

“*Journals from the Edge*” is a family’s battle with war trauma. The book is based on a true story beginning with my boyhood in the post-war 1950’s.

To fully comprehend the affects of prolonged battle stress, it may be helpful to examine the evolution of warfare.

Ancient cultures prepared their warriors for the emotional transition involved from peaceful living to killing other men. When they returned from battle the process was done in reverse. But when armies became large and battles became long wars, there was only time and inclination for the training involved in killing. While visible wounds from battle are as old as history, the invisible ones are a result of the new logistics, longer periods of stress and weaponry involved in modern warfare. The Civil War in the United States is a great place to begin.

When Johnny comes marching home again

Hurrah! Hurrah!

We'll give him a hearty welcome then

Hurrah! Hurrah!

The men will cheer and the boys will shout

The ladies they will all turn out

And we'll all feel gay

When Johnny comes marching home.

At Manassas, (the first battle of Bull Run)

*London Times* correspondent William Howard Russell observed, “On the hill beside me there was a crowd of civilians on horseback, and in all sorts of vehicles, with a few of the fairer, if not gentler sex .... The spectators were all excited, and a lady with an opera glass who was near me was quite beside herself when an unusually heavy discharge roused the current of her blood —“That is splendid, Oh my! Is not that first rate? I guess we will be in Richmond to-morrow.”

Those spectators went to watch what they expected to be a quick victory over the Confederate rebellion. But there was no clear

winner at the Battle of Bull Run. Casualties were appalling on both sides. Battles at Antietam, Shiloh, Chickamauga and Gettysburg continued the slaughter for four more years, resulting in 650,000 dead.

The casualties added up quickly with new technology. Artillery and Gatling guns annihilated cavalry charges. With new weaponry, old forms of bravery were simply mass suicidal assaults. As a result, defensive positions were dug in—trenches formed along battlefronts. Old forms of honor, like respecting civilian non-combatants, were also brushed aside, culminating in Sherman's march to Atlanta.

The Civil War was our country's initiation into the concept of total war. After Lee surrendered, Confederate soldiers returned to burnt-out homes, salted fields and predatory carpetbaggers. Many of the survivors on both sides were crippled and malnourished. Even when there were parades, there was little to cheer about when Johnny came marching home.

The American west provided empty space and opportunities for many Civil War veterans unfit to handle city living. But for many others, especially in the south, the trauma from that war lasted long after it ended—passing bitterness down through generations. As a young boy in northern Virginia in the early 1960's, I can tell you the Civil war was still on everyone's minds. Local high schools were named after famous Confederate generals such as Robert E. Lee and you were still called a reb if you lived south of the Potomac River.

If the Civil War wasn't modern warfare, then the Great War in Europe 1914-18(WWI) certainly qualified. The Gatling gun from 1860 was refined and made more mobile. The trench warfare from the Civil War became a battle line stretched across the entire European front concentrated in Belgium and France. The unsanitary conditions inside the trenches resulted in fatalities from even the most minor injuries. Infections during that pre-antibiotic era often resulted in gangrene. Living in those muddy trenches resulted in a long list of deadly diseases, including specifically named ones like trench foot and trench mouth. Bodies were left to rot in no-man's land.

Poison gas and flamethrowers were unleashed on those in the trenches but the most fearsome modern weapon was the heavy

artillery. Dug-in defensive positions were countered with howitzers that could loft a two thousand pound shell in a high trajectory so it plunged deep into the ground, neutralizing the safety of the trench. The effect was devastating and even those within a half-mile of the impact suffered the concussion. The anticipation of a shelling attack alone would cause sleeplessness and high anxiety. A word was coined, shellshock. Little was known about the condition but one thing was clear—some men with no visible wounds had ruined minds. My grandfather, William Howard Michael, described his experiences as a battalion surgeon at the front in an article that was published in 1934 ["Pleasure and Pain in 1918."](#)

The worldwide economic depression of the 1930's shifted attention from the trauma endured by soldiers in WWI. When the next war began for the U.S. in 1941, the mass production of weapons carved a path for us out of the Great Depression. There was enthusiasm as America joined what appeared to be a justified cause.

But on the front lines men suffered horrors equal to the previous war. From the beaches of Normandy to the jungles of Okinawa, pictures filtered back home of many soldiers with the infamous thousand-yard-stare. General Patton was notorious for slapping a traumatized soldier and calling him a coward. Back in the U.S., some theorized that men who cracked up in battle had overprotective mothers. But army studies showed nothing to support that idea. What the army did determine was that war trauma appeared greatest among soldiers brought up in religious communities, where killing was a sin, conflicting with doing their duty to kill in war.

In post WWII America, shell shock, combat fatigue and war neurosis were names of a condition that wasn't discussed in much depth. In those days these terms attached shame to men who were thought to be physiologically weak or constitutionally disordered. The men from WWII didn't speak about their feelings—not even to their wives. The military told wives that their husbands would get over their rough memories in a few weeks. But despite this being a time where divorce could mean social ostracism or career destruction, by the end of the war, the divorce rate among combat veterans was double that of the pre-war period. Many wives and children in marriages that did

survive endured physical and mental abuse. The reasons for that abuse remained a mystery and if any counseling did occur for war trauma, it was reluctant and secret. Families had to look elsewhere for answers. The 50's weren't so fabulous for many of the people involved with combat veterans.

During the 50's and 60's all the kids I knew had no idea that the war might have caused problems with their fathers. The image of the WWII we saw was glorified to a high degree in movies and TV shows, with stirring music and glamorous actors who suffered only minor flesh wounds. One exception was the movie "Lawrence of Arabia." Watching the film as an adult, I clearly see how and why Lawrence went berserk. But as a teenager, I had no idea how battle changed men to such an intense degree.

My view back then, was that wars were always victorious. WWII veterans returned as conquering heroes and because my father was a carrier pilot in the Pacific, the heroes I met growing up were fighter pilots. Following in my father's footsteps meant making that career choice.

Jet aircraft had become a new frontier for the Navy after the war and they used their best pilots to test them. My father became a test pilot, then Director of test pilot training. Future astronauts dined at our parents' quarters. I witnessed the bravado of these men at my parents' dinners and cocktail parties.

But what I didn't see was the life these pilots had when they were on the job. Combat readiness continued long after the Japanese surrendered in 1945. From Key West to Patuxent River and all the carriers at sea, Navy pilots were ready and vigilant—shadowing every move the Soviets ever made. In Korea, Naval aviators challenged Soviet pilots in a hot war over "Mig Alley." This was the world as I was growing up.

During the 1950's, outside of being a movie star, I figured a fighter pilot was the coolest thing a boy like me could ever do. But as Tom Wolfe described in "The Right Stuff," the weeding out process was extreme—and unfortunately I had bad eyes. Men who were weak or "constitutionally disordered" were culled out of the test pilot training process. A pilot who passed flight training was the best of the best and the last person you would ever suspect of being inadequate in any way.

My sister, brother and I witnessed the roller coaster of emotions in our parents' lives—their mood swings were severe and we had no answers as to why. My assumption was that this was just part of being an adult. Living a large portion of my early years on naval bases across the country meant that most of the kids I knew experienced the same things I did. We never questioned our fathers' disposition and when problems came up, we were at a loss. As my father used to like repeating, it was just a fact of life.

Another fact of life was the arms race that continued after WWII and Korea, where the use and threat of atomic bombs reached the point of what was referred to as mutually assured destruction. School desks or even back yard bomb shelters would offer little protection from nuclear attack.

But in August of 1964, the U.S. entered a war in Vietnam. Hazy foreign policy goals shaped by the ultimate threat of nuclear exchange created rules of engagement that hog-tied conventional U.S. troops and air forces.

It is ironic that we had been so successful using guerrilla tactics in the Revolutionary War and yet ignored that chapter of our history when we entered the chaos of Vietnam. During the late 60's, less equipped but highly motivated Viet Cong engaged highly equipped but less motivated U.S. troops in a ten-year struggle. The Vietnamese had been fighting the Japanese during WWII and continued against their former French colonial rulers from 1945-1954. By the time the U.S. Marines landed on the beaches of Da Nang in 1965, they were faced with a well-honed guerrilla operation combined with the conventional forces of the North Vietnamese Army.

American soldiers had to fight in a new paradigm. Did a woman carrying a baby in her arms also carry a hand grenade? And did a U.S. Army unit wipe out an entire village because they suspected the inhabitants supported the Viet Cong? Jungle warfare was hit-and-run, and at the same time presented all the everyday perils of WWI trenches.

An added element was terror. Even in cities like Saigon, U.S. soldiers on R&R were in danger of being blown up as they sat in bars or restaurants. The psychological toll was as enormous for survivors of a war that claimed over 50,000 young Americans. After the war ended in 1974, many men with no obvious physical wounds returned

from Vietnam with a loss of mental equilibrium. Years might pass before some who had initially seemed well adapted would suddenly drop into depression. Life as a warrior conflicted with the disorder of civilian and family life.

Symptoms in Vietnam vets were the same as in any war: depression, substance abuse, survivor's guilt, irritability over lack of order, sleeplessness, extreme preoccupation with time schedules, an inability to handle sudden loud noises or any noise that set off a war memory and, most serious of all, suicidal inclinations. But in the years following the end of the Vietnam war, these symptoms have been analyzed to a much greater extent than ever before. In 1990 a new term "posttraumatic stress disorder" was assigned to describe the symptoms resulting from prior combat exposure in Vietnam. Since 1990, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have also produced an alarming number of after-service suicides and the term has been used for those soldiers as well. It has been determined that long periods of exhaustive stress can permanently damage the mind.

Often overlooked were the men who served in WWII and Korea who also experienced the extraordinary levels of stress. The impact on many men who survived with no visible wounds was just as destructive. Most who served during 1941-45 have passed on but their children grew up uninformed about war trauma until the issue was illuminated in 1990. But for some 1990 was too late.

"Journals from the Edge" is our family's story, but also a story that should resonate with the entire baby boomer generation, the largest demographic in the country. As young adults we rebelled against and tried to cope with the world of our parents. Many of us stumbled and fell trying to deal with the damage we didn't even know we had suffered. Experiments with every facet of life were on the table as we struck out into the world. We tried what we could—anything that might ease the pain.

"Journals from the Edge" is my story of discovery and redemption.