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## MY VIEW

# Recording war stories allows spiritual renewal

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As a young kid, I read lots of books and saw many movies about war. The heroism, music and victories became my idealized image of combat as a crucible to certain manhood. Sadly, my war experience was much different.

Wounded twice, I hobbled home full of wisdom and certain that once everyone heard the truth about what I saw and experienced, peaceful alternatives to war would be found. When I tried to verbalize the horrors of war and the casualty calls I made to mothers and wives, my voice choked, my tears flowed and, worse, nobody wanted to listen.

For years I swallowed the pain. Pride turned to rage and I exploded often at my wife and children, destroying our relationship. Then I practiced omerta, the conspiracy of silence shared by many veterans rather than face the stigma of mental illness, shell shock or a nervous breakdown.

Years later, a VA counselor told me, "You've got Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. File a claim for PTSD. Write down the triggering events on this form and send it to me." Thirty single-spaced typewritten pages spewed out. He called and said, "You should write a book."

Documenting unspeakable memories, labeling those events and feelings with words and closing the cover on that story is cathartic. The result is a spiritual renewal, a freedom that allows me to choose when to open and close the past while trying to live in the present.

My dad never spoke much about Iwo Jima during World War II, joking that he worked on a radar site and saw Bob Hope.

My grandfather was mustard-gassed in France during World War I and spent 30 months in a VA hospital. I wondered why he cowered under his bed during thunderstorms, drank a tumbler full of whiskey for breakfast and a case of beer every day. The only words he told me about his war were "don't go into the infantry." Of course, that's exactly what I did.

We veterans should break our silence and write about the unspeakable events. I've written my stories and they're more than just about me.

There's Chuck Yaghoobian, age 23, a fellow officer who buoyed my spirits when I was low. We sat side-by-side on the long plane rides from Tampa to Danang. Chuck teased me about staying a "straight arrow" and I mocked his Boston accent. He was killed his first night in the field when the enemy threw a grenade in his foxhole.

There's Jim Parsons, also 23, whose favorite comic strip was Pogo. He walked a line of artillery behind us as we escaped an ambush. Months later he was shot and killed.

There's Billy Joe McCarty, 21, my brave radioman from Wilmer, Ala., always an arm's length away even when bullets were flying and mortars were exploding. He taught me how to keep warm under a cold rain. Half of his head and face were blown off the day his wife gave birth to their baby.

Chuck, Jim and Billy are dead now, have been for 40 years. Yet when we read their stories, they come back to life, resurrected again for a few precious moments.

The VA Western New York Healthcare System has allowed me to lead a writers group where participants can share their stories and offer each other suggestions to improve the readability of their experiences. The group meets on the first and third Monday of every month from 1:30 to 3:30 p. m. at 3495 Bailey Avenue, Room 422b. I invite all veterans interested in writing their story to attend.

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