

Friendship and Survivor Guilt

In the civilian world, the term “friend” is often used casually, and without a lot of concern over just what that actually means. I always get a chuckle inside, when someone says to me, “Oh, you just have to meet my friends.” In my mind, I see a fire team of combat hardened Warriors, dripping with sweat, loaded down with weapons and ammo, at the ready to kill to protect each other. And when I have “Met the Friends,” more often than not, it was a bunch of vitamin-poppin-limp-dicks that couldn’t figure out which pair of Nikes went best with their BMW.

If you look in the “Big Book of Words” (that’s what Marines call the Dictionary), the word friend means comrade, someone you like, or trust. Well that’s OK for the “nike club,” but for us warriors, that “Don’t quite get it”. And you know what I’m talkin’ about. To us, a friend is to be trusted with your life. He or she is always your back up, always watchin’ your 6 O’clock, always there if you need someone on your flank; you know, like the wing man on Top Gun, or ridin’ shotgun. Same-e-Same.

The first time I was in a fire fight, surrounded by the “Little People,” and my brothers and I were back to back, I learned what trust was; no little rice-propelled warrior in black pajamas was sneakin’ up on me without having field surgery on the spot. That is, a new asshole placed in the middle of his head. My brothers, my “friends,” protected me with their lives, and I returned the privilege of putting my life on the line for them. You don’t get any closer than that.

This is the way it’s always been with Warriors, and that’s the way it is today! With Warriors, the bond of true friendship is developed, tested, sealed in trust, and cherished as the result of any war, or life and death conflict. When you go into battle together, you do so with “friends” you can “trust.” And when every battle is over, once again, you look at “life” and true “friendship” a whole lot differently.

The more conflicts you live through together, the stronger the bond of friendship, and the mutual love between you. Yeah! That’s right, I said Love! Remember, as a human being, you’re suppose to “feel” emotions? Now I’m not talking about the ooey-goey, sloppy, kissy-in-the-shower love. I’m talkin’ about honorable, respectful, “Somebody just-saved-your-ass and you owe’m love.”

“So what’s the problem,” you ask? Real simple. What happens when the friend you love gets wasted (killed), and you don’t. And even worse, what happens if this is repeated over and over again? And worse again, what happens if you never even get a scratch, while what’s left of your “friends” are being scraped up off the ground and choppered out in half a body bag?

This repeated event starts to eat at you like a pack of wolves on a fresh kill. You think to yourself, “Why didn’t I step on that land mine?”, “Why wasn’t I killed?”, and “What the hell is going on here?” Every one of these self-destructive, cancerous thoughts stays locked in your brainhousing-group adding to the growing catalog of nightmares each time you fall asleep.

After a time of repeated “loss,” mounting survivor guilt, and being a part of, or witness to, continual killing, you become closed off, numb, and even a little reckless at times. I’ll give you a couple of examples. And by the way, my Young Warrior Friends, I’m only telling you all this so that

just maybe you can identify with the feelings taking place. And maybe you’ll have a heads-up in advance, so you won’t do what I did.

About 11 months into my 13 month tour (Marine Corps had to one-up the Army by a month) I was one of the coldest sons of bitches on the planet. After the loss of the best high school friend of my life, and I’d just as soon not say how many true friends I also lost in the war, I wanted revenge, and I didn’t give a shit if I lived or died in the process. I know, that some of you feel the same way, right now. That’s why some of you, in some ways, don’t mind going back to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for a second tour (or more). Your “friends” are there, and you can’t stand the thought of not covering their backs. This driving force “to be with your fellow Warriors” goes beyond family ties, beyond patriotism, or just plain common sense. And sometimes, it’s survivor guilt that makes you decide to return to war, or to be reckless in it. I’ll give you an example.

We were on one of our typical operations, burning everything in our path, taking prisoners for interrogation, and killing everyone who resisted. We came into a clearing and in the center of it was an old church, all blown to hell, but the tower was still pretty much intact.

I was part of a small group of Marines running the flank position, to make sure the main unit didn’t get ambushed. As soon as we moved into the clearing and near the church, we started taking fire from a few Viet Cong, trying to make their way to the river. Thanks to the bullshit Geneva Convention, this was a river we couldn’t cross, and there weren’t any Korean Marines around to help out. They didn’t need to follow the “so called” Rules of War. They did what the hell needed to be done, no questions asked.

Feeling a lot of survivor guilt, and not giving a shit, I climbed up on the tower, and started trying to kill as many of the enemy as I could. Well, not all the Cong had made it to the river yet. They saw me, and I saw them, and we all got into a great little fire fight. As the Marines down on the ground began to charge the Cong under fire (no small thing to do), I kept trying to keep the enemy on the run. After it was over, and with my rifle smoking like bratwurst on a grill, I stopped and looked at where I was standing.

During the battle, the names of all my dead brothers were rolling through my brain. All I could do was fire, and think “this one’s for Bob, this one’s for Dennis, this one’s for Sgt Mac!” I was in a blind rage, with no thought whatsoever for my own safety. A Marine sergeant had also climbed up during the firefight to be my spotter, as I was trying to kill the Cong crossing the river. He looked at me, and looked at the wall where I was standing and said, “Holy fuck, Brandi, look at this shit!” I was completely covered with plaster, and enemy rounds had hit everywhere around my body except where I was standing, forming a silhouette of sorts. Now you may think this was a real good thing, but I didn’t. It only made me feel even more guilty, because once again, I didn’t get hit! This kind of experience actually increases survivor guilt and encourages recklessness, even thoughts of suicide by way of battle. And no shit, my own survivor guilt increased even more.

The same kind of situation happened one more time while we were trying to med-evac our wounded, and I became even more careless with my own life. That is, until I came close the end of my 13 month tour, when a little girl looked into my soul and made me realize what a monster I’d become. I’ll tell you about that in the next topic. So what do you do about “Survivor Guilt?”

“YOU SURVIVE!”

It's just that simple. You don't dishonor the friends who died to protect you. You remember the good times you shared, and the bonds of real friendship that will guide for you for the rest of your life. Think about it! If they thought you were worth dying for, don't you think you're worth living for? I sure as hell do.

After 40 years, I still see the faces of my Brothers, smiling, laughing, and encouraging me to go on; to push forward, do something useful with my life, and have a damn good time doing it.

So to you young warriors, I'm saying, "Use the friendships of "trust" and "honor" as your standard, and your standard is excellence! We'll talk about where to get some help with this trauma in a bit.

Now, let's break camp, and get back in the bush. We've got a ways to go, and it's easier to see the booby traps in daylight.

From: "*The Warriors Guide to Insanity*" By Sgt. PTSD Brandi, U.S.M.C. Never Retired?
www.sgtbrandi.com