

## **2-1 You Ain't Who You Used to Be**

***“We cannot teach people anything; we can only help them discover it within themselves.”***

Galileo Galilei

The eggnog and whiskey are soothing as you take a polite sip. You feel the warmth of the radiant heat from the fireplace. Sitting comfortably in an overstuffed recliner, the smell of turkey and trimmings fills the air around you.

“Damn good to be back for Christmas,” you think.

Forty eight hours ago, you were lying on the icy ground in Afghanistan, covered with blood and praying. Praying you'd make it back while under heavy mortar attack.

The ground shook with the impact of each round, and your hearing was gone. Two of your fellow Soldiers, your close friends, exploded into a mass of red fragments. Body parts and blood covered you and everything around you.

With eyes closed and your body shaking, you prayed...

“Please God! One more day! Please God!”

A gentle hand touches your left shoulder. A plate of holiday cookies taps the end table as it touches the polished wood.

“Want a warm-up on that drink, Honey?”

“Mom's voice always sounds so kind,” you think, while gulping down every bit of the alcohol the cup has to offer.

“Thanks Mom,” you reply, while she looks lovingly into your eyes, then tops off your mug for a third time.

“It's so good to have my boy back home. You're safe now Charlie. So just forget about all the War stuff.”

Your body flinches. Your hands become fists. “Relax?”

you think. “Forget about that War stuff?”

Her comments pulled you right back into battle. The fire reminds you now of the flames and concussions of an airstrike. The smell of the turkey and roast beef kindles the smell of burning human flesh, reminding you of another Brother being burned in an IED attack.

Your Dad sits quietly in another recliner. He’s watching the flames and he’s watching you. Two tours in Vietnam as a Combat Rifleman, he looks around (no one’s within ear shot) and says...

“It’s OK, son... no shit. Those flames remind me of Napalm.”

You look over, smile, and nodding your head...

“Yeah, Pop... it does about the same for me. So what the fuck do I do now?”

There’s a Warrior Bond between the two of you that you had never felt before your last bloody tour in goat country. Speaking in a low tone, he replies...

“C’mon Buddy, let’s get some chow.”

As he stands and extends his hand to pull you up and out of the chair...

“It’s a long road, son, but I know you have the strength to adapt. And I’ve got your six on this one. We’ll talk when you’re ready.”

The tree is beautifully trimmed, and the table is set with a feast for a platoon. Feeling guilt flooding every cell of your body, you think...

“My Brothers are in that shithole right now, without even water for their MREs.”

Sitting down to sparkling clean chinaware and white cloth napkins, your Mom, sits next to you, grabs your hand and says...

“Let’s give thanks for Charlie being here with us, safe and sound.”

She bows her head and continues with a prayer of gratitude. The prayer ends, she looks at you and then it happens! In front of relatives, old friends and God Himself she continues...

“Charlie, you know I love you.”

“Oh fuck!” you think. “Just like old times. Stir up the shit with every meal. Why the hell can’t I eat one damn meal in peace? I can’t even remember food like this!”

Your father’s eyes are fixed on yours. He’s slowly shaking his head to warn you. “Don’t say a fucking word,” written all over his face.

Your mother continues, in the lovingly irritating way that only mothers can do...

“You know son, you can talk to me about anything. If you love me, you will. Won’t you, Charlie? If you love me that is.”

“Holy shit, Mom! How about some fuckin’ slack” you’re thinkin’.

But without hesitation, and ignoring the warning glare from Dad, the Beast takes over in a New York second.

“Oh sure, Mom. Well, let’s see. I just killed three kids last week... I think they were the enemy... not sure, but who gives a shit anyway. I watched two of my best friends in this world turn into red vapor and body parts before I left country. I’m still shittin’ MREs. Oh, and would ya pass the mashed potatoes? Now, I’m gonna have to skip the roast beef. It smells like human flesh. But don’t worry Mom, I’ll just forget about all that War stuff!”

With you sitting right next to her, you become invisible. She turns to the shocked and silent crowd, eyes welling with emotion and says...

“Oh! He’s just not the son I used to know. That Army changed him! He didn’t mean any of that! He’s just tired and had too much to drink.”

She bursts into tears. And the festive Christmas dinner spirals down the tube into Fly Paradise.

**So do you.**

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Well now, my fine, young, fly-covered friends, you’re sure as hell not the little kid Mama used to pamper and coddle. And you sure ain’t who you were before goin’ to War. You’re a lean, mean, fighting machine.

So let’s talk about why you’ve changed, and what’s normal for your green ass. But you gotta wonder, what do you suppose civilians think war is?

A Soldier once told me... ”Ya know Sarge, describing War to someone who hasn’t been there is sorta like describing the color red to a blind person.” Get the point?

And if you study the Civil War here in the States, you may remember how some folks took picnic lunches to see the first battle? Wonder what they were thinkin’?

Well, anyway, we condition and train our beautiful sons and daughters to become Warriors... killers to win battles. They kill human beings; and they may even take part in mutilations, torture, maiming, and the viciousness it takes to win battles and demoralize the enemy.

They return home still trained killers, and people expect them to be the same? What’s wrong with this picture? Our young Troops see this and live it.

Many have asked me, “Are people so misinformed, uninformed, and in denial? Or are they just plain stupid?” Don’t really know the answer to that one... maybe some of the above, all of the above, or a little of each? You decide.

Guess I’d better get down off my ammo can here, and get right to it. So I’ll start by saying that you Afghan and Iraq Warriors are my Heroes. And you damn sure need someone to give you a “Heads Up” on what’s normal.

“So what is normal?” you ask in twitching anticipation!

It’s all a matter of exposure. (Marines: Not zippin’ down your fly.) Here, I’ll give you an example.

Every few weeks or so this last year, my Marine Buddies and I got together for a few cigs and some brain grenades (beers to civvies). As usual, we’d rag on each other, civilians, and on the Marine Corps... which we all love dearly.

At one of our delightful gatherings, the topic of relationships came up. And between the four of us, we’ve had 23 wives and over 270 jobs! That’s right. You ain’t misreading this.

Now we’re all seasoned Combat Vets from the Land of the Little People (Nam) and after much laughing and pointing fingers (mostly the middle one), one Marine popped up and said...

“Hey! Wait a minute, you fuckin’ Jar Heads. We’re **NORMAL** for what we’ve been through! We’re **NORMAL** for our generation!”

And the small, dim green lights flickered in our heads. Damn it, if he wasn’t right as napalm!

That’s exactly why my green ass is talkin’ to you Young Pups right now. Us old Farts don’t want you to go through the same demoralizing, brain-clogging, failed

relationships and failed lives as we did. So pay attention. This ain't no training film. Don't wanna see any heads bobbin' out there.

And, by the way, I didn't dream this shit up. Couldn't. It comes from some real fine Squash Doctors. You know, as in the melon or squash that sits on top of your spines? Brain-Docs?

Anyway, let's start all this by talkin' about your brain-housing-group. That's the physical (body) brain part of you and just what's goin' on in your thick skull.

In combat, your brain pumps out a chemical cocktail that your body sucks up like a cold beer after a five-mile forced march. It makes such chemicals as adrenaline (your favorite) and another one called dopamine (Marines: Not a stupid friend).

These chemicals are kinda like havin' the gas pedal floored and stuck in a Ferrari on a Los Angeles freeway or sittin' on a horse that's hell-bent for the cactus patch. You're goin' along for the ride either way, and you're sure as hell gonna crash eventually.

The trouble with bein' "high" on a chemical like adrenaline is that, with enough sustained trauma (like gettin' shot at), your body not only becomes addicted, it also overrides the process for the other "slowdown" chemicals to kick in. In other words, your break lines are cut.

So what's the point? Real simple.

The point is that you as a Combat Warrior, coming back from War, are still hooked on adrenaline. You need the fix, and you react only in the "fight" mode of your lizard brain. But be advised, once again, that is a **NORMAL** result of War.

As I said, resilience seems to be the fancy word nowadays. And if I got it right, it means, “to bounce back” (or to recover quickly). But I’ll be damned if I can figure out what these eggheads want us to bounce back to?

We don’t want to be like we were before being reborn in boot camp and combat. We ain’t bouncin’ back to be a civilian! That’s a sure bet.

We’re burned out on killing and loss. So it makes no sense (military intelligence?) to bounce back into battle when we’re already brain fried? Which, by the way is what our Troops are doing right this minute. And we’re gonna talk about that real quick-like.

What does seem to make sense in my Old Green Skull is to focus this resilience stuff on bouncing back to getting in touch with not only your own humanity, but with who you’ve become after War.

You know, like maybe helpin’ us feel that every creature on Earth doesn’t need to die of lead poisoning... as in bullets to the brain. Maybe then, we can begin to trust people as much as our dog?

Anyway, my old black-and-white notion on this whole FUBAR is how about designing some training that cuts through the bullshit and helps us adapt to becoming at least semi-productive Warriors in civilian society? And not prepare our Troops to go back into battle after 20 times more combat than anyone ever thought about in WWII.

Guess I’m gettin’ pissed off here, but I gotta say that maybe these big-buck-program-designers should think about helping our Troops improvise and adapt to becoming feeling human beings again instead of preparing them for more battle. Sure they wanna go. They tell me that every day. But has anyone ever thought of the long-term consequences of combat, for a whole generation of

our youth? Don't think so.

Well then, gettin' back to the whole NORMAL issue, in ancient Greek-speak, the word trauma means, "to wound or pierce the soul." Well no shit, Sherlock! In War, your soul is definitely pierced, your body may be pierced, and your Spirit is hangin' on like it's screamin' back to Earth in a cigarette role. (That's when your chute don't open.)

So that bein' said, you youngins may just look at yourselves like bein' a powder keg of emotions, memories, and pent-up horrors with about a one second fuse. This is where we can throw in the concern for the triggers we just discussed.

Your lizard brain keeps "goin' and goin'" like that pink, fuzzy rabbit with those batteries stuck to its ass. The trauma (wound) doesn't fade away in time. Fact is, your reactions can get worse if you don't put a "round through the rabbit" by gettin' some help.

If you're not processing your shit bath memories and getting some good combat trauma guidance, then each time you "react" to a trigger (sight, sound, etc.) that kicks you into the emotional rollercoaster ride, the pathways in your lizard brain get stronger.

It's like watchin' animals make a trail. They start out walkin' over the same place over and over again. Pretty soon there's a clean path. The path gets deeper and deeper and when it rains (as in an emotional flood) the trail turns into an arroyo (deep trench).

So we've talked about the Parts that you're made up of. We've discussed the chemicals that pump you up, and we're attempting to make it as clear as mud that everything you do, everything you think and say, and every one of your actions is **NORMAL BEHAVIOR** for a Combat



Warrior.

Even CRS is normal. You know, **C**an't **R**emember **S**hit? And Why? Real simple. Your brain is tryin' to keep you out of the padded cell and clear of the Thorazine shuffle. It wants you to forget so you don't remember the shit. Damn if I'm not soundin' like one of them pencil neck poet-sorts.

When you've seen too much horror, the brain shuts down memory. Just that simple. You can't remember names because you don't want to think about the Brothers and Sisters you've lost.

Details are often gone, or so you think. Actually, your brain remembers every single detail of every single second... of your whole life. It's there, but you just can't recall it.

If you enjoyed killin' the enemy and a whole bunch of other good stuff in War, it doesn't make you a monster Warmonger. It makes you NORMAL for a battle tested, full-blown Combat Warrior. So be proud of it!

So you see, NORMAL is simply your experience. No one will understand you unless they have your exact (or very similar) experiences.

We're gonna talk about porno (pornography and you) in the last section, 3-1. But even that is normal for what you've been through. And I'll tell ya why. That may raise a few eyebrows!

So if you're like me and make lists of shit to remember, then forget where the lists are, it's normal. And after forty-plus years of surviving the alien world of civilians, I can tell you point-blank, that my military training is what pulled me through. It will do the same for you.

If you've killed more people than most people in

prison (like I have), it doesn't make you a criminal. It's what Warriors do in War. It's NORMAL.

I'm gonna give your young, green asses some real good tools (already have) so you don't live the life that I did. It's real simple.

Live through your gut, and live through your heart. Now I'm gettin' all tree-hugger-ish, but **if it don't feel right, then don't do it!**

I don't give a rat's ass if your Mom tells you, if an old Knuckle Dragger tells you, or if anybody you might respect tells you. If your heart and/or your gut tells you "you're walkin' into an ambush!" then don't do it!

Alright then, enough said on this one. Let's get down and dirty on this next topic. Hell, you made it this far. What have you got to lose, except bein' NORMAL?

**Keep that body armor on, and get up on that 50 Cal.**

**Snipers on the rooftops ahead! Unlock those weapons!**

**We're movin' out!**