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## Home Fires

American Veterans on the Post-War Life

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### Living the Dream

By *MICHAEL JERNIGAN*

Greetings again from the Sunshine State.

As I mentioned in my first post I would like to bring some awareness to an issue facing many of us returning war veterans. Post-traumatic stress disorder (P.T.S.D.) is a monster that war veterans have been facing since the beginning of armed conflict. In a nutshell, it is the stress brought on by a traumatic event. I understand that it is more complicated than that but I would like to keep it as simple as possible for our purposes here.

I am living with P.T.S.D., and I am thriving in some respects and having problems in others. In this and future posts I plan to use myself and my experiences as examples.

Post-traumatic stress can manifest itself in many different ways. It is usually brought on by a trigger mechanism, or what some might call a catalyst. It can be something very minor that can be easily controlled or it can be so large that it has life altering circumstances.

So what do I mean when I say I am both thriving and having problems at the same time? Well, I can tell you that in school I am thriving. I have been back for a couple of years now and continue to pull a 3-plus grade point average every semester. It is in other parts of my life that I am struggling.

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My relationship with my wife has been strained because of the way I react to certain things; my relationship with my stepson has suffered as well. I have quick reactions full of emotion that are not checked before they come out. In many cases they are very aggressive and quite counterproductive. I am impatient in numerous situations and become frustrated easily. To top it all off I often have to overcome bouts of anxiety, especially when I am outside my house. I do well in social situations but I find them physically taxing. I have been receiving help with all of these problems and I am improving at a good rate. My wife and I have worked hard to help me overcome a lot of these symptoms.

One of the most common problems facing our war veterans when we return home is drug and alcohol abuse. We turn to these to escape from emotions. I drank heavily when I returned home. I would drink to the point that I would pass out at night. I would do this because I could not sleep. I could not sleep because there were a healthy wave of emotions that I refused to face. What made sleep hard was the P.T.S.D. in conjunction with a traumatic brain injury. When I would finally sleep I had to deal with some strange and horrific dreams.

I would have dreams that most people would be scared by. I was scared, too, especially when I

would have the same dream more than once. One of the strangest dreams took place in Iraq. We would be returning from a foot patrol at night. It was as if I were looking through a set of night vision goggles. There were two gates that we would have to come through at our forward operating base (F.O.B.). I can remember gaining access through the first gate but then not being able to enter the inner part of the base until daybreak. Since we could not get back to our hooches we would decide to sleep under the gun line (155-millimeter howitzers), something that would not be done for safety purposes. Just when I would be drifting off to sleep the gun line would open up. It was at that point that I would awake for real. I was never able to go back to sleep after that.

There were dreams that were both strange and violent. In one of them, I was in the spare bedroom of a condominium that I had rented before I enlisted. When I lived there the only thing in this room was my gun cabinet with all of my rifles and shotguns in it. During my dream I was in this room waist deep in stuffed animals. Someone would enter the room (I could never identify the person) and attack me. We would be fighting in this room. At a certain point in the fight I would gain the advantage. I would bend over this individual and bite his throat out. It was always bloody. Just then I would wake up.

One of the hardest dreams to deal with came back many times. It was one of the scariest in my mind. It took place in Iraq as well. I can remember being on patrol in Mahmudiya. That is the town that I was wounded in. I was always on patrol with a group of Marines. At some point in the dream I would become separated from my patrol. Iraq can be a scary place to find yourself alone in. It got worse. I cannot remember how, but I would lose my rifle (a good Marine does not lose his weapon). I would see a small kid scampering off with my rifle and follow him. I was terrified of returning back to base without my rifle. The kid would enter a building and I knew that I would have to follow him into the building. Keep in mind that I am defenseless. When I would enter the building I always encountered hand to hand combat with a few different individuals at one time. I would always defeat those attacking me. I can remember that I also would find a number of weapons that had once belonged to Marines — pistols, rifles and shotguns. To my dismay I would never find my rifle.

I would see the kid again and chase him one more time. I always wound up chasing him into another building and encountering more and more hand to hand combat situations. I would always find more weapons but never mine. I always picked up the weapons that I would find and bring them with me before I gave pursuit to that kid again. This cycle would never end. I would thrash around in my bed until I would wake up hot and sweating. I could never get back to sleep and was quite disturbed by this dream.

While I was in Washington D.C. I started to make significant progress on many different fronts. I found a counselor there named Carey Smith, a disabled veteran from the Vietnam War. He has been through what I have. He began to teach me how to interpret my dreams in a positive way. I know that this can be hard to do. When he first told me I was very hesitant. As he explained it to me I started to understand what he was talking about.

We came to the conclusion that the dreams were my mind's way of reconciling problems I had. They usually dealt with some guilt I had over one thing or another. In many of these situations,

I would have no way of making things better, so my brain would do it for me in my sleep. Once I grasped this concept the dreams became much easier to deal with. I would then wake up in the middle of the night and be able to tell myself that there was nothing wrong and return to sleep. It is great. Currently, I am not dealing with any harsh dreams. I use the term “harsh” because I no longer see these dreams as bad but as healthy and productive.

One of the things that I am learning as I am living with P.T.S.D. is that these feelings can be dealt with positively, that these different symptoms do not have to control my life. I am doing my best to live my life and be happy. There is no magic pill that will make things better. By facing the difficult emotions and learning how to positively react to them my life becomes easier. The emotions are still there — they will probably never go away. But when I face them sober and head on I can live my good dreams and not be controlled by the difficult ones.

Semper Fidelis,  
Mike Jernigan