the death of the Self?**

**Our beliefs determine how we see and react to the world around us. Beliefs are emotionally charged assumptions.**

**The result of the collective belief system of a people is referred to as**

**culture. In general terms culture is the specific set of symbols, institutions, ceremonies, acts, and behaviors that confirm a peoples' beliefs and convey a sense of shared meaning and purpose. It is this belief system around which the individual members of the culture organize their lives.**

**The process of learning expected behaviors, cultural limits, a common view of the world and the individual's place in it is referred to as enculturation. Enculturation is the civilizing process to which we subject our children in expectation of directing them toward becoming contributing members of society.**

**A principal tool in the civilizing process is the threat or actual exposure of a individual to rejection. For a child perceived rejection can range from a change in a parent's tone of voice, to a smack on the bottom for running heedlessly into the street, to the physical and emotional violence characteristic of child abuse.**

**The threat or actual occurrence of perceived rejection by a child is common in the American enculturation process. As a result, a child begins to learn that there are very specific limits within which he or she must function in order to avoid rejection, either real or threatened.**

**Defining himself or herself in terms of imposed limits leads a child to a "cultural identity" based on "what I do" or "what I have." When I have this or behave in this way I am acceptable and have value. I avoid rejection.**

**As a child develops into adolescence it is normal to test the limits of the cultural boundaries, both family and social. In traditional cultures it is at this point that the tribal elders intervene. The traditional method of intervention is the initiation ceremony.**

## **Traditional Initiation**

**All traditional initiation ceremonies involve a three-part process of separation, indoctrination, and return to the community with a recognized change in status.**

**For adolescent girls initiation tends to be a passive process that occurs at the onset of menstruation. A common ritual involves the young girl being led to a hut apart from the village. Here, set apart from the community and her childhood, she spends several days.**

**She may receive instruction from certain women of the village. This time apart, however, is primarily a time of solitude during which the girl contemplates the mystery of her being which is the giver and sustainer of life.**

**At the conclusion of this time apart she is returned to the village with a recognized change in her social status. Leaving the community as a girl, she has returned as a woman.**

**For adolescent boys in traditional cultures, however, the process is not usually passive. As with girls, the process of initiation for boys involves the totality of their experience. It is physical, psychological, and spiritual.**

**The men of the community take the boy away, often over the wailing, symbolic protest of the mother. Once separated, the boy is subjected to a variety of trials, both physical and psychological.**

**Physical mutilation is common. Circumcision at this time is often one of the physical trials to be endured. The indoctrination into manhood is a mystery for which the boy can present himself, but for which he cannot be truly prepared.**

**The essence of indoctrination for the boy is that of an ordeal which must be survived. Interwoven in the process are the spiritual aspects related in sacred ritual and ceremony.**

**Survival, both real and symbolic, of the initiation process conveys a new identity of manhood on the boy. He is returned to the community, usually with great celebration, where his new identity as a man is recognized and affirmed.**

**As a man he now has rights and incurs the obligation to participate in family, in the community, and in the world. This includes both its physical and spiritual aspects.**

**The two alternatives in American culture that most closely approximate the rite of initiation, as it appears in traditional societies, are entry into a religious order, and induction into the military.**

## **Military Initiation**

**Initiation into the military must be endured and survived. The physical separation of the individual from the community is apparent. There is also the symbolic separation. Shaving the head, turning in civilian clothes, and the issuance of uniforms are all symbolic of the separation.**

**The continual rejection in the form of deliberate harassment by Drill Instructors and cadre is intentionally designed to separate an individual from his civilian identity.**

**The separation process occurs within the first few days. The indoctrination process takes place over the succeeding weeks.**

**Indoctrination involves physical, emotional and existential rejection directed toward the individual. Physical training is intense. Physical punishment is common and expected - an ordeal to be endured.**

**Emotional indoctrination initially takes the form of intentional verbal abuse designed to discount and eliminate personal identity in the form of individual thought. The military indoctrination process does not want conscious, individual thought; it seeks instead collective unit reaction.**

**Anyone who has been through military initiation is familiar with the Drill Instructor's monotone diatribe that begins, "When you left home you were in your mother's care. You are now under mine."**

**Emotional involvement with the past has no place in the indoctrination process of future soldiers. The "Dear John" or "Dear Jane" letters, which routinely arrive during basic training, serve to confirm this separation from the past and from the civilian world.**

**The lesson becomes clearer over the weeks. You cannot trust anyone except the people with whom you work and endure day to day. Forget the past. Your prior identity is without meaning or significance. Concentrate. Learn. React. Become part of a team.**

**This is the basis of survival. The military cultural identity is the only one that is acceptable. Cooperate and graduate.**

**The indoctrination process is also designed to escalate the level of stress and threat to which a trainees will expose themselves. For example, bayonet training does not occur until the middle period of the indoctrination process. The “Live Fire” range, where trainees crawl through and around obstacles, while live machinegun rounds are fired over their heads, does not occur until the next to the last week of the indoctrination.**

**Adolescents, who only six weeks before were “on the block” asserting their independence and were tacitly, if not overtly, challenging the cultural boundaries, now function in unison. Crawling together through mud and under barbed wire while explosives are detonated around them and live rounds are fired over them, is a testimonial to the intensity and effectiveness of the military initiation process.**

**The culmination, of course, is graduation. Graduation is itself a ceremony. Companies are arrayed in dress uniforms, colored ribbon affixed above the top left pocket. Demonstrated proficiency with weapons are displayed by the marksmanship badge adorning the uniform.**

**Spectators and senior officers in the reviewing stands face the initiates. Words of commendation, acceptance and recognition are spoken by an officer. The command to “Pass in Review” is given.**

**Companies, in practiced unison, execute a right turn and two left turns to pass before the elders of the tribe, each step in cadence with the traditional music of the military band.**

**Most important, on arrival back in the company area, there is a noticeable change between the young soldiers and their Drill Instructors. While there is still the distance of rank between them, the relationship has altered.**

The young men and women are now accepted as members of the profession of arms. Over the weeks of indoctrination the transition in cultural identity has occurred. As an accepted member of the military, the young soldier has incurred the “right of military initiation” and with it the obligations of the “defender of the country.”

These rights and obligations are carefully orchestrated around the “ideal of brotherhood” associated with military initiation.

The Basic Training graduation scene in the film *Full Metal Jacket* is an excellent example of the result of military initiation. The Senior Drill Instructor intones the benediction.

*“Today you people are no longer maggots. You are Marines. You’re part of a brotherhood. Until the day you die, wherever you are, every Marine is your brother. Most of you will go to Vietnam. Some of you will not come back. Marines die. That’s what we’re here for, but the Marine Corps lives forever. And that means you live forever.”*

This is the nature of cultural identity in the military. It is an identity that is proud, an identity that has honor as its core. This is the identity that is taken into combat. It is the identity I took to Vietnam.

## Immersion in Absurdity

Immersion in absurdity occurred during the first thirty to one hundred and twenty days in the field for American ground troops in Vietnam.

Remember how it was? Isolated and vulnerable. Trying to think your way through a mission, through a day, through a moment. Aware that you were suspect. Veterans kept a wary eye on you. You were a threat. You were ignorant and your ignorance could get them killed.

Patrol. Scared and wondering if it got worse? Trying to do what the old-timers did and never getting it quite right.

**Snap. A round fired. Crack. Crack. M-16s respond. People drop and roll. You're three rounds slow putting your face in the dirt. Mentally kicking yourself for not reacting fast enough.**

**Gunfire. Individual rounds indistinguishable, lost in the roar that rises and dissipates like the sound of a titan yawning. The adrenalin backed up all the way to your throat.**

**"This way!"**

**He's talking to you. Your legs start moving even though your mind knows better. This is insane! You dive for cover beside the man you are following.**

**It's over. The firing stopped. The old-timer beside you lights a cigarette. It's over and you never saw a thing.**

**"You're too slow," he comments as he exhales the cigarette smoke.**

**"What now," you ask?**

**He shrugs. "Wait for the dust off, keep your eyes open, and take a break."**

**A break? The words are audible but he's talking to himself. "Lucky we weren't on point. We always take fire from that ville."**

**Medevac chopper inbound. Dust off. Through the blowing dirt two grunts carry a sagging form to the bird. The chopper lifts then banks hard left and is gone.**

**Grunts rise from the earth. Come on line. Fifteen meter intervals. Sweep toward the ville. You join them. The only thing worse than walking toward the ville is being left behind.**

**Thatched huts. Cooking fires. Women and children and old men. Conical hats. Somebody just got shot and there's nothing here. Pay attention cherry!**

**Immersion in absurdity. The personal sense of isolation and vulnerability, the massive adrenalin rushes, thinking instead of anticipating and reacting.**

**The reality pushes itself into conscious awareness. Everything can kill you. It's not just the NVA and the VC. It's the snakes, the bugs, the rivers, the heat, the women, the children, "friendly fire".**

**"I remember sitting on a hillside. Charlie would drop rounds on us and we'd dive for our holes. Our artillery would open up and we'd climb out. There were three or four of us sitting around...new guys...hell, we'd been in Vietnam all day. One of the old-timers was with us. We could hear the rounds from our artillery going over the hill. You know, that sounds like a train or something?"**

**"One of the guys asked the sarge how you could tell the sound of incoming from friendly fire? The sarge finished off his can of C's, then he looked at the cherry. 'Well, there's theirs and there's ours...but there ain't none of it friendly.'"**

**Remember? Your gradual acceptance by the old-timers, if you survived. Your first direct experience with violent death and loss. Heat. Rain. Leeches. Elephant grass. Body bags. Exhaustion. Nothing made sense. The immersion in absurdity. Participation by rationalization.**

**The average age of American combatants in Vietnam was 19.6 years. Nineteen years of enculturation and participation in the initiation into the military. A cultural identity grounded in the American mystique and military brotherhood.**

**Day by day, casualty by casualty, moment by moment the ideas, assumptions and expectations about what war was, what combat was, what could keep you alive began to change.**

**Vietnam was no longer America at war. It was trying to stay alive and shut out the sounds and sights and smells and, most of all, the feelings of horror, and loss, and despair.**

**Nothing prepared young soldiers for what they experienced in Vietnam. Nothing could have. Combat is beyond the range of normal human experience. People are there and then they're gone. They vanish in a body bag or on a medevac. The relentless progression of loss.**

**The cultural identity young men took to Vietnam became irrelevant. The**

symbols, rituals, ideals and assumptions that protect a human being in the normal cultural context became children's daydreams.

Then it happened, the specific incident that was the portal through which an enculturated human being passed to become a survivor. The incident referred to as the Acute Trauma Threshold.

In that moment the earth's axis shifted. What was tropical became arctic. The Iceman became a living presence. A survivor was born.

## The Acute Trauma Threshold - Part 1

The new guy attempted to make sense of what was actually happening in the bush. Reality didn't fit his expectations. The assumptions of a nineteen-year-old were eroded by the continual exposure to loss - unreconciled loss, inescapable loss.

He participated by rationalization. Trying desperately to use the psychological defense mechanisms learned during the enculturation process, to ward off the fear, vulnerability, and confusion that are the reality of combat.

Trying to hold onto a sense of identity...to family, to values, to something, anything that would protect him from the reality of violent death and mutilation. Still thinking. Too slow. Vulnerable and scared.

Then it happens. The critical incident. The event that opens and propels an enculturated human being into the infinite emptiness of beyond. The Acute Trauma Threshold is an event/moment frozen in time.

The cultural façade is ripped away. The symbols of the individual's cultural identity are obliterated. Mirrored in the glacial, staring eyes of the participant is the shrill, silent scream echoing in the abyss of eternity.

All the life experience that has proceeded this moment is irrelevant. *It don't mean nothin'.*

My personal experience with the Acute Trauma Threshold was the [incident with 37](#) that I wrote about in the first chapter of *When Our Troops Come Home*.

Another of my Brothers recounted his experience this way.

“Art and I were tight...brothers. It was on the border. There were only five of us. Recon team. We walked right into it. The shit really hit the fan. We were outgunned big time. We had to get out...we started falling back...hell, we were running.”

“Art had been on point. I was behind him. The rest of the team covered us while we ran back. Rounds were flying everywhere. I heard Art stop to fire so I turned. He took a burst right in the chest.”

“I ran back to him...I could see the dinks comin. I was firing and screaming at Art...‘Come on! We got to get outta’ here!’ The team was screaming at me to move.”

“I kept yelling at him but he didn’t move...I tried to drag him...It was no good. I grabbed his throat to check for a pulse. There wasn’t one...I know there wasn’t one. Then I had to get out. The dinks were coming. We ran all day. Charlie kept coming. We finally got an extraction.”

“Three days later we went back in with a Mike Force. I found him...F\_\_\_\_\_ gooks! They nailed his hands between two trees. Crucified him! His teeth were filed down to the gums. Then they shot him between the eyes.”

“I know he was dead when I left him. There was no pulse! But why would they have done that to him if he wasn’t still alive? Jesus Christ! I left my brother for that?”

The acute trauma threshold is the ultimate double-bind. In the immediate present a choice is demanded, and whatever you choose is wrong.

The entire world collapses into the single event/moment. The gnashing mandibles of eternity open wide. The human being is consumed and a survivor is spewed forth. Survivors do not remember this event. They relive it.

## The Acute Trauma Threshold - Part 2

**A combat survivor's world is different. When I was debriefing combat survivors a pattern emerged that was generally consistent across a broad cross-section of men and women who served in Vietnam. At the acute trauma threshold a radical change in the primary mode of cognition, the way in which a survivor sees and reacts to the world took place.**

**In western culture the usual mode of cognition is linear, sequential. People look for cause and effect, if/then kinds of relationships. It was this enculturated form of cognition that made a man half a step slow in combat.**

**After the acute trauma threshold a survivor "saw" everything at once. The senses went on automatic. Reaction became immediate, without conscious thought. Every sense was tuned. A survivor could be sound asleep, and listening to the situation reports on the radio.**

**Attuned to the lethal ecology of combat, survivors were no longer observers but participants. Threat assessments became automatic and instantaneous.**

**Encompassed by the rage that transcends fear was the individual's primal decision to survive at any cost. The cultural symbols were gone. The cold, gun metal reality is that there is nothing from the survivor's former world that has the power to protect him.**

**The simultaneous obliteration of the survivor's cultural identity, cultural symbols and the implosion of the survivor's reality into the single event/moment of the acute trauma threshold meant that the entire world was now distilled within two or three or four other men - the squad, the track crew, the recon team, the gun crew - those who shared and participated, moment to moment, in the survivor's reality. It was these people on whom the individual literally depended for survival, both physical survival and psychological survival.**

In sharing this experience the bonds of combat were formed. From these incredibly intense bonds comes the primary code of a survivor: *Take care of your people at any cost – at any cost, including your own life.* The bonds were such that, to lose one of your people was to lose a part of yourself. The losses continued relentlessly.

So, in the event/moment of the acute trauma threshold, the world was radically altered. Linear time ceased to have any relevance. The individual's cultural identity, and with it the cultural symbols, were obliterated in a heartbeat. The rest; the leeches, body bags, ground taken, civilians killed, the body count - *it don't mean nothin'.*

In the relentless rage of the survivor's experience was the one conscious decision – *nothing will ever hurt me this bad again.* On the survivor's glaciated face are suspended in time, the frozen tears of trauma.

## Combat Survivor Profile - The Hawkeye

The Acute Trauma Threshold is the point at which none of the enculturated forms for making sense of the world apply. The symbols, rituals, ceremonies, icons, beliefs, and assumptions are obliterated. None of these can protect the person from the reality of combat in which they are immersed. Now there is only survival – and the code: *Take care of your people at any price.*

The type of survivor that emerges from the acute trauma threshold appears to depend on a person's job in relation to combat. My experience is that there are two related, yet different survivor profiles.

One is the Hawkeye. These types of survivors usually consider themselves "support personnel." This personal distinction made by a Hawkeye frequently results in discounting the validity and pain of their own experience as combat survivors. It is a particular form of survival guilt.

Hawkeyes commonly had jobs that directly involved them in the trauma of

**combat, even though they may not have been assigned to ground combat units.**

**Examples include medics, aircraft flight crews (especially helicopter crews), nurses, doctors, search and rescue personnel, air traffic and forward air controllers, combat engineers, and transportation personnel subject to frequent convoy ambushes.**

**Hawkeyes bonded primarily with the technology they used associated with combat. As long as the technology functioned properly, whether it was a helicopter gunship or operating room equipment, Hawkeyes could concentrate on the mission and block out the horror and anguish that surrounded them.**

**A Hawkeye's acute trauma threshold can often be found at the point where equipment failed. The failure of the technology exposed the Hawkeye's consciousness to the horror of combat. They became helpless and vulnerable because their technology failed.**

**Because the most intense combat experiences frequently involved people who were unknown, by name, to the Hawkeye there is often the perception by Hawkeyes that they are somehow personally responsible for all the nameless dead.**

**Hawkeyes, as a result of their combat experience, will directly confront, sometimes violently, any authority figure or situation that makes them feel helpless or vulnerable. Hawkeyes learned that rage and the adrenalin rush were the tools that would keep the pain and vulnerability away.**

**This brings us to two of the most distinguishing characteristics associated with the Hawkeye survivor profile. The first is that the Hawkeye assumes that he or she is absolutely alone.**

**This self-imposed isolation is a form of control. Survivors must control situations and relationships in order to avoid any emotional involvement. The survivor's conclusion from combat is simple, "I'll never let anything hurt me that bad again." Emotional numbing and isolation are the result.**

**The second characteristic is a matter of situations and circumstances.**

**It has to do with payback.**

**“I was a door jammer...gunner on a Huey slick. I can’t even tell you how many combat assaults we made. Man, we’d go into those hot LZs with the sixties on rock-and-roll...firing up everything...but you couldn’t see shit. We just fired up the tree line to cover the grunts. I was shot down three times...twice I was the only survivor. Sometimes I think about the guys who didn’t make it. I just wish that I knew for sure that I’d killed one of those f\_\_\_\_\_ gooks. Payback’s a bitch...but it’s worse not knowing.”**

## **Combat Survivor Profile - The Grunt**

**The second survivor profile is a Grunt. Survivors with this profile were nearly always members of a ground combat unit.**

**Like Hawkeyes, the Grunt was also hooked on the adrenalin rush of combat. The Grunt also demands personal accountability of those with whom he works and associates, and will confront any situation or person that puts him in a position of feeling helpless or vulnerable.**

**One aspect of combat survivors, in general, is the “all or nothing/black or white” assessment process. Trust is based on predictability. When the situation is totally unpredictable, as it is in combat, then an individual must be able to trust his people.**

**One of the things that are confusing for combat survivors is that, back here in the world, it is no longer a matter of life and death moment to moment. Life is more complex than that.**

**Here it is a matter of social interaction and relationships, but the people with whom the survivor is expected to relate and interact are “civilians”. By definition “civilians” do not share the perspective of combat.**

**When survivors bring their “all or nothing” assumptions into a relationship as the basis of trust, as far as a “civilian” is concerned, there is no context**

for these assumptions and expectations.

Even worse, it frequently happens that “civilians” have no idea that such assumptions and expectations are being made by the survivor. Of course the good news is that the survivor gets exactly what he or she expects and needs in order to maintain the survivor identity – another incident of betrayal and abandonment.

Self-imposed isolation is a method of controlling situations and relationships. For a “Grunt” this need to maintain control is often expressed as a need to stay in control in order to “avoid the killing.” This is usually projected outward.

Contrary to the media hype, the problem with most survivors is not that they lose control. The real problem is too much control. This control, coupled with personal isolation, drives all the rage and guilt and anguish inward. A “Grunt” will kill that which can kill him. When he becomes a great enough threat to himself, he will do himself.

This brings us to the two most distinguishing characteristics of the Grunt survivor profile. The first is that, because of their unique combat experience, a Grunt will bond with a brother, a person who has shared the combat experience.

The second characteristic of a Grunt has to do with his greatest fear in giving up his identity of a survivor and coming home. The fear is essentially the anguish of separation.

For fifteen to twenty-five years “Grunts” have carried their people on their backs. Those to whom the survivor is intensely bonded and were killed in action have been continually present to the survivor all these years. Like experiences, survivors do not remember relationships, they relive them.

The “Grunt’s” greatest fear in coming home is that he’s leaving his people behind. They have been such an intimate part of the survivor’s life for so long that the survivor feels somehow that, if he lets them go, they will cease to exist. The question for the survivor is simple, “If I don’t remember them, who will?”

This question is rooted in the survivors’ experience, not just in combat, but after the tour is completed – for years to come.

## Love in an Altered State

There are two important things for family members to understand about loved ones returning from combat. The first is the nature of the love, the bond that occurs among warriors in combat. The second is the experience of *Other Time*.

Here is an excerpt from *When Our Troops Come Home* that talks about love in an altered state.

*"Viet Nam provided the drama in which men and women experienced themselves in the extreme. Survivors returned with intensified personalities. They returned as who they were magnified a thousand times.*

*Photographs, even film and videotape, do not convey the awareness of combat. The survivor has encountered the reality of direct experience. Returning to a world of second-hand information and active uninvolvement is disorienting. Returning from a world of continuous present to one of assumed tomorrows is unnerving.*

*The survivor, like a top that has lost its angular momentum, wobbles. The ability to regain momentum, to stabilize, no longer depends on the circumstances of the environment. It depends on the survivor's personal capacity to redirect his own energy.*

*Love was one of the most intense emotions experienced by survivors in Viet Nam. It was seldom perceived as that. Love was materialized most frequently as its antithesis; horror, rage, slaughter, and destruction.*

*Love exists beyond the illusion of its sexual expression. Love is loyalty. Love is commitment. In the techno-macho illusion of Viet Nam the science of counter guerilla operations did not acknowledge the emotional basis of high-technology war.*

*The drug problem in Viet Nam was not heroin. It was adrenaline. Drugs offer an altered state of consciousness, a different awareness. A*

*perception of reality that is altogether real for the user. Survival is an altered state of consciousness. The concept of time is distorted. There were only two times a survivor in Viet Nam was aware of. The date he was due to leave country and the present. The right here, right now. Everything else was illusion. It was "other time".*

## Other Time

*An excerpt from **When Our Troops Come Home**.*

*Survivors played with other time like children reading the National Geographic. Far away places, beautiful photographs. Discovering the past. Speculating about the future. But when the word came to saddle up, other time was folded and put away. Other time is part of the unresolved question for survivors.*

*In Viet Nam other time was used to construct fantasies. Fantasies about home. Fantasies about places and people and about how time would be spent.*

*The fantasies constructed around people were the most intense. Fantasies about important people; wives, girlfriends, parents, children, friends. People who had cared. People who would care again.*

*The fantasies grew. They grew because in a reality of death, hurt, and gut grinding fear, what a survivor wanted most was love.*

*The need for love was so great, so intense, so heightened by his Viet Nam relationships that the fantasies the survivor created were beyond what any of those important people could comprehend. Survivors seldom asked for love. They expected it.*

*In the reality of Viet Nam they had experienced love in an altered state. In that altered state they had created the structure and fabric and intensity of a love that they could not communicate. A love so powerful that it literally*

*denied death.*

*The people the survivor came home to, the important people, simply did not understand what was expected, what was utterly, totally needed from them. And the survivor had forgotten how to ask.*

*Once home, the other time fantasies created so carefully for so long crumbled. So, for the survivor who found himself suddenly in a world of uncaring people, Viet Nam became his other time.*

*The survivor retreated within himself to the aloneness with which he was most comfortable. Alone. Like dying of a heart attack during the Christmas rush at O'Hare International."*

## Survivor Guilt

Combat survivors use an inner rage to pump the adrenalin that feeds their habit. Rage is important. It helps protect them from the guilt.

Survivor guilt takes many forms. It may be the result of an act committed, or an act not taken. Living through experiences in which others are killed and maimed is a common source of survivor guilt.

For many of us who fought in Vietnam the guilt is tangible. If we had really done what was expected of us, our names would be on the Wall.

This is how I writhed with my own version of survivor guilt.

An excerpt from *When Our Troops Come Home*.

*"Guilt is the morea eel that lurks in the crevices of my mind. Waiting. Waiting to tear my throat out if I ever make the mistake of swimming too close. Guilt is the slimy, gooey slug that wanders endlessly across the trails of my memories.*

***Guilt is the metallic shades of brown and green covering the skin of that huge snake coiled on the tree limb of my imagination. The snake ready to drop and strangle the life out of me in a careless moment.***

***Guilt is the black shiny eyes of a starving rat hiding just beyond the door of my consciousness. Guilt is the death stare of an opossum squashed on the highway leading to my dreams. The death grimace. The bared teeth. Guilt is the tapeworm in my soul.***

***For the survivor guilt is like having too much to drink. Needing to vomit and not being able to. The survivor searches for the emotional equivalent to shoving a finger down his throat. The release of being able to puke and collapse.***

***Guilt is the wheelbarrow in which we carry a whole wardrobe of other feelings. Insidious costumes. The trappings of evil and dangerous men. Men who have the potential for violence. Men who cannot be trusted, especially alone with their own feelings.***

***Look at this. Look at what's in here. Ah, here's the ensemble of aloneness. Unworthy, unlovable, unforgivable. When I wear these I am most detached. No one can see me. Least of all myself. The secretive attire of the stuck, powerless, guilt-ridden victim. The survivor.***

***Who packed this bag? Are these the clothes I chose for myself? Looking at what's in here, item by item, I'm appalled by my own creativity. Why do I keep them? The rational, conscious me has no idea. The addict knows.***

***The adrenalin addict knows. That camouflaged, face-blackened, cold-eyed, flesh-consuming addict knows. For he is the one who dominates my "other time". The one who seeks the rush from reliving the moments of pain and exhilaration. The addict who fabricates illusions of aliveness on the never-ending stage of my memories. I must keep these costumes. I must keep them with me always. For how else can I conceal my real nature in a world of nonusers?***

***Guilt, the habit of the priestly order of the Ice Man. Savored, luxuriated in, retained as the last vestige of a time that history would rather forget.***

***Look at it. Look at this thing we call guilt. Look at it in the light of your own***

*awareness. Disgusting, maggot-infested, putrid, stench-filled guilt. I've shown you mine. What about yours?"*

Survivor guilt is an intensely personal matter. A matter that must be resolved during a warrior's journey home.

## Combat Induced Depression

The depression that combat survivors return with is a ruck they carry on their backs, a stone at the center of their being. It weighs them down. It bends them over. It pulls them to their knees. Then they stand and move on – for awhile.

Every day, every moment depression is there as an ephemeral state, a cloud, a fog. Often they shake their heads to clear their minds long enough to stay connected to the world they have returned to.

Fortunately, they're warriors, and *it really don't bother them...* just like it didn't bother me.

An excerpt from *When Our Troops Come Home*.

*"Four a.m. Just another morning. I've showered in the dark. Just another habit. I'm uncomfortable with light this early in the day.*

*Up against the wall. Not digging, not hauling bricks, just hanging on. I've been here for a day or so. Heavy-handed, limp-legged. The crushing pain in my chest. The gripping hurt in the center of my being.*

*No reason I know of. Nothing specific to associate it with. Like a daffodil being smothered by cow shit. Come on Ken, get control of yourself. Come on you asshole, suck it up! Oh, God I hurt.*

***The pressing, gripping, overwhelming sense of loss. I feel my solar-plexus tense to ward off another onslaught. I'm going to be overrun by something I can't even see. Clenching the lip of the sink. Move! Do something. Attack! Fumbling for the shaving cream. Smearing the lather on an unseen, unfeeling face.***

***Heavy. So goddamn heavy I'm going to fall through the floor. Fall through myself. Fall into the crunching, gnashing mandibles of eternity. Fall into the utter total darkness. The absolute blackness of the all consuming nothing. Ed Abbey's words overwhelming me.... "The outback of beyond." The place the man Jesus wandered through when he was contemplating suicide.***

***The light switch next to the mirror. Keep moving. Squinting my eyes against the glare. Searching for the razor through the firing slits of my eyes. Razor in hand. Looking up to the mirror. Looking up to face myself. And there they are. The two glistening trails, one from each eye, disappearing into the white puffiness of the shaving cream. The contrails of emotion.***

***No! No, not now! I haven't cried in sixteen years. It's the law. My most basic rule I'll never cry again.... Older than I ever thought I'd be.... Older than I ever wanted to be. Fuck the wall! Screw this whole goddamn trip. I'm not ready for this.***

***8:05 a.m. The first phone call of the day.***

***"Hey Ken, how you doin'?"***

***"I'm terrific, Bob. How are you?"***

***And as we talk my mind drifts back to a recent conversation with Peggy.***

***"Ken, do you ever feel like you're living two lives?"***

***"Only all the time, sweetheart...only all the time."***

# It Will Never Be the Same

I have described the process of combat induced traumatic stress in six phases:

1. Enculturation
2. Initiation into the military
3. Immersion in absurdity
4. The acute trauma threshold
5. Survival
6. Homecoming

The homecoming ceremonies for our troops now are exceptionally valuable. There is validation of their experience. There is the ceremonial recognition of loss. There are the collective voices of cheers and reunion with loved ones. For many this is sufficient. For others the experience is not a memory, but a continual reliving of traumatic events.

For these there is the isolation. The self-selection, by warriors, out of intimate forms of communication and connections with family members is something that happens even when it may not be desired. Among young troops now video games seem to be a favorite form of isolation.

At some point, sometimes months or years beyond their return to the world, a combat survivor may risk disclosure to someone loved and trusted.

This is the moment when the loved one realizes that it will never be the same again. This is the moment when a decision is made whether a combat survivor's anguish can be accepted – is acceptable.

An excerpt from *When Our Troops Come Home*.

*Viet Nam survivors seldom talk about their experiences. How do they speak of the intuition of the ambush they walked into? How do they convey the unspeakable process of growing old in a young man's body? How do they bring the awareness of knowing to rational conversation?*

***The survivor knows absolutely that it is possible to care without feeling. The survivor reads peoples' souls in their eyes.***

***"What you're saying is so heavy," the lady said. "There must have been some funny things. Some humorous experiences. Tell me about the countryside. The people. Your friends."***

***"Do you know what I did," responded the survivor.***

***"No", the lady said.***

***The survivor was watching her eyes. Knowing, before he spoke, that the lady had sand bagged her soul.***

***"I killed people. It was my job. I was very good at it. Sometimes it feels like that's what I did the very best in my whole life. I killed people."***

***"You mean when they attacked you?" Her voice was toneless. Detached. Like a teacher dissecting a frog in biology class. The survivor read her eyes.***

***"I mean, I ambushed them. I mean, I waited stone silent in a moonless, shadow blackness and when they walked by me, I blew their lungs out with an automatic weapon. They never knew I was there."***

***The next question was unasked. It swelled in her eyes like a wino's vomit.***

***"You mean it wasn't a fair fight?"***

***The question thumped against the survivor's chest. An unexpected medicine ball. It had simply never occurred to him that anyone would conceive of Viet Nam as a fair fight.***

***The lady's eyes dropped to her folded hands. The survivor studies the texture of the tablecloth.***

***"We were talking about how I feel," he said. "Do you really want to know where my feelings come from?"***

*And in the silence that followed, the lady's eyes never left her hands.  
"No. No, I don't think so," she whispered.*

*The survivor had been home from Viet Nam for 15 years. The lady was his mother.*

It was Pascal who said that, "What we seek is a love great enough to bear both the disclosure and the discovery."

## Emotional and Existential Death

In western culture, physical death is the only form of death generally acknowledged.

It is apparent from experience with combat survivors, however, that psychological death and existential/spiritual death are equally valid in terms of experiential reality. Psychological death is characterized, in part, by the phenomenon of psychic numbing.

Existential/spiritual death involves the obliteration of an individual's primary cultural symbols. The loss of these symbols results in a corresponding sense of loss of personal meaning and purpose. The sense of a foreshortened future – not expecting to live beyond a certain age is common. In Vietnam I never expected to live to be twenty. When I got back to the civilian world I never ever expected to be thirty.

Those traumatized by combat share with women who have been raped the ripping away of any personal sense that the world is a safe, secure, affirming place. By virtue of their experience the world is not such a place.

The anthropologist Ernest Becker argued that, a human being's greatest fear is not physical death. *It is death in insignificance – meaningless death.* The worst case scenario is that the person does not physically die. For those whose reality is emotional and existential death, there is the purgatory of every day.

**One way of thinking about this is through the notion of rejection avoidance behavior. Rejection can be thought of as the threat or actuality of excluding an individual from participation in social or cultural group – a tribe.**

**The tribe can be Wall Street bankers, or fighter pilots; a family unit, or a political party; a football team or Facebook friends.**

**Human beings will die in place rather than be continually shunned or excluded from participation in a tribe that they value – if they can find no place where they belong. This is the beginning of the internal logic and relevance of suicide.**

**Here is the truly insidious part: Perceived rejection may or may not have a basis in objective fact or intent. Perceived rejection is about a person's experiential reality, not necessarily about objective reality.**

**Perceived rejection is a common experience. Any parent knows, for example, that sometimes it makes no difference how well intended a correction or admonishment directed at a child may be. If the child perceives the comment as rejection, then that is the child's experiential reality.**

**This same idea of perceived rejection applies to all human beings.**

**Rejection constitutes such a serious threat, and is of such critical importance in the relationship between an individual and the tribe, that it is important to specify the forms of rejection encountered by individuals.**

**There are three specific forms of rejection:**

- Frequency rejection**
- Duration rejection**
- Intensity rejection.**

**Frequency rejection is that form of rejection experienced by an individual when the person is, or perceives being, rejected over and over again by different people or situations. Among teenagers, this is frequently identified as peer group pressure.**

**A common phenomenon in the adult world can be found in the area of marketing. It is labeled "call reluctance". This occurs when salespeople have attained their "no quota" for the day.**

**Anyone who has been involved in fund raising is familiar with this form of rejection. It occurs when, during the course of an evening's telephone solicitation, the caller has been turned down by a number of individuals.**

**The potential threat to the person's self-worth, as a result of continued perceived rejection, becomes so great that the individual simply stops making phone calls.**

**The remainder of the evening is spent at the coffee pot, in the rest room, or checking to see how other people are doing in their efforts.**

**Duration rejection is that form of rejection experienced by an individual when the person is, or perceives being, rejected over and over again by the same people or situations. Teenagers often identify this form of rejection with parents.**

**In the adult world, it is common in the "today is the day" syndrome preceding a divorce.**

**Example: Husband walks through the door at 5:30 PM. Being a keen observer, he immediately notices that his wife of fifteen years is sitting quietly at the dining room table and that nothing is prepared for dinner. The wife looks up and says,  
"I filed for divorce today."**

**The husband is astounded. "Why today? What did I do? Did I forget to take out the trash?" To which the wife replies, "Nothing in particular. I'm just tired of the way things are, and today is the day it stops."**

**Duration rejection is cumulative. It is composed of the small, perhaps seemingly insignificant events that compound over extended periods and force individuals to terminate a relationship or situation in order to preserve the most basic aspects of themselves.**

**Intensity rejection is that form of rejection that, in a normal lifetime, is**

generally infrequent. When this form of perceived rejection does occur the pain is very deep and it lasts for a long time. The deaths of a spouse, or child, or parent - as well as divorce and rape - are examples of this kind of rejection.

## Different Cultural Identities

John Bowlby developed an insightful approach to working with people who have a cultural identity based on “what I have or what I do. It’s called Attachment Theory. A good executive summary can be found in his book, [\*A Secure Base\*](#).

When it comes to human behavior, I have no idea what “normal” is. In the US, however, we do have a book that describes what we consider to be unhealthy behavior. It goes by the rather imposing title of The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – currently in volume IV, revised.

It’s like a Sear’s catalog of conditions that affect peoples’ lives. The book contains all kinds of things from the fear of being in crowds, to depression, paranoia, and suicidal behaviors. It’s a big book.

One way of thinking about the difference between healthy and unhealthy behavior is by looking at the different ways of describing cultural identity.

Someone whose life experience has been primarily affirming is more likely to have a cultural identity based on “who I am.” This is a person that has the sense that the world is basically a safe, nurturing place. Of course, this way of being can be shattered by events. But in the normal course of things, life is good and is expected to remain that way.

For others their life experience has been different. For them the world is not entirely, or even mostly safe. The feeling that a person has value and is loveable based on who they are has been called into question in some way. For these people their value as human beings is based on *what they have or what they do*.

**John Bowlby lists a number of reasons that, as a child, a person may find their place in the world tenuous – unsecure.**

***A child may never have been wanted by one or both parents;***

***A child may be of the wrong sex in a family in which parents had set their hearts on a boy or a girl;***

***A child may have been made the family scapegoat, sometimes as the result of a family tragedy that...has always been attributed to him;***

***A parent may have used guilt inducing techniques to control a child, frequent claims that a child's behavior makes a mother ill;***

***A parent may have sought to make one of her children her attachment figure by discouraging him from exploring the world away from her and from believing that he will ever be able to make his way on his own;***

***A child's usual role in a family may be the result of a mother having had an extra-marital affair during her marriage so that the child's putative father is not his real father;***

***Another cause of a child's unusual role is when one or the other parent identifies one child with a relative, often one of the child's grandparents, with whom he or she has had a difficult relationship, and who then reenacts that relationship with the child;***

***A child may have been the target of more or less serious physical abuse from a parent or step-parent;***

***A child may have been involved in sexual abuse from a parent, step-parent or other sibling for short or long periods of time (A Secure Base p. 150).***

**The result of these kinds of life experiences is that a person creates a cultural identity based on “what I have or what I do.” Assuming this identity means that anything or anyone that can take away the things a person has or does is a threat.**

**The specific threat is that of rejection, real or perceived. Protecting the cultural identity, the sense of self, the basis for self-worth becomes vitally**

important.

**For example: As a business owner, if the business goes bankrupt, who am I? As a spouse who has devoted years of energy, concern and devotion to a marriage – when the divorce occurs, who am I? As a professional who has aspired to and gained recognition in my field, when I get downsized out of the organization, who am I?**

## **The Journey Home**

**Rejection is death. The ultimate form of rejection is physical death. The most obvious forms are the killing of human beings in combat, and capital punishment. Symbolic death is the result of emotional and existential trauma like that experienced in combat.**

**The Acute Trauma Threshold is the point in the progression of combat trauma that an enculturated warrior becomes a survivor. A combat survivor has two imperatives:**

- 1. Kill that which can kill him**
- 2. Take care of his people at any price, including his own life.**

**Killing in combat is the literal rejection of death. Physical survival is paramount for a warrior. But other parts die. Emotional death takes the form of emotional numbing. “Nothing will ever hurt me this bad again.” The formation of the cultural identity of a survivor is the result.**

**It is here that the tribe of the survivor’s unit becomes critical for a combat survivor. Within the tribe a survivor knows exactly what is expected. The rules are clear. The tribe is trusted. Within the tribe a survivor can sustain the bonds through which there is meaning and purpose. This is one reason why there is such exceptional loyalty to their unit and each other among combat survivors.**

**Loss, betrayal, and abandonment are the trinity of trauma. At some point a**

combat survivor will be separated from the tribe and come back to the world.

For those who have assumed the cultural identity of a survivor, separation from the tribe, the unit, is a second death.

Trauma comes in pairs. The first one sets you up. The second one knocks you down. The acute trauma threshold is the first death. Separation from the tribe is the second. This is what we are seeing now among members of the guard and reserve returning to civilian life.

Without the tribe the survivor has one initial reaction – form a tight perimeter of one.

Minds are torn and souls are shattered in combat. A survivor's heart is broken at home. The fantasies of reconnecting with loved ones do not happen. It seldom occurs to combat survivors that it is their own isolation and their inability to re-engage emotionally that is denying them the love they so desperately seek.

There is no longer the tribe. And now there is the realization that home no longer exists. This is when the survivor's heart is broken. Two more imperatives arise for a survivor. The first is, "I don't have a problem." The second is to stay in control to deny the suffering. "If I ever start crying I'll never be able to stop."

The survivor enters fully into the self-destruct cycle. Here begins the behaviors that compulsively recreate "survival" situations. These are essential because they reconfirm the combat survivor cultural identity. They are necessary to avoid the survivor's most basic question, "If I am not a warrior who am I?"

These are the *stoned on a Harley at 130 miles an hour* moments. These are the *turn two car links in front of an oncoming semi to see if I can make it* moments. These are the *free falling and hope my chute won't open* moments. Bridge abutments begin to look enticing.

The adrenalin rush and rage are used to create a fleeting sense of aliveness and make the pain go away. But the aliveness doesn't last, and the pain goes on and on.

**Suicide takes many forms. Sometimes it is quick – a magnum round in the head or an officer assisted suicide. Other forms can take years. Alcoholism and drug addiction are also suicide.**

**But at some point, for some reason many combat survivors will realize that “*It don’t mean nothin*” is a double negation. *It means everything!***

**All of the anguish, and suffering, and loss, and guilt had to mean something. *It just has to mean something!***

**This is the moment that has the potential to save a survivor’s life. The decision and the absolute determination to find the meaning in the experience is the beginning – the beginning of the journey home.**

*When Our Troops Come Home* is a description of one such journey home

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