

The War Room

By Kathy Platoni, PsyD, LTC, United States Army Reserve

Regardless of the audience or the listener, those lessons originating in the wartime theater may offer broader applicability than expected. Central to this theme is the nature of relationships and the extraordinary ties that bind, forged by times of hardship and desperation through catastrophic life experiences. The universality of those necessary survivorship skills of war is a classroom like none other. To exist in subhuman conditions and confront the second reality that one's untimely demise has an high probability, witness and reside in the basest of human conditions, and face the most adversarial, and despicable forms of human behavior, provides lessons few would elect to learn in this manner.

There are no elective courses in surviving this prehistoric entity we call war. As psychologists and clinicians, we are responsible for treating those suffering from painful afflictions of mind and mood and developing resources that will enable self-efficacy in coping with the burdens life has placed upon them. A critical factor frequently absent from this equation is the promotion of that desperate search to fill the void, discover some kind of value, meaning, and purpose which may lead to more complete lives of satisfaction and unrestrained joy. We must become skilled in promoting growth through trauma and adversity, and cultivate the development of survivorship skills. Tough triumph over hardship is hardly a novel concept; it is the nature of catastrophic life experiences, among them the tragic psychological blows rooted in wartime service, that necessitate specialized training and a greater and more far-reaching knowledge base. The prevalence of stress-related disorders stemming from combat exposure alone and the number of soldiers whose psychological stability has been shaken and ravaged by indescribable acts, dictates this. At the least, we must become vigilant to the fact that no one comes home from war unscathed.

There is war in my own head. Those of us who served in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom have set foot into rooms from which we may never leave. I have been most fortunate to have experienced total immersion into an unfathomable and bottomless well, where

most Americans will thankfully never be forced to descend, and have lived the depth and breadth and horror of a war where the cowardly enemy, waits to slaughter and incinerate his victims with the most cunning of guerilla warfare tactics. The results are never less than gruesome.

Desert life encompassed the usual daily fare of employing plastic bags as toilets and carrying them to "poo burning" piles, dodging fire in both directions, and breathing airborne fecal matter for months on end. My favorite "dining facilities" (euphemistically speaking) were festooned with skylights; a daily dosage of multiple mortar attacks that made mealtime an event most assuredly to be missed. Living on stale Cheerios and Fruit Loops was



Dr. Kathy Platoni (right) was stationed at Ar Ramadi. She now provides reintegration services for soldiers at Fort Benning, Georgia.

preferable to dying unceremoniously at the trough. Bedtime choices often times called for remaining awake until word of pending attacks had passed or to opt for sleeping in post-mortar attack rubble piles. Always with one eye open and likely bypassing a few sleep stages, the requisite sleeping position was now and again, bedding down with both M-16 A2 rifles and 9 MM Beretta, sidearms on red (round in the chamber), lying next to us on our racks (Army cots), waiting to report to our assigned sectors of fire. Entertainment came from the supremely ridiculous and profane, raucous laughter at any cost, a saving grace from the agony and torment of living only two steps from hell.

I witnessed my first soldier killed in action (KIA) early last spring during my first tour

of duty in the Sunni Triangle of Death. In the midst of Blackhawk helicopters plummeting to earth, hoards of casualties were off-loaded onto litters at rapid velocity, blood splattering their body armor and pooling in their Kevlar helmets, skulls crushed and separated from spines by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). We bowed our heads around his unzipped body bag to show reverence for the life taken and to honor the sacrifice, the loss of only a boy not many months past his high school graduation, every heart pounding with trepidation and dread at how many more would have to fall that day...and all the days to follow.

Bradley tanks, their fuel cells punctured by the latest and most lethal forms of insurgent technology, designed to explode upon impact, transformed crew compartments into crematoriums in a matter of seconds. These enormous track vehicles, reduced to the size of banquet tables, littered the desert landscape, a constant and grisly reminder in full view of war zone inhabitants. One prefers not to fathom death by such unbearable means and struggles to scrub these images from thoughts. The sounds of rockets, mortars, and small arms fired from every conceivable type of weapon tinged the atmosphere throughout the course of every waking hour, every sleepless night, rendering alarm clocks useless. Adrenaline rose proportionately with noise decibels, though dead silence was even more unsettling. Every crash or bang, even now, remains a potential mortar or rocket attack in our heads. More times than not, we continue to wrestle ourselves away from the temptation to "hit the dirt" and dive for cover, weeks and months after redeployment back to home. Riding the wave of chaos became an inescapable and longstanding way of life. We became engrossed in profound conversation with those hungering for a listening ear, only to witness their death scenes hours later and learn of their devastating internal blast injuries and amputations by mortar or rocket attacks. Too often, we fell victim to the incompetence of appalling leadership and came to blows with an enemy inside the gates, forcing the mission to take second chair while clashing with those in the rear who have no clue as to the sweat



and toil of the battlefield.

Distraught became a routine state of mind. We attended far too many tear-staining memorial services. We customarily traveled in convoys comprised of up-armored Humvees, surrounded by

an extraordinary degree of force protection and with gunners loaded for bear and laden with thousands of rounds in the turrets of each vehicle. One becomes accustomed to living in mind-numbing fear and panic, unable to gear down or de-escalate from the unceasing adrenalin rush long after redeployment home. The fight or flight reaction has yet failed to permit complete adaptation and readjustment to any manifestation of what was once, ordinary life in the states. What once yielded satisfaction and reward has become mundane.

Whether infantryman or psychologist, this is the legacy of the soldier and the price to be paid, a cost that divides those who went to a war where garrison (more "civilized" military installations with an abundance of amenities) broke out and those who legitimately went to war. Even now, danger lurks everywhere. More than a few of us speculate about becoming less ill at ease with the comfort of cold steel at our sides. There is an unsettling infection of guilt at having left so many suffering souls behind, at not having fulfilled the mission or of guaranteed better outcomes to unremitting combat exposure and transport back to some sense of normalcy on the home front. Now comes the endless quest to discover what constitutes the "new normal," given that normalcy was recently comprised of sustained attacks and loss of life, intense combat, relentless heat and sand, and the most unforgiving of living conditions imaginable. Given the choice, I would not relinquish the angst or the misery, a continuous plague upon our souls. These searing images have shaken and stunned me to my core, yet they are a gift of untold proportions and remarkable magnitude. I can no longer reside in that clueless and

protective bubble of ignorance, arrogantly proclaiming pride in my military service for having lived in the comfortable trappings of pools, fast food establishments, smoothie bars, and movie theaters. I wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

The combat zone is no longer the most improbable place for psychologists to be implanted in the wartime theater, as facilitation of access to combat stress interventions far forward in the battlefield falls within the principles of combat stress doctrine. There is no longer a front line, a rear echelon, or anyplace to draw the imaginary line in the sand. It is the categorical truth that both the requirements and needs for support are greatest among those with the highest levels of exposure to combat and unquestionably, where the greatest impact can be made upon service members from all branches of the Armed Forces, regardless of military occupational specialty or location in the wartime theater. This is also where the most glaring lessons of the war are fostered.

There is far more to this story. There are ties that cement the soldier to brother and sister soldiers in times of hardship and catastrophe that will endure for a lifetime. It steers the soldier and sailor and airman and marine and "coastie" through incomparable devastation and wreckage.

Like witnessing life through a telephoto lens, unless one has lived and breathed the enormity of such life-altering experiences, one cannot truly appreciate the darkness, the crushing defeat of lost comrades, and what one must conquer within the deepest recesses of the psyche to pass through to enlightenment and wisdom. This is the revered essence of the brother-sisterhood that has stood the test of all terrible times of war that gives rise to that infinite yearning for a return to the theater of war, to keep the backs of another out of harms way and make the ultimate and final sacrifice. There simply is no greater gift than the willingness to lay down one's life for one's brother/sister. For those who wear the uniform, this force that often propels and surpasses the will to survive, and it may be the key for the evolution of anguish and tragedy into triumph and the essence of discovering value, significance, and purpose from the most appalling and dreadful of human conditions and war's insanity. Perhaps the path to resilience is

paved by the performance of such virtuous and ennobling deeds.

About the Author:

Kathy Platoni, PsyD, LTC, US Army Reserve, has been a practicing clinical psychologist for 24 years. She has recently returned to private practice in Centerville, and a position as assistant clinical professor (adjunct faculty), School of Professional Psychology, Wright State University, Dayton, after a third voluntary deployment to active duty Army status in October, 2004. She served as commander of the 1972nd Medical Detachment (Combat Stress Control) at Guantanamo Bay Cuba from 2003-04. She then deployed to Iraq as Deputy Commander for Clinical Services, 55th Medical Company and Officer in Charge of Team Ar Ramadi, situated in the seat of the insurgency and during times of intensive combat. Dr. Platoni then returned to the Home of the Infantry, Fort Benning, Georgia to provide reintegration services due to elevated numbers of psychological casualties among combat arms soldiers. During her 26 years of both active and Army Reserve status, including a six month tour of duty during Operation Desert Storm, Dr. Platoni developed combat stress control, debriefings and crisis management programs used throughout the U.S. Army. Dr. Platoni also voluntarily deployed twice to New York City to provide post-9/11 disaster mental health and debriefing services to NYPD first responders. Dr. Platoni is a skilled hypnotherapist and possesses expertise in the sub-specialty areas of behavioral medicine and the treatment of chronic pain and chronic, debilitating, and terminal illnesses, to include Diplomate status by the American Academy of Pain Management.

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