

When The War Is Over

Chapter One: Alone in a Crowd

“Those of us who did make it, have an obligation to teach others what we know, And to try with what’s left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life. The war is over for me now, but it will always be there for the rest of my days...”
Platoon, (Screenplay by Oliver Stone)

“Failed suicide attempt,” I heard the professional, expressionless tone in the policemen’s voice – even over the telephone line. “He wants to see you.”

With heavy heart, I hung up and drove to the hospital. I had no idea what to expect when I opened the door to Jim’s room. Of all the veterans I knew, Jim seemed least likely to choose death as the answer to the problems he faced.

What on earth could have brought him to this point?

As I stepped into the room, Jim mustered a sheepish smile. His pale, tired features showed through the false front. His smile turned to a frown when he recognized me.

“How you doin’ Jim?” I pulled a chair to the bedside.

“Awful, thanks to the next door neighbor and all these f—ing people.” He threw a tissue box at the wall and glared out the window.

Not sure what to say, I asked, “Did someone hurt you last night?”

He ignored the question. “All I wanted to do was die, and I couldn’t even do that. I should have done it some other way – to make sure no one could keep me alive. God, I’m such a failure.” Jim avoided eye contact and his voice broke as he said, “This is just another way to prove it.”

The words took me by complete surprise. Jim had a beautiful wife, a great family, and a successful career. How could he consider himself a failure?

In the weeks that followed, I visited Jim whenever I could, even after he left the medical ward and entered the in-hospital, eight-week post-traumatic stress program. During those visits, I discovered some interesting things about my friend.

Jim lived two different lives.

To the outside world, Jim projected a bright and hopeful exterior. But the inner man, the one who lived inside, knew a blackness so deep he could swim in it. By strength of will, he pulled himself out of bed every day, his chest aching with depression, and moved through his obligations. Jim refused to let anyone know how he really felt. From the day he came home from Vietnam, Jim used all his energy in a kind of emotional calisthenics – desperate to keep up the deception.

As a highly disciplined Green Beret, Jim carefully separated his emotional war from his outward life. He managed to develop a highly successful business, providing well for his family.

His military training actually enabled him to lead two lives – one exuding strength and success – the other encumbered by depression, guilt, and fear. Jim lived like an Olympic athlete in a swimming race – swimming with all his might, anxious to beat his competitors.

Unlike the other swimmers, Jim had a serious handicap. Jim swam his race attached to a three-foot beach ball, which he kept firmly hidden under the surface of the water. When the ball threatened to pop into view, he focused on keeping it down. But the distraction and effort made Jim fall behind. Letting go of the beach ball, he would swim with all his might, desperate to catch up – until once again, his beach ball threatened to surface.

His life formed an exhausting and unproductive cycle. Swim a little, push the ball down; swim a little, push the ball down.

For thirty years, Jim managed to get through his days in a debilitating succession of play-acting. Sleep brought him no comfort. Frequent nightmares brought a sleep deprivation so severe and so long lasting that roll playing became nearly impossible. Often, startled awake by terrorizing combat dreams, Jim moved to the computer where he spent long hours in the dead of night. His wife believed he was catching up on work. In truth, Jim used Internet chat rooms to visit with other combat veterans.

In spite of the many people in his life, Jim felt alone. Isolated. His combat experiences trapped him in an unearthly hell. Unable to connect with other people, Jim had no way of dealing with his emotional devastation. Like termites attacking the foundation of a building, eventually the damage became apparent for all to see, and Jim's carefully maintained exterior crumbled to dust. The ball finally popped out of the water, and Jim gave up the race.

Does this sound familiar?

Most combat veterans can identify with Jim's life. You are not the first to have these feelings. In fact, believing that no one else has ever felt this way, adds to the isolation most veterans experience. In truth, nearly every combat veteran faces these issues. Listen to the words of other veterans of other wars...

When our country decided to take the islands back from Britain they sent us, (mostly eighteen and nineteen year olds), to do the fighting. We had practically no training, and some of us had only fired a few rounds from our weapons in preparation. We were no match for the British. Our return home was not a victorious one at all, and now I wonder if life is worth living. Suicide seems to be the best way out of the hell I live day after day. (Argentinean soldier, Falkland War)

If I had not gone to war, none of this would have happened. It has scarred me in other places besides my body. My wife would not have divorced me and I would not have lost my family. If she only knew what I went through in Afghanistan... (Russian soldier, Afghanistan War)

During these days off, I retreated to my own little "fox hole," a small, dimly lit room that was filled with some old relics that I brought home from the war. There I would spend time with my demons, and they would torment my mind through the memories of what I had seen and experienced in Africa. Nobody at work ever knew of my problems, because I covered it up so well. I never wanted anyone to think I was crazy because of the war. (World War II veteran)

I was discharged and went silently back to my job. I was as confused as everyone else about the "police action" and not much was mentioned about it after that. At times, I would feel some bitterness begin to rise up inside of me... The best way for me to control any bad feelings and resentments was to work hard in the days and drink a lot at night. My wife and I became regulars at several taverns and dance halls, but my drinking became a threat to our marriage. When I would get drunk, I would either become remorseful or belligerent... I just had too much pent up frustration I had to release it somehow. (Korean veteran)

All of these men developed patterns of isolation. They kept their wartime involvement to themselves. Unable or unwilling to tell the truth about their past, they became a kind of secret agent, living a "false identity" in a new country.

Why were they afraid to reveal the truth? Did they fear rejection? Guilt? Were they afraid of the questions of others? Were their relationships too fragile for the horrible truth they'd experienced? Did they really believe that they could keep these secrets forever, never having to tell anyone about the personal side of war? Why do veterans have difficulty with intimate relationships?

I can speak from my own experience. I served in Vietnam from the beginning of May 1965 as part of the first regular army combat unit to begin escalating the 10,000-Day War. We were sent for a year into the rice paddies, jungles and coastlines of Southeast Asia to "stop communist aggression."

When I left home, I believed that after serving in Vietnam, I would be able to come back and pick up my life exactly where I left off. It never occurred to me that my experience in Vietnam would change my life forever. I will never forget my coming home experience:

At two o'clock in the morning, the temperature in Vietnam hovered in the mid-nineties. We had turned in our weapons and equipment the previous day and were confined to a tiny barbed wire compound at the airbase. For some of us the war was over. We looked forward to boarding a jetliner and forever leaving this living hell. After drinking dozens of beers, we scrounged for a place to sleep.

I managed to find a mattress inside a small building made of corrugated tin and scrap wood and settled in to relax for the few hours before our plane would leave. Moments later, just as I'd begun to slip into a drunken stupor, a frightening but familiar sound blasted me into consciousness. Incoming mortar explosions violently rocked the compound.

Instinctively, I threw the mattress over me as the air-bursting explosions ripped through the area. Pounding my fists into the ground, I screamed in anger, "You're not going to get me now! I'm going home! You're not getting me now!"

As suddenly as it began, the explosions ceased. I heard the injured crying out. Nearby, someone screamed at a dead friend, ordering him to get up. I ran to a wounded soldier, his stomach gashed open, and ripped off my shirt. As I applied it to the wound, I shouted for a medic.

Seven teenage soldiers died that morning in a tiny compound ten thousand miles from home. After spending one year in the hell of Vietnam, this was their reward. How unjust it seemed!

By the time my first year stateside ended, I wasn't so sure. Maybe the ones who died were the lucky ones. Though my body lived through that last night in Vietnam, I left a large part of my soul behind. At least those who died wouldn't have the memories, the nightmares, or the people spitting on them when they finally got home.

I'd imagined a glorified homecoming. Instead, I was abused. Nobody wanted to hear about my experiences in Vietnam; it seemed as though the entire country wanted to forget the whole sorry mess. Students were rioting, brothers were fighting, and quarreling about the right and wrong of it; I felt caught in the middle.

I could not get the war off my mind. I kept seeing the same scenes over and over. People dying. The injured crying for help. Failure, with all its pain and fear, stood on me like a giant in lead boots. As a good soldier, I'd done what my country asked me to do. Now, I was a social outcast for participating in an "unpopular" war. It felt like everyone I met blamed me for our involvement in Vietnam.

My country's disapproval took away any pride I felt in a job well done.

Eventually, I found my escape. I began to drink a lot of alcohol and take drugs. I couldn't control my behavior; but the alcohol and drugs gave me an acceptable excuse to behave and react in inappropriate ways. They helped me sleep without so many nightmares. They numbed my emotions. With drugs, I could make it through a day without breaking down and crying uncontrollably about the turn my life had taken.

The war hadn't ended for me; it only changed locations.

Now, almost forty years later, I am still fighting the war. Though now I concentrate on helping my combat brothers leave their war behind, I am still recouping the damage done by that experience. Like Jim, I have observed dozens – perhaps hundreds of veterans struggle with issues of isolation and intimacy.

I've watched men move from relationship to relationship, over and over again, never really identifying the cause of their failure. I've known women who tolerate veteran husbands who disappear for months at a time – completely unable to maintain the physical closeness of marriage and family. I've seen veterans retreat, rather than struggle to maintain a difficult relationship.

I've long wondered about these issues. Wondered about their causes. Wondered if injured people could change. And now, instead of wondering, I want to take action. I want to bring healing and wholeness to my combat brothers. I know that isolation racks all trauma survivors. Rape, domestic violence, assault, natural disaster – nearly any traumatic experience has the potential to keep us from the very ones we love the most.

I know too that survivors can reconnect with people. We can trust others. We can learn the kinds of relational skills that make successful marriages and friendships. We can learn how to dismantle the crippling isolation which threatens our very existence. And in so doing, we can recoup the most valuable part of our humanity.

We can share our souls.