

CHECK THE LOGBOOK

By Adam Walker

Once home and the guns have gone silent, combat veterans often feel alone. It may come in the quiet moments remember long nights on watch. It may come with the awkward stares following an involuntary flinch to a loud noise. During the war one's responsibilities held life and death consequences. Some found they felt the most alive when they were so close to death. Adjustment can be hard. The loved ones at home care but are incapable of understanding the paradox, the struggle. They yearn to help but are impotent to assist.

The fatigue and demands of combat made staying awake a herculean feat, yet after the war sleep eludes the veteran. A man spends the war dreaming of coming home and once home he thinks of combat every day. You can't say you miss it, that would make you sound crazy. At the same time there are aspects of it you do miss, and you wonder if you are crazy.

You think the only ones who understand are those who were with you during the hard times of bitter combat, those who faced the confrontation of flesh and steel by your side. You are close to people with whom you previously had nothing in common. The bond you now share would compel you to "show up with a shovel, no questions asked" as they say.

Brothers-in-arms forged by combat are closer than your blood relatives. Despite this fact veterans lose touch with one another for many reasons. Physical distance and the busy demands making some kind of a life contribute to the dormancy of relationship. Additionally, many veterans purposely avoid maintaining contact in an attempt to circumvent dealing with combat's residue in their life.

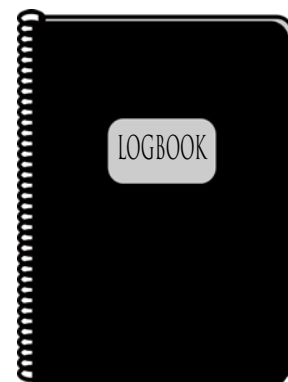
Until one is ready to reconnect with their comrades, there is another way to find camaraderie and a sense of community with individuals whose experiences resound with your own. It is through reading memoirs, biographies, and stories from veterans of conflicts preceding your war. Here you will gain tremendous perspective, have a feeling of connectedness, and find a measure of healing; reassurance that you that you are not crazy.

Remember standing watch when you were in uniform? Prior to assuming post, you reviewed the logbook of those who had the watch before you. This informed you of what actions occurred, how your predecessor responded, and framed anticipated actions on your part. In similar fashion reading books will provide insight to the experiences of those combat veterans who preceded you. You looked up to them when you were a child. A few of them were leaving the military when you were brand new enlistee. You admired them from a distance but now you are peers of sort. By reading their tales you can get to know them, and perhaps know yourself a little better.

In the Marine Corps there's a well-known set of regulations called General Orders. All Marines are versed in these General Orders. They are drilled into them during boot camp. The Sixth General Order begins with "To receive, obey, and pass on to the sentry who relieves me..." This same approach should be taken by veterans navigating life after combat, when the uniform is placed into the footlocker and stowed away.

Receive the stories from the generations before you. Obey by taking their recommendations on how to process and move on. Pass on by sharing your stories with those young warriors next in the queue. One caveat, allow yourself time to heal, mature, and process your experience before diving in too deeply as a sage.

The books that will provide you with the greatest value are those written years after the experience. Perspective takes time. Processing the experience takes time. Your own responses are often difficult to understand in the moment. Things such as "Why am I so restless?" "Why am I angry all the time?" "Why am I so self-destructive?" Books written in the weeks and months immediately following a battle may chronicle facts with a great degree of accuracy, but they will lack perspective. It is too soon for the personal context to be absorbed.



Reading books about the experiences from previous wars has the additional benefit of studying the topic while providing a measure of distance from one's own conflict. I know many veterans who enjoy war movies and documentaries, but they don't watch ones about their era. A common opinion amongst combat veterans is the belief that the wars before their own were much tougher. Those older veterans are held in high regard. As such the lessons they pass on, even indirectly, are readily received.

When an aged veteran writes about their experience as a young man in combat, and how they navigated life afterwards, they have the ability to impact generations of warriors who will follow in their footsteps. From a distance they exercise leadership with an impact that outlasts their own mortality. We owe a debt of gratitude for those who fought and died, but also to those who fought and came home to tell their tales. We remember them in gratitude. They are not forgotten.

Therefore in the 2024 issues of AT EASE! Veterans Magazine we will review some lesser-known books spanning various wars in our nation's history. We will highlight experiences, thoughts, and reactions from the men who fought there. We won't cover the heroes with whom you are already familiar. Our goal will be to showcase the warriors who hitherto fore were known only by their family and their comrades. In doing so, we will not only honor their memory but will gain lessons for ourselves.

We must be reminded that these lessons were paid for in blood, sweat, toil, and tears. In learning about them, we will learn about ourselves. We will ensure these lessons were not learned in vain. This practice will serve as an example to the veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan so that, in time, they too may be encouraged write an account for the generations that will fight the next war.



Adam Walker served as a Marine infantryman for twenty-five years, retiring as a Master Gunnery Sergeant with three tours in Iraq and a Purple Heart. You can read more of his work on his blog: takeitontheleftfoot.com

