

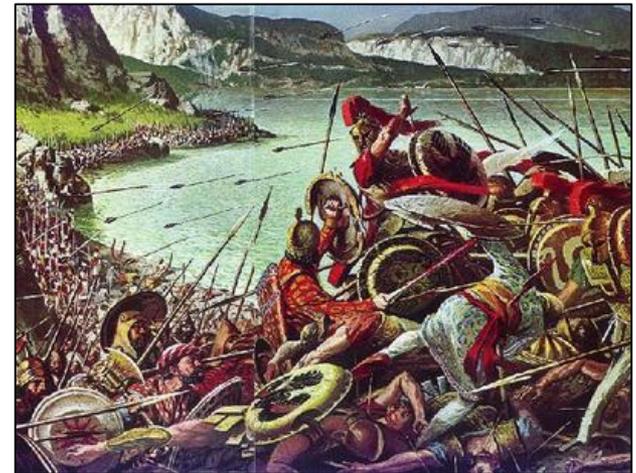
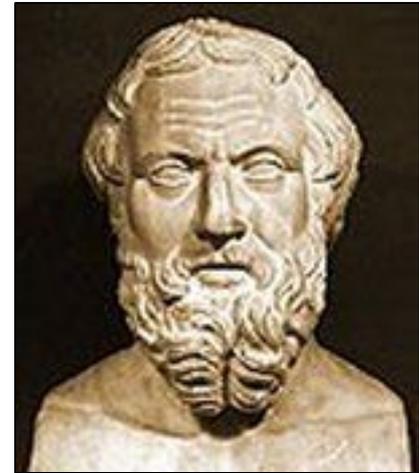
# Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Combat Veterans

Bradley D. Sussner, Ph.D.



# PTSD: A Brief History

- Herodotus: Greek historian who was the first to document the psychological impact of war.<sup>1</sup>
  - Battle of Marathon, 490 BCE:
    - Athenian soldier becomes blind after seeing someone killed in front of him.
  - Battle of Thermopylae, 480 BCE:
    - Spartan soldiers unable to return combat due to psychological exhaustion from prior battles.



The Battle of Thermopylae

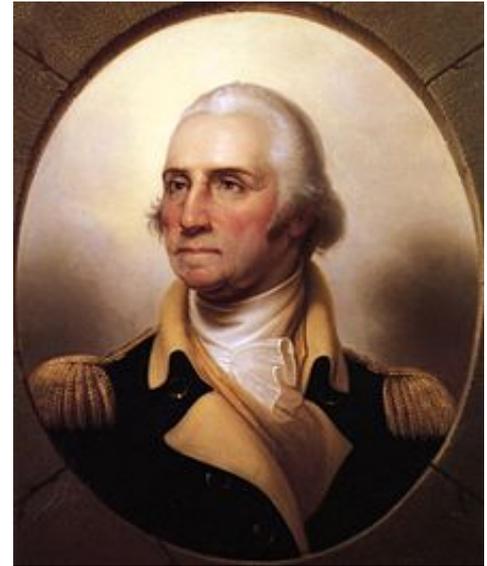
# The American Revolution

- ▶ John Henry, Patrick Henry's son, goes "raving mad" after walking among bodies after the Battle of Monmouth.<sup>2</sup>
  - Goes missing and resigns his commission nine months later.
- ▶ Letters home from Continental Army soldiers describe the trauma and the disconnect between the military and the public.



# The American Revolution

- ▶ George Washington warns of problems awaiting returning soldiers.
- ▶ Joseph Plumb Martin writes of the struggles of veterans of the Continental Army confirming Washington's fears.



# The Civil War

- A.K.A. Soldier's Heart, Irritable Heart, or DaCosta's Syndrome in honor of Jacob Mendes Da Costa who investigated the condition during the war.
- Originally thought to be a heart condition due to symptoms commonly associated with cardiovascular problems:
  - Nightmares, sleep disturbance, headache, palpitations, chest pain, and digestive problems.



# World War I: Shell Shock

- ▶ Unusual psychiatric symptoms initially thought to be the effect of blast exposure on the brain.
- ▶ Later noticed among combat soldiers not exposed to exploding shells.



# World War II

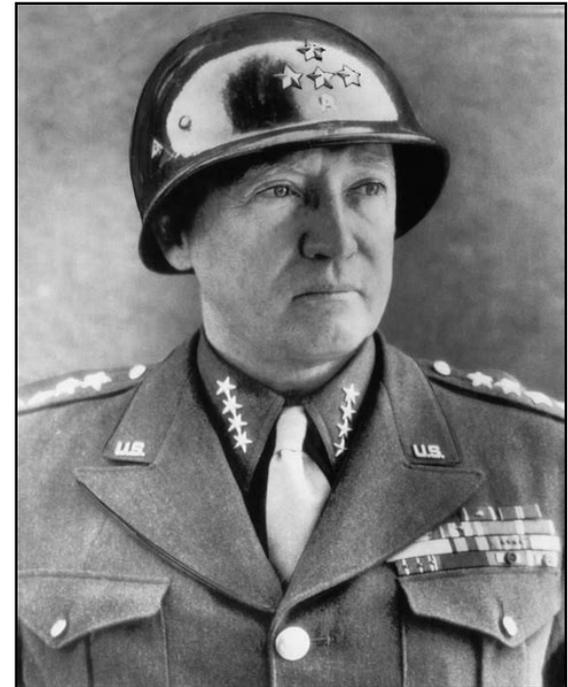
- ▶ Combat Neurosis, Combat Exhaustion, Battle Fatigue, Combat Stress Reaction
- ▶ 40% of medical discharges were for psychiatric reasons.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ Department of Defense releases films during and after the war to educate clinicians about psychiatric symptoms stemming from combat.



3. Shultz Vento (2012)

# Stigma Persists

- ▶ In August, 1943, General George Patton slaps Private Charles H. Kuhl after learning that he suffered from “battle fatigue.”
- ▶ Patton slaps Private Paul G. Bennett a week later for the same reason.
- ▶ Patton was ultimately relieved of command, but the majority of the public were in support of him.

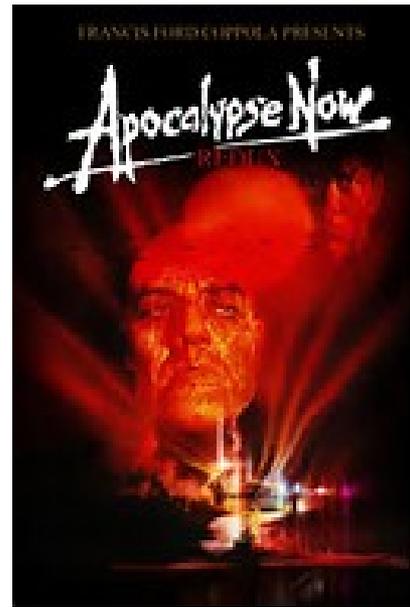
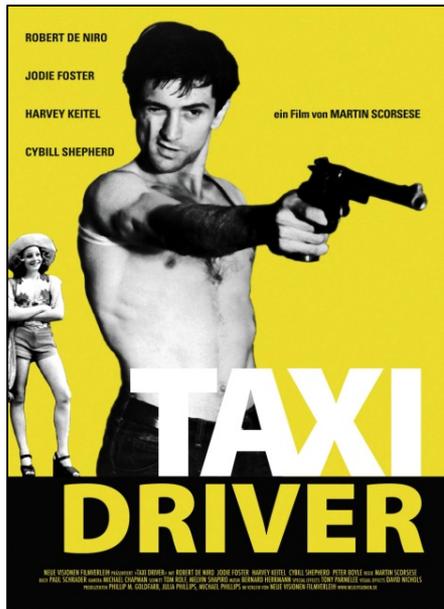


# Vietnam War: Post-Vietnam Syndrome

- ▶ First described in *The NY Times* in 1972.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ Characterized by guilt, resentment, rage, emotional numbing and alienation.
- ▶ “Rap Groups” developed and led by veterans begin in 1970 in NYC to address symptoms and problems.
  - ▶ Posttraumatic Stress Disorder first included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980.



# The Myth of the Disturbed and Violent Veteran



# Stereotypes Linger...

- ▶ In a recent survey, 84% of employers and 75% of civilians viewed veterans as “heroes,” but only 26% of employers and 22% of civilians considered them “strategic assets in their communities.”<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ 40% incorrectly believed that a majority suffered from PTSD.
- ▶ Employers views on veterans’ needs:
  - Mental health services: 92%
  - Employment services: 88%
  - Education services: 65%



# The Truth About Veterans' Mental Health

- ▶ Only around one-third of veterans have served in a war zone with a similar percentage having been exposed to dead, dying, or wounded people.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ The majority (69%) of OEF/OIF veterans do not experience significant mental health problems upon their return from combat.<sup>7</sup>
- ▶ Veterans are more likely to be married, have higher average annual incomes, are as likely to be employed, and more likely to have completed some college education than non-veterans.<sup>6</sup>



# Mental Health Problems Among Returning Veterans

- ▶ Approximately 44% of OEF/OIF veterans reported problems readjusting to civilian life.<sup>8</sup>
- ▶ PTSD: 4–20%
  - Greater combat exposure associated with higher risk.<sup>9</sup>
- ▶ Depression: 5–37%
- ▶ Mild TBI: 20–23%
- ▶ Alcohol Abuse: 5–39%



# PTSD and Combat

“An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior” *Victor Frankl, 1946.*



# PTSD: Diagnostic Criteria

- ▶ 20 Symptoms in Four Main Categories
- ▶ **Marked Alterations in Arousal and Reactivity**
- ▶ Irritable behavior and angry outbursts
- ▶ Hypervigilance
- ▶ Exaggerated Startle
- ▶ Problems with concentration
- ▶ Sleep disturbance
- ▶ Reckless or self-destructive behavior



# PTSD: Diagnostic Criteria

## ▶ Intrusion Symptoms

- Intrusive and Distressing Memories
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Psychological Distress in Response to Trauma Cues
- Physiological Reactions to Trauma Cues



# PTSD: Diagnostic Criteria

- ▶ **Avoidance Symptoms**
  - Of memories, thoughts, or feelings
  - Of reminders and triggers
- ▶ **Forms of Avoidance**
  - Restriction of activities, especially uncontrolled environments, often due to “Fear of Anger”
  - Reluctance to discuss traumatic events
  - Withdrawal from relationships
  - Drugs and Alcohol



# PTSD: Diagnostic Criteria

- ▶ **Negative Alterations in Cognitions and Mood Associated with the Traumatic Event**
  - Negative beliefs or expectations about oneself, others, or the world
  - Persistent distorted thoughts about the cause or consequences of the event leading to blame of self or others (e.g., survivor's guilt)
  - Decreased interest in activities
  - Inability to remember aspects of the trauma
  - Emotional numbing
  - Persistent negative emotional state (e.g., fear, horror, anger)
  - Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others



# PLEASE

Tell me how bad YOUR day was...

# Combat-Related PTSD and its Relationship to Anger Problems

- ▶ Combat veterans with PTSD report more anger, hostility and aggression than combat veterans without the disorder.<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ Vietnam Veterans with and without PTSD:<sup>11</sup>
  - ▶ Domestic violence in the past year: 33% vs. 15%
  - ▶ Incidents of aggression in the past year: 4.9 vs. 1.3
- ▶ OEF/OIF Veterans with and without PTSD<sup>12</sup>
  - ▶ Physical Aggression: 48% vs. 21%
  - ▶ Severe Violence: 20% vs. 6%
    - ▶ Alcohol abuse a major factor in the relationship

10: Mac Manus et al. (2015); 11: Kulka et al. (1990);  
12: Elbogen et al. (2014)



**CHRISTINE  
LOEBER**



**DR. JENNIFER  
GOLICK**



**DR. JENNIFER  
GONZALES**

# Weapons and Warriors

- ▶ Gun ownership is higher among veterans and even higher among veterans entering treatment for PTSD.<sup>13</sup>
- ▶ Veterans with PTSD were more likely to report having fired a weapon when threatened compared to non-combat-veterans without mental illness.<sup>14</sup>
- ▶ Close to two-thirds of veterans seeking healthcare at one VA reported owning at least one combat-style knife with a blade five inches or longer.<sup>15</sup>
  - ▶ PTSD severity was positively correlated with the number of knives owned.

13: Hall & Friedman (2013); 14: Freeman & Roca (2001);  
15: Strom et al. (2012)

# Combat PTSD and Criminal Behavior

- ▶ Overall, veterans are half as likely to be incarcerated than the general population.<sup>16</sup>
- ▶ PTSD is a risk factor for criminal justice system involvement and incarceration<sup>17</sup>
  - ▶ 46% of Vietnam veterans with PTSD arrested or jailed at least once vs. 12% without PTSD.<sup>18</sup>



16: U.S. Dept. of Justice (2010); 17: Greenberg & Rosenheck (2009); 18: Kulka et al. (1990)

# Combat PTSD–Related Anger and Criminal Behavior

- ▶ Anger is the PTSD symptom most associated with criminal behavior.<sup>19</sup>
- ▶ Percentage of OEF/OIF veterans arrested since deployment:
  - ▶ 9% for all combat veterans.
  - ▶ 23% with PTSD and high irritability/anger had been arrested
  - ▶ 13% with PTSD and low irritability/anger



# PTSD: Treatment

## ▶ Overview of VA PTSD Services

- Outpatient individual psychotherapy
- Group psychotherapy
  - Supportive psychotherapy
  - Anger Management
  - Trauma Processing
  - Distress Tolerance
  - Mindfulness
- Residential PTSD Program
- Couple/Family Therapy
- Peer Support



# Evidenced-Based Treatments for PTSD

- ▶ Prolonged Exposure Therapy
  - A 9 to 15 session intervention designed to reduce the distress and functional impairment stemming from trauma.
  - Psychoeducation
  - In Vivo Exposure
  - Imaginal Exposure



# Evidenced-Based Treatments for PTSD

- ▶ Cognitive Processing Therapy
  - A 12 session cognitive behavioral intervention to reduce the intensity of PTSD symptoms and associated symptoms: depression, anxiety, guilt and shame and to improve daily functioning.
    - Psychoeducation
    - Identification of “Stuck Points”
    - Highlight Patterns of Problematic Thinking
    - Learn Questions to Challenge Negative Thoughts and Problematic Beliefs

# Tips for Interacting with Veterans

- ▶ Look for signs of veteran status and when in doubt, ask.
  - Veteran indicators: military style haircut; unit and conflict decals; military clothing and gear, etc.
- ▶ Honesty, trust and respect go a long way.<sup>20</sup>
  - If you are not a combat veteran, avoid using phrases like, “I understand what you’re going through...”
- ▶ If possible, involve others who are also military veterans.

# Tips for Interacting with Veterans

- ▶ Whenever possible, avoid an adversarial posture, or other behavior that might lead the veteran to feel backed into a corner.<sup>19</sup>
- ▶ Trash bags, dead deer and road repairs as triggers and perceived threats.
- ▶ Combat veterans may be physically in New Jersey, but mentally back in Iraq or Afghanistan.
- ▶ Tailgating and not stopping as survival tactics.
- ▶ Don't underestimate the importance of honor and codes of conduct.

# The Long Road Home

- ▶ “A Marine is a Marine  
...there’s no such thing  
as a former Marine.”  
*General James F. Amos, 35<sup>th</sup>  
Commandant of the Marine Corps*
- ▶ “Once a soldier, always a  
soldier.” *General Raymond T.  
Odierno, U.S. Army Chief of Staff*



# Strangers in a Familiar Land

- Rates of PTSD for US veterans are as high as 20% compared to 1.5% for the Israeli Defense Forces.
- As of 2017, only 6% of the US population has served in the military
  - In Israel, 74% over 18 serve
  - By 2040, 3.7% of the US population will have served
- The more disconnected the public is from the wars that are fought on their behalf, the more difficulty soldiers have upon their return.<sup>21</sup>



21. Junger (2016)

# Help for Veterans

- ▶ VA Veterans Crisis Hotline: (800) 273-TALK (8255)
- ▶ VANJ PTSD Services
  - Nancy Friedman, Ph.D., Program Coordinator
    - (908) 647-0180 x1569; Nancy.Friedman@VA.gov
- ▶ Outpatient PTSD Clinical Team
  - Lyons Campus-Bradley D. Sussner, Ph.D.
    - (908) 647-0180 x4862; Bradley.Sussner@VA.gov
  - East Orange Campus-Dianna Rowell-Boschulte, Ph.D.
    - (973) 676-1000 x2271; Dianna.Rowell@VA.gov
- ▶ PTSD Residential Treatment Program
  - Mia Downing, Ph.D.-(908) 647-0180 x4613; Mia.Downing@VA.gov
- ▶ National Center for PTSD: [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov)
- ▶ Rutgers/NJDMAVA Vet2Vet: (866) 838-7654, [www.njveteranshelpline.org](http://www.njveteranshelpline.org)

▶ And You!!!.....

