

I wish to thank Chaplain Owen Matthews for nominating me and President Tom Eichler for appointing me to the position of Chaplain for the Khe Sanh Veterans. I believe it to be both an honor and a privilege to serve such an outstanding organization. It is my goal to write an article for the general good of the membership for each edition of *RED CLAY*. And I certainly recommend to everyone that can, to attend next year's reunion in Denver. The reunion this year in Reno has made a tremendous impact on my life and my view of my role in the war. My heart was warmed by the fellowship of the people who shared life-changing experience with me 40 years ago. We are "Eternally Bonded".

The Real Problem Concerning Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder

By Ron Rayner Chaplain:

Khe Sanh Veterans, Pontiac, MI Fire Dept., and Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter
133 Oakland County, MI

It is front-page news when a police officer, firefighter, marine, soldier, airman, sailor, or coast guard personnel risks his or her life to save a comrade or a perfect stranger. There is an abundance of evidence that there is courage and self sacrifice among the United States military personnel and community emergency responders in America.

In many cases when there is exposure to extreme danger or horrific images and no proper counseling afterward, something called post-traumatic-stress-disorder develops. As I am not a doctor, I will define PTSD as mental wounds from unusual situations. (Google PTSD or go to eagleprep.com for full definition)

The real problem with P.T.S.D. is not that people are mentally wounded from a traumatic life-threatening event and suffer from Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder. The real problem is that most of the victims are in denial and will not seek help for this life threatening disability. These courageous individuals who risk their lives for others cannot accept that they may also need help from a mental health professional. The minds of military personnel and emergency responders are wounded each time they see or handle things like maimed friends, dead babies, and mass casualties. Near death and extremely frightening experiences are also on the list of events that can wound a person mentally. The effects are accumulative. Long service and many mental wounds increase the possibility of PTSD.

I know that I personally was in denial. I always thought I was a tough guy and didn't need help. Being tough is definitely part of the job that these occupations demand. But what I have learned and what these brave people have to realize is that mental wounds can ruin your life and kill you just like a physical wound. These individuals who spend much time in harms way commonly accept depression, divorce and estrangement from their children as occupational hazards.

I have PTSD. I was diagnosed in 2000, 32 years after Vietnam and 6 years after retiring from the fire service. The only reason I am getting help for my problem is that when I went to my county Veterans Services officer to fill out the forms to receive hearing aids, he looked at my combat record and convinced me to seek help for PTSD. My story on how I handle this problem is on my website at eagleprep.com.

While taking chaplain classes sponsored by *The International Fellowship of Chaplains* in 2003, I was shocked to learn that over 170,000 Vietnam veterans had

committed suicide by 1987. This is almost triple the deaths that had occurred in the war itself. In November 2004 a firefighter friend of mine committed suicide. He was in denial right to the end. I also knew two firefighters who drank themselves to death. Congress is investigating the numerous suicides among today's US military.

My secular purpose as a chaplain has been to convince veterans and emergency responders who may have PTSD to seek a mental health care professional's opinion on their mental health.

Just like diabetes, without daily care, PTSD can be a killer. I believe that unlike diabetes, it is contagious. (This is debatable in the mental health community) The people that risk their lives for complete strangers on a regular basis quite often infect their families with this mental health problem. It is a strange phenomenon that people, who will give their families almost anything material they ask for, will not make a visit to a mental health provider to insure the mental health of their family.

One of the symptoms of PTSD is outbursts of anger at little insignificant things. I used to accept my bad temper as a normal condition as my grandfather and my father had certain things that set them off also. Duh! My grandfather was a police officer for over 20 years and my father was a firefighter for 35 years. The family legend has always been that a bad temper was just hereditary.

The Khe Sanh Veterans 40th Anniversary Reunion of the Siege of Khe Sanh was held July 28-August 3, 2008 in Reno, Nevada. A recurring theme during the reunion was veterans who were being treated for PTSD trying to get the other veterans to seek help for PTSD.

A friend of mine who was in my machine gun squad in Vietnam came to see me at the reunion. We hadn't seen each other since December 1968. We talked and discovered we had similar lives. He had been a police officer and I had been a firefighter. We both had lost our tempers more than once and were involved in physical altercations. We both had suffered from road rage. We both had problems relating to our families. Emotional numbness also seems to be a problem with the both of us. We both have recurring suicidal thoughts.

This Marine on June 5, 1968 exposed himself to enemy fire and rescued a wounded Marine from extreme danger. He received a Navy Commendation Medal for that. On June 7, 1968 he helped rescue two marines in a similar situation. He received a Bronze Star for that. I believe this same Marine would risk his life to help someone today if the situation presented itself.

All I am asking my friend and all other veteran and active duty military personnel and emergency responders to do is to be evaluated by a mental health care professional for the possibility of PTSD. It can't hurt and can only help. I can almost guarantee that no one will be shooting at them on their trip to the clinic. Sometimes the seemingly easiest tasks in life are the hardest to accomplish.

A part of PTSD therapy is a technique called "thought stopping". When a troubled individual identifies that his or her thoughts are headed in the wrong direction he or she should call a halt to the negativity. They may even yell "STOP" out loud. They must then replace those thoughts as described by Marcy Blochowiak in her book *No Glass Ceiling, Just Blue Sky* from Simple Truths.

"One powerful technique that can stir your emotions and change the way you feel is to use 'emotional triggers.' Our emotions are powerful motivators and, to a large degree,

will control our behavior. For example, if we find ourselves thinking negative thoughts, we can replace the thoughts with something that we know will stir our emotions in a positive way. It may be listening to your favorite song, it may be a love letter from your spouse, a card from your child, a beautiful poem, or a passage from your favorite book.”

“Thought stopping” has saved my life and family relationships on numerous occasions. Just learning this simple technique to change the direction of your thoughts could make the difference between a long marriage and divorce, or suicide and life.

I believe the following scripture addresses some of the issues I have mentioned. I believe God gives mental health professionals their skills.

“Today I give you the **choice** between life and death, between blessings and curses. I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you and your descendants might live! Choose to love the Lord your God and to obey him, for he is your life. Then you will live long in the land...

Deuteronomy 30:19-20

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“Others died that you might live. I traded their lives for yours because you are precious to me. You are honored, and I love you.”

Isaiah 43:4

New Living Testament

There have been over one million men and women who have sacrificed their lives serving the United States of America. What the rest of us owe these individuals is to live a happy, healthy, and purposeful life so that they have not died in vain. If there is a possibility that the problems in your life are caused by PTSD, do yourself and your loved ones a favor and please seek professional mental health care. PTSD is treatable. As hard headed as I am, I did it and it is well worth it. My daily goal is for my grandchildren to know a better person than the one my wife and children have had to endure.