

DO SOMETHING CREATIVE!

By Adam Walker

Whether the Veteran spent four years in uniform, or made it a career, the experience transformed their perspective, and daresay identity, for the remaining years. This element is compounded ten-fold after enduring combat. Something about being so near death, in a hostile environment for months on end, affects how one looks at life. There are some very positive attributes generated afterward such as thankfulness, humility, and appreciating simple pleasures such as a cold beer or a hot cup of coffee. There's also lingering residue, memories difficult to wash away.

Though much of the stigma surrounding Post Traumatic Stress has diminished with the current generation of combat Veterans, it remains in the minds of some.

There are solid counselors, too many prescriptions, and community groups of varying effectiveness. Community and connectedness are significant components of emotional and mental health as the Veteran navigates and cultivates life in the wake of combat. Even so, Veterans often find themselves alone with their thoughts, memories, and unvoiced feelings. Much of the knotting in the heart and mind must be unraveled alone.

An overlooked method of untangling this debris is engaging in a creative outlet. Simply put, the value of creativity for the combat Veteran is where the effort once applied to destruction is now applied to make something of value. The concentration and focus applied to this creative outlet serve as a means to quiet the constant reels playing in the background of one's mind. It slowly burns up the weeds choking the garden of your heart.

Some take up tools in their hands to work wood or turn wrenches. They start with some basic components; with time and labor, a beautiful thing emerges. A sense of accomplishment is visible and tangible. Others play music and write songs, a powerful means of conveying emotion and story with depth mere words fail to convey. Many Veterans find healing in farming. It may be a backyard garden, a small flock of hens, or a commercial endeavor where they can simultaneously apply their leadership skills.

Area of interest and venue vary but the results are always of immeasurable value. Some Veterans apply natural talent and novice skills to become master craftsmen in their trade, even if as an amateur. The pursuit may generate profit, but the purpose is healing. Other Veterans apply themselves to things completely out of the box and reap what essentially feels like a new life. These discoveries are not distractions from the past, but mediums that usher hope for today.

A brief search of the internet will result in a plethora of organizations dedicated to equipping Veterans in their pursuit of a given creative outlet. However, just as the Veteran discovered there's a time for structure, unit, and cooperation; there's also a place for individual effort. It is in solitude, with an application of the creative, that much of the combat residue is washed away. There will always be a stain, but the years do not have to be scrapped and wasted.

The combat Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are maturing now. Many of the first years after combat were spent in distraction, recklessness, and drunkenness. We were old men while still young, but now the lines on our faces and the thinning, gray hair leave no doubt. The self-destructive methods did not help our plight. We wasted money, impaired our health, and damaged relationships. We each know brothers who succumbed to despair and by their own hand became a stereotype and statistic. There must be a better way.

One of the most effective means of initiating a new season in life while wrestling through post-traumatic stress is to create. If you don't know where to start, simply put your hands to work wherever you are. Conduct a home improvement project, landscape, start cooking elaborate meals, pick up an instrument, or take a single class at a community college. It won't take long for you to bring that small glowing ember into a warm and inviting fire.

As you grow in this newfound interest, a hobby that may become a lifestyle has the potential to reframe the view you have of yourself. Identity can be a real struggle for some Veterans. You once

had a title and responsibilities that meant life or death; that's a tough one to follow. You are more than a Marine, Sailor, Soldier, or Airman. Simply redefining yourself as a (insert your creative effort) isn't a complete cure or replacement, but does help you to see that you are more than a combat Veteran. Military service is a significant part of you, but it must not be the sole defining characteristic. If you insist on holding onto that image too tightly then you compound your struggles.

And for the love of Chesty Puller...start exercising again! You don't have to become a CrossFit Commando or Spartan Mud Runner, but you must PT. Even if you just take a thirty-minute stroll around suburbia with the dog, it pays huge dividends. Get outside and get some movement. The expenditure of physical energy burns emotional energy while generating a host of goodness for your overall health.

You recall moments in training as a young service member when you were placed in scenarios to develop decision-making and were told "DO SOMETHING!" You didn't always get it right, but you got better each time, and you learned the value of momentum. Always move forward. Do not allow apathy, indecisiveness, or fear to hold you in place. DO SOMETHING.

Apply that principle now and do something creative. You will reap benefits for yourself while leaving something for others. It may be a piece of furniture, a loaf of home-baked bread, a song, or a podcast; but you will have made something for others. You can pour yourself into this outlet with the result of contributing to the lives of others. It is not a stretch to say that too is a service. It may not come with awards and recognition but with a sense of satisfaction, healing, and peace.

NOW GO DO SOMETHING CREATIVE.