

# The Lost Road Home

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Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)  
And the Psychological Effects of War  
On Veterans and Their Families

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# **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Balzarini Home**

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“Another guy and I were carrying a wounded soldier on a stretcher. I felt the back of the stretcher drop, and I looked back. The guy who had been holding up the other end didn’t have a head.”

Steve, a Vietnam veteran



# What's Happened to My World?

It was a quiet Saturday afternoon when I first learned about PTSD. I was getting caught up on chores around the house and was folding laundry in the living room and watching TV at the same time. I happened to be watching the PBS channel which was being broadcast from our local university television station. A program featuring Vietnam veterans and a counselor was on. The veterans were relating some of their reactions, feelings and behaviors since they had returned from Vietnam 30 or more years ago. They were speaking of anger, the outbursts, the depression, and their inability to cope with life in general. Words such as impatience, hypervigilance, and stress were common as each Vietnam veteran told his story.

I put down the towel I was folding and began to listen more attentively. I could relate to everything they said! They were describing my husband! I had missed the first portion of the program but the last 20 minutes had my undivided attention.

At the end of the program the counselor listed two telephone numbers in case anyone was interested in more information. I quickly grabbed a scrap of paper and a pen and wrote down the numbers. I needed to find out more about this PTSD. When the moment was right I would tell Ted about what I had learned. I would tell him I thought I finally knew what was wrong...

I always knew there was something wrong. I wasn't sure what it was, but I knew that something wasn't right. I remember sitting in church with Ted and fighting back tears. I was praying that God would help my husband. I was praying that God would help me to cope. I had attended this church with him many times, and we had been married here. We had stood at this altar and recited our wedding vows 34 years ago. In sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer, until death do we part. I tried to swallow that huge lump in my throat and tried to conceal my emotion, but many times as we sang "Let There be Peace on Earth and Let It Begin With Me" it triggered deep emotions within me. I wondered how long I could stay in a marriage like this. It was so confusing. At times I was so happy, and I knew that Ted loved me and our children, but then there were the outbursts of anger, that short fuse, the constant underlying anger and negativity that we all dealt with. The unpredictable behaviors which caused us to all walk on eggs. He was like a time bomb, and we never knew when he would explode.

So many questions went through my mind over the years when I would witness this behavior. Ted's mother had been mentally ill for many years and had lived in and out of institutions for most of our marriage. Each time she was given a chance to live in her own home it would result in a suicide attempt. The thought of mental illness was in the back of my mind. But Ted was so intelligent, and most of the time he was fine. Was it a dysfunctional home that he was brought up in? Or was he just a spoiled brat? So many things went through my mind. What made people act the way that they did? What could explain this behavior? Where do I begin?

## Ted's Story

We flew into Vietnam at dusk. When I got off of the plane it was so hot. They put us on buses (almost like prison buses with mesh on the windows). Finally we got to the repo depo. There were burms and embankments, and there were barracks, but they were mostly occupied and we would have had to walk through and find a place to sleep. It was night and so I threw my duffle bag on the ground and slept on the street. So did a lot of other guys. It would be morning in just a few hours.

My first day in the bush in Vietnam, the squad I was to be leading was guarding water point. When I arrived I was told to go down to the river to introduce myself to the guys as their new squad leader. As I approached the stream I saw that they were playing with a huge python and her baby. I had always been deathly afraid of snakes, but I wasn't about to let them know it. I introduced myself and sat back on the bank and had a smoke. I didn't say a word about the snake and just let them have their fun. Eventually they let the snakes go. I had just gone through basic training, Advanced Infantry Training, Noncommissioned Officers School, and had trained for thirteen weeks with the Rangers. Here I was after all of that training, on my first day in the bush thinking, "Don't tell me it's going to be like this every day." It wasn't the first thing that I wanted to run into. I'd had lots of encounters, but Pythons weren't one of them. Snakes gave me the willies.

We lived a kind of primitive life. Our clothes used to practically rot off of us because of the sweat and the salt that would dry into our clothes. Any little stick or thorn would tear our clothes and after a while we barely had any clothes. They were in shreds. We used our helmets as a washbasin to wash our faces and shave. We didn't always have a toothbrush and so when we were near a pond we would wash up and brush our teeth with sand and our fingers. We weren't always resupplied with the things we needed. At times we were in extreme conditions. We were in dangerous areas where even the helicopters

couldn't come in. Many times we went without food and water. We would look for wild cucumbers to eat. There were banana trees but the bananas didn't ripen enough to eat until days after they were picked.

I remember a helicopter coming in to resupply us in the boonies and to bring another replacement to our company. The helicopter was hovering 40 feet above us and I not only could see our replacement but I could smell the brand of soap he had used. We hadn't had a bath or a change of clothing in 40 days and so I can just imagine what we all smelled like to him.

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The first time I was on patrol with my company I was sent to Ban me Tuit. That particular terrain is heavy underbrush cover and the easiest trails to follow were made by the largest animals such as elephants or water buffalo. As a new sergeant, my CO (commanding officer) decided to have me take (walk) point. The point man has the compass and leads the whole column. I was a new guy and he was going to test me. As I broke my way through heavy underbrush I noticed a well-worn elephant trail which was pretty much paralleling my route, so rather than fight the heavy brush I decided to follow this trail. Upon coming to the end of this trail I stopped and was baffled because the trail ended and I saw no elephant. All of a sudden two or three elephants got up from wherever they were lying down and made that loud shrill shriek they make when they are scared or charging. All of a sudden there was brush breaking and elephants running. My heart almost stopped. I was so startled that I hit the deck, taking a position of defense. The CO called forward from his radio and asked, "What the hell's going on up there?!" I responded that we surprised some elephants and they ran off screaming. The CO asked if they were humpin' anything. I asked, "What do you mean?" He said, "I mean were they carrying anything?" (The North Vietnamese



Ted setting up a night ambush.

used animals to carry weapons and supplies.) I said I was too startled to notice.

You must look and listen for the desperation of seeking safety, brought on by the fear of escaping impending death. The vastness of distance to safety is a world away. With each step, with each glance, with each breath one takes, your senses are heightened, and then deflated, and then rapidly brought back to maximum sensitivity. This repeated exercise is the Combat Infantry Search and Destroy Mission response to dangerous surroundings, always planning for the worst should it happen right now. The visible enemy is watching my approach and I must react to minimize his effect on me and my comrades. This is on my mind night and day.

The combat infantryman is always sharpening his keen senses because this is what is relied on to get us through. I am expected to perform, to protect myself. Others rely on me for



## Donny

I remember Donny as a teenager. He was probably about fourteen or fifteen years old and he was riding a beautiful horse through a field near my cousin's home. He was blonde and very good looking and seemed quite carefree at the time. Life later became very difficult for Don. Here's how Don tells it:

I joined the Marines in September and six months later, on March 12, I was in Vietnam. I was sent to map and compass school in Da Nang. The Marines were on guard on the perimeter of that place. I was asked if I wanted to be the chaplain's assistant but I turned it down.

I had graduated "honor man" at boot camp. The officers were drilling me with questions. "Why did you join?" I replied, "To fight for God and my country and fight for the people of South Vietnam."

During Don's tour of Vietnam he encountered many very traumatic experiences. He related some of the following to me one evening.

In the middle of the night a helicopter dropped us right in the middle of a firefight. I didn't know where to go, what to do, or who was who. I got near an embankment and stayed there all night. There were dead bodies all over. When it was over I was asked to pray over the dead.

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We found an opening in the tree line. A guy stepped on a land mine. I held his hand while he was being patched up. We were human land mine detectors. We

were 12 miles South of Da Nang and they were all Viet Cong in that area. (There is a difference between the Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong infiltrated into the general population.)

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You'd get sniped at from villages when you were coming across and you couldn't see them. We'd end up calling in choppers and had to use smoke to give us a screen so we could get out of there.

During search and clear missions you weren't allowed to shoot unless shot at and couldn't destroy anything. After four months of getting shot at and not being able to retaliate we were told to search and destroy, and that's what we did. We made a village into a parking lot.

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We had walked into an ambush. We were left there for 54 hours—two and a quarter days—and there was no one to help us. We had a chopper come in to get the wounded. Choppers resupplied us by dropping things from the air. After 54 hours the enemy left and we bandaged up everyone we could. We walked about a half mile so we could find a place where choppers could land. We had started out with 99 men. Eighty-eight were either dead or wounded. Eleven men were left, and I was one of them.

I remember running with these dead bodies to the helicopter. There was a pile of bodies six feet high. I remember running and falling on the pile of bodies.

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## Noah

What could be more heartbreaking than the loss of your child? We worry about our children as they grow up. We protect them, we hurt when they hurt, and we are delighted in their successes and happy moments.

When a young adult is sent off to war it adds gray hair and takes years off of a parent's life. We worry and wait for the days to pass until they are safe at home again. Imagine sending your child off to war not once, but twice, for a second or a third tour of duty. Cheryl saw her 18-year-old son go off to Iraq twice. Her son Noah finally returned to safety and she was able to breathe a sigh of relief at last.



Noah

Noah said that he thought he had the perfect childhood and that his mom was awesome. He loved to hunt with his dad and fish with his friends, to pick on his sister. He was easy going and loved to joke around. He was kind and sensitive and after the 9/11 attack in New York he decided that he wanted to serve his country. He was a young man at the beginning of his life ready to do the right thing.

He had a lot of courage and served two tours of duty in Iraq. During this time he experienced the horrors of war, witnessing death and seeing innocent people killed. He loved the children and it bothered him to see them in danger or hurt. He survived the bombs and snipers, but the children and the horrors of that war haunted him and filled him with guilt.

He had been trained for war and always followed orders, but after the second tour of duty things had happened that disturbed him terribly and he was changed for life. Physically he had come home in one piece, but emotionally and psychologically he was scarred, and his heart was broken. He became

depressed and began to self-medicate with the help of alcohol. Noah had always loved life, but he came home changed. His parents, his friends, and all who knew him could sense that there was something eating away at him. He was not the same person—something was on his mind.

Noah was diagnosed with PTSD. He went in for counseling appointments a few times, but then began to miss appointments. His family worried and tried to encourage him to continue with the counseling and get help. As many veterans with PTSD do, Noah saw counseling as a sign of weakness and thought he could deal with all of this himself. He had no idea how serious PTSD is. He was having nightmares and suffered from guilt. He didn't know that there was a link between these symptoms and the devastating effects he witnessed and experienced in Iraq. But he would try to reassure his mother and said "Ma, you worry too much. I'm fine, I'm happy." However, he had experienced too many horrors of war, and the pain and invisible wounds inside were too much for him to endure. On July 26, 2007, Noah found a secluded spot in the woods and took his own life. The same spot he used to hang out with his friends while growing up and doing the normal boy stuff, like skipping school and going fishing. He took his life in a place that was filled with good memories for him.

Noah's parents are heartbroken. A kind of sadness has engulfed them. Noah is in the loving arms of Jesus now and he suffers no more. He is finally at rest. But they miss him. They ask themselves, How could this have happened? Noah loved life. Only those who have been to war can know the secret knowledge that no ordinary citizen can imagine or understand. The trauma they are left with cuts deep into the soul. The veteran, rather than thinking about it, or dealing with those memories, tries to bury them and forget. But there are triggers that are constant reminders of the pain they endure. A smell, a sound, or the Fourth of July fireworks will bring them back to that experience in a second. The veteran has a difficult time

readjusting to civilian life, knowing what is going on in Iraq, and he cannot forgive himself.

It is said that approximately 21 percent of Iraq veterans, approximately 18 veterans a day, four times the national average, commit suicide. Cheryl, Noah's mother, is working on a bill that would make it mandatory that all combat infantrymen be assessed for and treated for PTSD. It would be something the soldier would have to sign and agree to before going into the armed forces. She feels that Noah was a man of his word and would have definitely agreed to counseling if he had signed something prior to entering the service. He deserved help. It was not his fault. He had served his country and he paid the ultimate price. The added bill to the military contracts would be called "Noah's Clause" if Cheryl has her way. Noah died so people would learn about PTSD and Cheryl, his mother, wants to make sure that another family does not suffer like hers has...to make sure another sister is not left without her brother, a father without his son, and a mother never to hold her child again in her lifetime.

The local Amvets Post 33 in Virginia, Minnesota, has been named in honor of Noah. Hopefully, thanks to Noah and his family, the future veterans who come here will be made aware of PTSD and how serious this disorder is and will deal with the symptoms and get counseling. A few already have expressed their thanks to Noah.

Noah's family loved him very much and they know that he did not die in vain regardless of how he died. He died to get the word out to others about PTSD. His name will live on long after we are gone. His family says, "He will always be our hero, just like he was the day he was born."

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The following two poems were written by Noah.

### Friends

I feel bad for the kids  
Can't blame them for begging  
Can't give them anything, they beg more  
This one was different  
He was 7  
I let him sit next to me on the Bradley  
I give him water,  
He goes gets me food.  
It's great compared to MREs  
No english  
No arabic  
Yet we still understand each other  
Then it's time to leave  
He wraps his arms around me crying  
I say it will be ok  
I still wonder if he is.

### Still at war

Got home almost a year and a half ago  
We were so happy  
That beer never tasted so good  
Iraq was the farthest thing from my mind  
That was the best week of my life  
It crept up slowly  
first just while sleeping  
more real and scary than when it happened  
After, it's on the mind awake  
Never 10 minutes goes by without being reminded  
Been home a year and a half physically  
Mentally I will never be home.



# The Healing Process

What can you do if you have a spouse that possibly suffers from PTSD? Some of the following things I have learned and done may be helpful for you.

Talk to your spouse and calmly explain that you think their behaviors indicate they may have a problem. Be supportive.

Contact a VA representative to get permission to get an assessment by a psychologist who works with veterans. Once you get an appointment you will be answering some questions and filling out some simple forms.

A psychologist will meet with the veteran and make an assessment. He/she will then advise you as to what you will need to do next.

It will be important for you to sit down and write an honest letter explaining what the veteran was like before he went into combat or experienced some type of trauma, and how he has changed since that time. It should be detailed and include