

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

Finishing My Unfinished Business

Steve Barrett, LCSW, BCD

Regular columnist Steve Barrett takes the leap to share some very personal military experiences.

I was at first perplexed when AMRA requested that I write an article about service members and veterans who seem to avoid patriotic holidays or military celebrations, veterans who tend not to join service organizations, such as AMRA, VFW, and the American Legion. As I contemplated what to write, however, memories of my own experiences when I returned from Vietnam began to surface. Along with the memories came the realization of how these experiences affected my behavior towards anything military at that time and for a long while afterward.

For those of you who may not know about the homecoming received by veterans returning from Vietnam, it was a very unpleasant experience. Regardless of their branch of service or military occupational specialty, returning Vietnam veterans were met with name calling (“baby killers”), protesters, and a society that wanted to disassociate itself from the military establishment. In order to survive and blend in, returning Vietnam veterans soon learned not to talk about their military experiences with others at work, in social situations, college or even at home. If we did ever talk about it, we were treated as if we had a communicable disease; no one would associate with us. We quickly learned to “shut down” and not talk about our experiences, even with other veterans. This “shutdown” eventually led to avoidance of anything associated with the military. It was our form of survival; yet, at the same time, this “shutdown” tended to exacerbate whatever emotional problems we had developed from our experiences in Vietnam.

I was one of those veterans who shut down my military experiences. I never talked about my Vietnam experiences with others, for fear of how they would react to me. I avoided watching war movies and did not join any service organizations. However, I noticed that I would become very emotional and tearful on Veterans' Day and Memorial Day. I realized that I had “unfinished business.” In the early 1980’s, realizing that I needed to deal with my unfinished business, I rejoined the service as a military social worker. I took pride wearing my uniform every day and helping active-duty service members with their emotional problems from their military experiences. But I also noticed that while I was very proud of being on active duty, I *still* did not talk about my own Vietnam experiences with others. It wasn't until 1999, when a friend gave me a Vietnam Veteran hat, that I realized I had done nothing wrong by volunteering to go to Vietnam in 1966. It was my reaction to the ‘homecoming’ which had generated my feelings of shame and guilt for serving in the military, not my service. Even writing this article makes me very emotional, but now the emotion is based on pride and not shame.

At the Atlanta VA, I work with many veterans who have PTSD from their combat experiences. One of the classic symptoms of PTSD is avoidance of military “triggers” and memories. For

many veterans, anything related to the military can trigger painful memories or anxiety. Avoidance, however, is actually counterproductive and can even aggravate symptoms.

One of the classic treatments for PTSD is *prolonged exposure*. This is where the veteran is encouraged to talk about their combat experiences in a supportive environment. At first, the experience is very similar to watching a scary movie for the first time and being afraid. However, we know that if you watch that scary movie 100 times, the fear will lessen with each viewing. When a veteran avoids reminders of their combat/military experiences it is similar to avoiding scary movies based on the fear experienced on first viewing. This avoidance develops into a belief that, "I can't handle (parades, military movies, events, etc.)." Sadly, if a veteran *believes* they cannot emotionally handle going to a patriotic parade or joining a military organization, they will make excuses about why they cannot participate. Over time, this negative belief is then reinforced by actions, or lack of action. However, if instead one believes that going to a parade may initially be *uncomfortable* but *not* catastrophic, and if one then goes to the parade, they will find that their anxiety will *lessen* and their self-confidence will skyrocket.

If you have been consciously or unconsciously avoiding military events, ask yourself, "What is the worst thing that could happen if I cried at a Veterans' Day parade?" Most likely, the worst thing that will happen is that you will see other veterans wiping their eyes, too. But that won't be all. At the same time, when you take part in a military parade or join a service organization, you will discover that fellow veterans "got your back." You will learn that the camaraderie and support of other veterans is uplifting. After all, they have all been where you have been. Suddenly, in the presence of allies, shedding a tear is not so bad after all.

I facilitate a lot of PTSD groups for combat veterans at the Atlanta VA. There is one veteran in the group, whom we call "The Big Hawaiian." He had three tours in Vietnam, and was awarded the Silver Star for heroism. This veteran is part of the committee for the Fourth of July parade at Stone Mountain every year. When he asked me to walk in this parade, I was initially hesitant. But then I took the big step, and walked in my first parade. It was truly a heartwarming, goose-bump and teary-eyed experience. Hearing crowds of people yell "Welcome Home" is an experience that cannot be described in words. The Big Hawaiian now has approximately 30 Vietnam veterans walking in this parade. While this parade could not have occurred 40 years ago, it is happening today...and that is what counts.

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale once said, "Change your thoughts, and you change your world." In keeping with that sentiment, I would encourage any veteran who is stuck in avoidance to take a "leap of faith." Go to a patriotic parade, or participate in a veterans service organization in your community. As I did, you may find that dealing with your own 'unfinished business' will be just what the doctor ordered.