

Flashbacks: Smells, Sounds and Places

A short time after being married (to my first wife), my in-laws decided to drop in on the happy family and spend a few days. That was OK, because I had plenty of money for beer at the time. We had just moved to Ocean Beach, San Diego, and lived in a tiny, two bedroom duplex, about a thousand feet from the water. If I remember right, it was only about \$300 a month, and even though it was a little run down, it was still about the nicest place I ever lived.

There was nothin' better to me than getting up before sunrise, throwin' on my sweats (and jungle boots), then going for a good run along the beach, before goin' to work. I still don't know if the in-laws were coming to see "us," or just wanted to spend a couple days in paradise. At night, you could hear the waves, and besides reminding me of guard duty at China Beach, it was a great way to fall asleep.

They didn't know me very well, and knew next to nothing about my rifleman's experiences in Vietnam. They had never brought up the subject, and I sure as hell didn't want to talk about it.

One morning, after they arrived, I had the kitchen duty, and was fixing breakfast. Our little kitchen faced the street, so we heard most of the traffic goin' by. This particular morning, my wife and her mom were sitting at our little table, enjoying a pleasant cup of coffee. Their position offered them a clear view of yours truly, working away at not breaking the eggs while burning the toast.

Without warning, a car back-fired right in front of me! "Incoming!" I thought, as I hit the deck!

Not thinking anything of the street noise, my mother-in law turned her head, looked into the kitchen, dropped her spoon into her coffee, and without taking her eyes off of me, asked her daughter, "UH, Honey, why is Andy laying on the floor and not moving?"

And no shit, there I was. Pressed to the kitchen floor, like a crab in the surf-zone, waiting for the next sniper round, and wondering "Where the hell is my weapon?"

Having already explained far too much to my wife about the "war" experiences, she calmly turned to her mother and said, "Oh, it's OK mom, he's just having a flashback."

"There is no way I can slither out of this one," I thought, and "no one is gonna believe I just dropped down for a quick 25 before the eggs were done," then finally, "Nope! My ass is in the sling for sure." So feeling embarrassed and like something the neighbor's dog just left on our sidewalk (you know, nice and fresh), I got up, went back to burning breakfast, and tried to fit in with the "normies."

In case you're not familiar with the term "Flashback," I'll explain just what that means to me, as well as other Vets. It is also important to realize that flashbacks happen to everyone, all the time. If you hear a song that played when you were a kid, your brain may "flash back" to that time and recall some particular experience that was either pleasant or unpleasant. When you revisit a place after a long time, you remember (flash back) to how it was when you first visited there, and either good or not so good memories pop into your head, and so on.

For someone who has had traumatic experiences, the same thing happens. A near fatal collision at an intersection causes you to flash back every time you pass through it again. Seeing old pictures of the Twin Towers brings you crashing into memories of that tragic event, and floods you with your own personal psychological repercussions (big shrinker words).

The same thing happens with Veterans, only in some cases, the degree of intensity is strong enough to "hold" you in the memory for a considerable length of time. You actually believe that you are back in the jungle (in the desert?) dodging bullets, and hunting for the enemy. There were times in my early years of dealing with this stress that I would stay in a flashback for almost an hour. In my twisted brain, it was like a closed-loop movie, rolling the same scenes, over and over again.

If you don't get this "reaction" under control, it is possible to actually "stay" in the flashback for a considerable length of time, maybe for good. It all depends on each person's willingness to accept "where they now are." I'll explain that a bit.

If you are completely overwhelmed, stressed out, pissed off, depressed, confused, and frustrated with where you are in the present, in order to "survive," you welcome something from the past. Even if the past was painful, your brain picks out a time when you didn't have to deal with so many emotions all at once. It's a sneaky little sucker; it brings you back to a point just below the pain threshold of the present moment, just enough to make it seem a little better. Then maybe, like it did to me, the brain throws in a good memory or two. Kind of like a carrot in front of the donkey.

It is very difficult to describe the actual feeling during a flashback, but I'll give it a shot. Most people have heard of, or have actually experienced what is known as a "panic attack." That's a nice way of saying, that one or a series of events, has just turned to shit, it keeps getting worse, and you are at your maximum limit of control (Prozac time?).

In the Marine Corps, when conditions reach this point, in our limited vocabulary (and favorite words), we simply say that a series of events going bad is, or is becoming, a "Cluster Fuck," or to describe the situation in its conclusion, a FUBAR "Fucked Up Beyond All Reason." Do you see how Marines have mastered a few simple words to describe so many wonderful events?

A flashback creates a very unsettling feeling in your head. First of all, your blood pressure feels like it's off the charts, your heart is pounding so hard, you're sure it's gonna give out at any second. And depending on the kind of experience you are "reliving," the adrenaline is also kickin' in a bit. Maybe the adrenaline is doing the whole thing, hell, I'm no doctor, all I know is how the damn thing feels.

Now, this is the scary part. You are looking out through your eyes. You have to in order to move through the landscape, avoiding trees, holes, and small creatures. So a portion of your senses "is" in the present moment. But, the expectation of the past, "coming into" the present is so great, it's like living "in" two separate events at the same time. That is, in the same exact moment.

For example, on one occasion, when I was caught between two worlds for a period, I was walking through the woods with my M-14 "unlocked" and loaded, thinking "engage and destroy." I knew that I was in the woods, near my home, in the outback of Ohio, and yet I expected the Viet Cong to

be walking down the trail at any moment. It was so real that I felt like I was actually back in the war.

The next scary thing is that I also felt that at any moment I was actually going to lose my mind completely, lose control, and “not get out” of the nightmare. That was usually the critical breaking point for me, and what pulled my head back into the “real” point in time, that place in the present moment. Other Vets have had the same experiences, and the main factor in maintaining a small measure of sanity (or insanity), is our strong commitment “Not to Lose Control.” We know what we’re capable of, and do not want to unleash that on innocent people.

In extreme cases, when a Veteran does cross the line into the past, and stays there, he knows he may be walking in the woods, or down a trail, but that’s where reality stops. He believes he’s seeing bamboo trees or palm trees, and the trail is barbered by rice paddies. Now-a-days, it might be an oasis in the desert.

When I was an honored guest at the VA Hospital, Psycho Ward, I talked to other Warriors who were disturbing, even for me. These guys were so far gone, and they “jumped” back and forth so much between the painful present and the Flashback Loop, that they really weren’t sure what was real and just a bullshit memory. Not a good place to be.

In all truthfulness, in the story of when that car backfired (and that situation happened a lot), I was actually more comfortable flashing back to my old unit, my true friends, and the life I understood, than being a confused, dumb ass on the kitchen floor.

To me, combat with friends was a hell of a lot better than where I was. Sure we were pissed off and frustrated there too, but at least we could go out and burn something down, blow shit up, or shoot at somebody. We had a way to “release” (Shrinkers call it venting) our anxiety, our emotions. We also had other Warriors next to us that shared the same feelings, and over a good drunk we could talk about it. Even if all that “venting” wasn’t carried out in the most productive way, it still made us feel better.

“So what do I do?” you ask, and “How long will it take to handle these flashbacks?” The answer to the first question ain’t rocket science. What “you do” is, you accept the fact that there just might be a problem in your dip-shit brain that’s causing you to have flashbacks in the first place. And damn it! It’s not your fault that you do! Remember, you are a feeling human being. You weren’t designed to experience what you did, and not be affected by it. So cut yourself some slack, there’s nothing wrong with the way you’re reacting. Now here’s the good news. The more you talk about your flashback feelings with other warriors who have had similar traumatic experiences, and the more you participate in professional counseling at the VA, either one-on-one or in a group, the milder and milder the flashbacks become.

Why you ask? It’s because, just like riding the emotional surfboard when you’re dealing with loss, you have to learn to “turtle” under the wave that each flashback dumps on you. Same-e-Same. The more you accept your present life, the less your brain can trick you with flashbacks from the past. The more you deal with your traumatic problems, while learning to improvise, overcome and adapt to your new life, the more “you like” the present, and don’t need to go back in time. With good professional help, it won’t take you as long as it did for me, to get the flashbacks in a very manageable place in your brain-housing-group.

OK, the answer to the second question might sting a bit. But I wouldn’t really call it real bad news. It’s sort of like going out to take a ride, and while you’re making a flight check on your car, discover a flat tire. You know the “Oh shit” comment.

Fact is, after more than 35 years, I still stop and track a Hewie (old type helicopter), remembering sitting in the door and flying over rice paddies. The smell of burning grass still reminds me of torching villages with my friends, and taking fire from the “little” snipers. It never really goes away, because I don’t want it to. What! Man, this Jar Head really is whacked! you say. Well, maybe so, but just hear me out, before you stick your head up your ass.

The reason I “choose” not to forget all the bad stuff, is because it’s mixed up with the good stuff. When you accept who you are and what you’ve become, and that you actually “did” a Damn Fine Job at being a Warrior, it’s like turning down the volume on a radio. I’ve learned that you Youngins now call radios, iPods. I call’em I-puds (ask a marine on that one). Well anyway, as you turn the volume down lower and lower, it becomes more like background music. It’s not so loud that it prevents you from thinking of something else. Just like going into a nice restaurant and having dinner and a cool one. You hardly know the music is playing. And after a time, you can barely hear it anymore, because after a time, you’re feeling better about yourself, and the life you’re living through in the present moment.

You now have a future, and you’ve learned to live with the past. Enough said.

OK, let’s get on down this next trail. Watch that ridge line for enemy movement, and stay frosty!

From: “*The Warriors Guide to Insanity*” By Sgt. PTSD Brandi, U.S.M.C. Never Retired?
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