

COMBAT  
VET

DON'T  
MEAN  
CRAZY

Veteran Mental Health in  
Post-Military Life

DUANE FRANCE, LPC

# Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy: Veteran Mental Health in Post-Military Life

This is a sample copy of the complete book. Not for sale or distribution without the express written consent of the author.

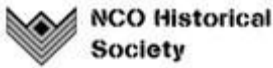
Duane K. L. France, MA, MBA, LPC

To purchase the book, go to  
[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

# Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

COMBAT VET DON'T MEAN CRAZY.

Published By:  
NCO Historical Society  
P.O. Box 1341  
Temple, TX 76503  
[www.ncohistory.com](http://www.ncohistory.com)



Copyright © 2018 Duane K. L. France.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission except in the case of brief quotations with proper attribution. For permissions contact: [duane@veteranmentalhealth.com](mailto:duane@veteranmentalhealth.com)

The content of this book has been previously published in a digital format on the Head Space and Timing blog, located at [www.veteranmentalhealth.com](http://www.veteranmentalhealth.com)

Cover Design by Extended Imagery

The author of this book is a Mental Health Counselor licensed to practice in the state of Colorado. The thoughts, ideas, musings, and posts in this book come from his military experience, professional experience, and personal opinions. They do NOT, however, represent professional advice. While he is a Mental Health Counselor, he is not YOUR Mental Health Counselor, and the guidance in this work should not be considered a substitute for working with a licensed clinical mental health provider. The opinions expressed here are his own, and in no way should be seen as reflection of his agency, his profession, or any professional associations that he is connected with.

ISBN: 0-9963181-4-3

ISBN-13: 978-0-9963181-4-3

Published in the United States of America

1<sup>st</sup> Edition

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

To purchase the book, go to  
[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

To My Family: Connie, Christina, and Daniel. You served along with me, in a different way, but with the same pride and sacrifice as I did

To My Family: The Soldiers I served with in all of my units, but especially the troops of A Co, 704<sup>th</sup> BSB and those that rode with us. Having been through the valley of death, I would do it all again if you were by my side.

And finally, To My Family: all who have stepped up to serve our nation through military service. I don't know you, but you're my brother and sister.  
You're not alone...ever.

To purchase the book, go to  
[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

CONTENTS

Foreword: Dr. Mark Stebnicki

- Part 1 Raising Awareness about the Psychological Impact of Military Service
- Part 2 Developing Personal Awareness of the Need for Veteran Mental Health
- Part 3 Developing Resilience to Recover
- Part 4 Developing Skills to Apply to Our Post-Military Life
- Part 5 Personal Satisfaction in our Post-Military Life
- Part 6 The Importance of Remembrance Post-Military Life
- Part 7 Applying Lessons Learned to Post-Military Life
- Part 8 Veteran Mental Health as Mental Wellness instead of Mental Illness

Acknowledgements

Notes

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Foreword

Duane France provides a tribute to veterans in *Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy: Veteran Mental Health in Post-Military Life*. This body of work is a collection of rich stories that depict the horrors of war and the transition back to civilian life. Each section paints an all sensory picture of the internal struggles on the back-drop of negative societal stigma and stereotypes. The book confirms how these societal issues impact the mental and physical well-being of veterans and their family members. In this book, the reader is provided with a better understanding of the wounded warrior's moral injury that occurs in some veterans after combat operations. As a consequence, thousands of veterans have become homeless, unemployed, and struggle to claw their way back to some level of normalcy and balance within civilian life. Indeed, the combination of mental and physical disabling conditions post-deployment and during reintegration imprints on the veteran's mind, body, and spirit.

Duane's extensive military career as an Army NCO with five combat and operational deployments in Iraq, Afghanistan, North Africa, and Bosnia-Herzegovina has laid a strong foundation for his body of work. Duane's background as a veteran and as a mental health professional provides a unique prospective in working with the military culture. Duane comprehensively communicates, from the veteran's point of view, critical elements of life after the military. He draws on a range of other behavioral health experiences which includes his roles as Director of Veteran Services Family Care Center and Executive Director for the Colorado Veterans Health and Wellness Agency in Colorado Springs. Duane continues to enhance the quality of life for veteran services as a mentor, advocate, and an innovated service provider for veterans and their family members. Thus, Duane's body of work bridges the gap between real-life experiences of veterans and limitations found in the traditional research literature.

Duane's compassion and heart for veteran-related issues are further exemplified by the podcast he created for the Change Your POV Podcast Network titled Head Space and Timing. Here, in his weekly podcast, he explores and defines the military and veteran's way of life in a manner rarely seen. He presents first-hand accounts of service members and veterans' experiences in the deployment cycle through transition into civilian life. This adds immense value in *Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy* as a qualitative study of sorts.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

His unique perspectives in the chapter, “*Cross-Generational War*” suggests that for the first time in American history, that a child born around 9/11 could potentially be deployed OCONUS and fight alongside his or her father or mother. Indeed, there is a story to tell that should inspire readers to research the inter-generational implications of how service members and their family members transition well, in-and-out of military service. In the piece, “*You Break it You Buy it*” Duane points to critical issues that some veterans experience as feeling like they are “damaged goods” or “broken”. These statements bring to light the overwhelming number of thoughts, feelings, and experiences that occur within veterans on a day-to-day basis. This work speaks volumes to the psychological impact resulting from repeated exposure to combat operations.

One of the many gems of this body of work is found in chapter “*Six Thoughts on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*”. This section speaks to the fact that PTSD is not just a psychological condition. Rather, it is a whole-body experience that has physiological, neurobiological, and cognitive-relational significance. Duane reports on some current thinking in this specialty area of mental health suggesting that PTSD is not a single-episode event. In military service, there are multiple critical incidents which are cumulative and are seated within the veterans’ mind, body, and spirit. Duane attempts to destigmatize the “D” in PTSD to emphasize the human nature of the natural body’s reaction to extraordinary stressful and traumatic events. The clinical diagnostic category does not quite address the interaction between the veteran and his/her environment. Nor does it provide truth to the fact that warfighters are human beings. The consequence is that service members, during combat operations, are trained to adapt and survive. However, it is not until later in post-deployment and reintegration that the veteran is absent of his/her identity of a Hollywood-style super-hero.

Overall, the themes communicated in Duane’s work addresses how some veterans thrive and bounce-back from adversity and cultivate resiliency after exposure to the human pain and suffering of war. The path home for the war-fighter is a long journey for some. Bringing meaning and purpose to ones’ military experiences into the present are eloquently communicated in *Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy*. It is living in-the-present moment that many veterans find transformation for optimal living in balance and with good mental, physical, and spiritual well being.

**Mark A. Stebnicki, Ph.D., LPC, DCMHS, CRC, CCM, CMCC**  
**Professor, Coordinator of Military and Trauma Counseling Certificate**

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)



Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

**Program**

**Department of Addictions and Rehabilitation  
East Carolina University**

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## PART 1

### Raising Awareness about the Psychological Impact of Military Service

*The problem with the stigma around mental health is really about the stories that we tell ourselves as a society. What is normal? That's just a story that we tell ourselves. - Matthew Quick*

The first step towards making any change in our lives is to become aware that change is necessary. That awareness can come by many paths: self-reflection, crisis, others pointing it out to us. In order for the conversation about veteran mental health to change, there first needs to be an awareness about how service in the military changes someone.

When a civilian joins the military, they experience an intense, isolating experience that is designed to assimilate them into the military culture. They learn discipline, highly technical and tactical skills, and the need to work as a team to accomplish a difficult task. Service in the military changes the way that someone thinks and acts. Whether they have served five years or twenty-five years, the impact of the military service is one that develops a connection to an entirely different culture.

By any definition of the word, the military is a different culture.

Merriam-Webster defines culture in the following ways:

1. The characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in place or time
2. The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution
3. The set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity or societal characteristic

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

4. The integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations

Each of these has application to military service. The characteristic features of everyday existence: the hierarchical structure of military rank, duty positions, training events. The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices: the Army Values. The Rifleman's Creed. The Warrior Ethos. The set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field: military ceremonies. Traditions. The integrated pattern of human knowledge transmitted to succeeding generations: military history.

Along with this culture is the thoughts, attitudes, and mindset of the culture. A veteran from one country has an affinity for a veteran from another country, sometimes finding more in common with another veteran than they do with their neighbors who haven't served.

The following collection of articles is an attempt to help raise the awareness about the psychological impact of military service. They try to convey the struggle that service members have when leaving the military and rejoin their community, the barriers that exist in getting the support they need, and discussions on prevalent attitudes towards suicide and posttraumatic stress disorder. By raising community awareness, we make it easier for veterans to be open and honest about how their military service has changed the way they look at and think about the world.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Starving at the Feast: A Parable of Modern Transition

The traveler stepped through the gate, excited and anxious about the future. Both the possibilities and challenges seemed endless, and he was curious what support he could obtain to help him along his journey. He clutched in his hand his traveling papers.

As he walked into the village clustered outside the gate of the garrison, the first thing that surprised the traveler was the crowded square, a wide space of clamoring chaos that had an overwhelming number of vendors, all vying for his attention. The selection of choices seemed endless, as well as the variety; there were vendors that seemed to want to give him things, and others that wanted to take things from him.

He felt a tug on his garment; he turned to see an older gentleman, kind; he was perhaps a traveler in his youth. "A new companion on the path, I see," the gentleman said with an honest smile. "You'll want to register with the Traveler's Agency over there, if they'll have you." The traveler looked to his left, and a large imposing structure loomed. A line of travelers, both young and old, stretched out the door and around the block. "No, I think I'm okay," the traveler said, "I want to get started and don't think I need that kind of assistance. Besides, it looks like those other travelers need it more than me."

The kind gentleman's face fell slightly. "Don't wait too long, son. You could end up walking a rough road for a while, like me." The traveler thanked him and continued into the square.

The assortment of vendors continued to startle the traveler. Where to begin? There were some obvious well-established and long-serving vendors, lined together on a high rise on the far side of the square. Their stalls were strong and well-made, but it was curious...it did not seem that many travelers were interested in them. The representatives of these vendors, grave and severe in their demeanor, could be seen in a serious discussion with the King's ministers, but travelers passed to and fro in front of their establishments without giving them a second glance.

Perhaps more promising were the newer vendors on the left side of the square, no less grand than the established vendors, but with a different air about them. A sense of eagerness, of youth, and perhaps even a touch of new wealth drove their activities. On closer inspection, however, it was hard to determine which of these newer vendors were here to support the traveler, or were here to take advantage of the traveler. The lack of distinction caused the

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

traveler to pause.

On his right, the traveler could see the specialty vendors, who promised all manner of support. He could see vendors that promised to help find employment, others that promised housing, a third that was distributing professional garments. He could see a large number of vendors promising a life of adventure; a week-long trip to the King's Forest, a weekend adventure on Queen's Lake. The traveler looked at these offers longingly, recognizing them as trips of a lifetime, but failed to see how they could help him along his journey.

Interspersed among all of these vendors were others, operating small stalls in an inefficient way. Why was there so much duplication in their efforts, the traveler wondered? Every third person wanted to help the traveler record his experiences so that he may find employment. The conflicting voices clamoring in his ears was beginning to overwhelm...

Adding to this cacophony, and confusion, were the minstrels and the traveling performers. Each individual and group with similar advice, raising their voices to try to be heard above the other, because the traveler *needed* to hear what they had to say, in order to be successful on his journey! A vast array of information was starting to wash over the traveler, from all sides.

He took a deep breath and decided that he should start somewhere. He stepped toward one of the stalls promising employment support. "I'd like to find work," the traveler said, "but I also could use help finding lodgings."

"Let me see your traveling papers, sir" the kind young woman said. After glancing over his documents, she said, "Yes sir, you have the qualifications for us to support you. We don't offer support for lodging, however, so you must seek that elsewhere."

The traveler was confused. "You don't support all travelers?" He said. "No," came the reply, "Only recent travelers with the right kind of papers."

"And you can't help me secure lodging?"

"No," came the reply again, "We only support employment."

The traveler thanked her and moved on, past another vendor offering an adventure. As appealing a diversion as that would be, he recognized that it was even less beneficial than it was before. He hurried towards a vendor that promised support with lodging. "I'd like to get some help finding somewhere to stay," the traveler said. Again he was asked, "Could I see your papers?"

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

After a brief scan, they were returned to him. “We can help provide lodging for a short time, but you will need employment before we can support you.” At this point, frustration began to set in. “Could you not help me find employment as well?” The traveler asked. “No, I’m sorry, I’m afraid not. I can only help with lodging.”

As he stepped away from the stall, he began to wonder...if I’m having such a hard time, what about those who are not new travelers? Or who do not have the right paper? He looked down the lane, and saw another traveler being detained by the Sheriff’s men. Could that be me, he thought?

The traveler stood in the middle of the square, overwhelmed by choice and frustrated by obstacles, and began to starve in the middle of a vast feast.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## PART 2

### Developing Personal Awareness of the Need for Veteran Mental Health

*What is necessary to change a person is to change his awareness about himself – Abraham Maslow*

In addition to raising awareness in the community, a veteran will not reach out for support unless there is a measure of awareness within themselves about why they think the way they do. Why they do the things they do. Without personal awareness about those things that we carry over from our military service, we could possibly think that what we're going through is no big deal. That it's something that we can handle.

Along with developing awareness about why we think, feel, and act the way we do, we can and should come to the awareness that there are ways to change this if it's getting in our way. I often tell veterans I work with: if you want to go live in a cabin in the woods, and you're not hurting yourself, your family, or breaking the law, then go for it. Understand *why* you're doing it, though; if you're okay with your reasons, then go for it. If isolation is a desire for you, and isolation doesn't bother you, and your family and friends are okay with it, then more power to you. The challenge comes when we engage in these behaviors and we don't know why, or don't know how to change them if we don't like how they're impacting our lives.

This collection looks at how a veteran or military spouse can develop awareness about different aspects of their military connection, and how those aspects impact their post-military lives. Why veterans love their time in combat, and hate it at the same time. The way we think and feel has an impact on how we act, and vice versa. Gaining awareness about these things, and

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

then deciding whether or not we like them, is the first step towards making a change.

To purchase the book, go to  
[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)



## The Black Dog of the Veteran Emotion

I've often heard the psychological aftermath of military service described as a black dog. The black dog is an emotion, or series of emotions, that the veteran experiences, sometimes under control, sometimes uncontrollably.

The black dog of PTSD can be terrifying. It's always on alert, hackles raised, mouth curled in a snarl, as a warning. Warning others not to approach, as danger is near. Warning others to stay away, as they may BE the danger. Snapping, barking, growling, scratching at the ground, prowling back and forth but never taking its eyes off of you. And everybody. And everything. The black dog of PTSD has seen things and had to do things that no dog should ever have to see or do, and is constantly on alert as if it were to happen all over again.

The black dog of anxiety is pitiful. It's a dog that has learned that every movement contains danger, and even the slightest gesture can make it flinch. Tail tucked, cowering down, a mere shadow of what it once was. The anxiety dog has been kicked by a cruel master way too often, and looks out at the world with fearful eyes. Like a dog reacting to a thunderstorm, the black dog of a veteran's anxiety will react to other things: crowds, traffic, uncontrollable situations. The reaction will be similar as well. As a dog is afraid of thunder, and starts to tremble uncontrollably, pacing the room, so too does the anxiety dog. As our dog does, so do we.

The black dog of depression sits on the veteran, heavy and immovable. It weighs you down, holds you back, keeps you stuck and stagnant. The depression dog is sometimes a constant companion, always there, always present. It is as common as a shadow, enveloping the veteran, cloaking them. It curls at the veteran's feet, and in the veteran's heart, in the morning, follows their footsteps all day, and keeps them companion through the night.

The thing about the black dog of the veteran's emotion: it's our dog, and we love it. We don't always enjoy it, we sometimes wish it wasn't there, but it's comfortable and familiar. We might accept it as something that will never go away, or we might take it with us wherever we go as a matter of pride. "*Of course I have a black dog,*" we say when others point it out, "*I'm a combat vet, what do you expect?*" We even feed the dog, nurture it, allow it to grow more anxious, more depressed, more angry.

The other thing about the black dog: it doesn't have to stay that way. We can learn to control it, to make it less present and impactful on our daily lives. We

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

don't have to make it go away entirely, as we are never the same once the black dog comes into our lives. Instead, we can train the black dog to be something else. The black dog of PTSD can be tamed. The anxiety dog can be calmed. The black dog of depression can be uplifted.

We can learn to understand the warning signs of when the black dog starts to come around, and manage how we react to it. We can understand the things in our environment that will bring out the PTSD dog, or trigger the anxiety dog. We can protect against those thoughts that allow the depression dog to show up.

We can also understand that, sometimes, the dog's gonna get loose and go tearing around the neighborhood. That's okay. It doesn't have to be often, and it doesn't have to be for long. We can learn to control it, manage it, understand it, and be okay with it. We can either resist the dog, be angry at ourselves because we are dragging the dog around with us, and even grow to hate the black dog of our emotion as much as we are comfortable with it.

We can do all sorts of unhelpful things to try to get rid of the black dog; we drink. We fight. We give the black dog of our emotion control over our actions, and hurt others. We may even hurt ourselves; because letting the black dog be in control of our lives is easier than trying to control it.

It doesn't have to be that way. We can come to a place of acceptance, of understanding, that the black dog of our emotion is part of us. It's who we are; it's *what* we are now. It's a matter of becoming aware of the fact that the dog is there, being aware of the impact that it's having on our life and those around us, and beginning to understand why. Why the dog is there in the first place. Why it sticks around, despite our best efforts to make it go away.

Once we become aware, and then understand, then we can choose to change. To tame the black dog. To get it under control. We don't have to do it alone; there are professionals who can help us calm the black dogs inside of us, just as there are professional trainers who can help train our real pups. You just have to find one who understands the black dog, and the dog's owner; they're out there, and while searching may be challenging, it's ultimately worth it.

Learn to control the black dog, don't let the black dog control you.

To purchase the book, go to  
[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## PART 3

### Developing Resilience to Recover

*“Out of massive suffering emerged the strongest souls; the most massive character are seared with scars.” Khalil Gibran*

If we never face adversity, then we will never know how to react to it when it happens. That's the entire premise of basic military training, in whatever form it takes: putting people in stressful and challenging situations that they haven't experienced before. It is done in an incremental way, from small challenges to large challenges, allowing individuals and teams to build, then bend, then build again. This is something that veterans are intimately familiar with from their time in the service. *If it ain't rainin', we ain't trainin'* is a phrase that has probably been used by noncommissioned officers since the beginning of time. George S. Patton said, “a pint of sweat prevents a gallon of blood,” meaning the effort that we make before the battle can positively influence the outcome.

The alternative to resilience is capitulation. Breaking when we fall or bouncing when we fall can make a significant difference when it comes to success in our post-military lives. Tapping into the resilience and strength that we had when we were in the service can help us recover more quickly and to higher levels than we were before the thing that took us out. Resilience is a key factor in posttraumatic growth; after extremely stressful and traumatic events, we can become better and stronger versions of ourselves.

The following collection talks about resilience, and bouncing back, and tapping into something that helps us respond to adverse life conditions. The thing about resilience is that it can be developed just like any other skill. We first have to recognize the need, then develop the ability, and the more we apply it, the stronger it becomes.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Veterans, How Do You Deal with Insurmountable Obstacles?

What do you do when you are faced with inevitable or insurmountable obstacles? Veterans are go-to, get-'er-done kind of folks. I was having a conversation recently about the amount of time that it takes to get things done in the civilian world, and how we see it differently in the military. At the operational level, we move from planning to execution in a matter of months, days, or even minutes. The flexibility and the responsiveness of the military decision making process...whether it's the more formal Military Decision Making Process or the grunt level Troop Leading Procedures<sup>8</sup>... means that we observe something, decide how to react to it, and then react.

However, there were times in our military career, or now in our post-military lives, that no amount of effort on our part could change the outcome. When we set foot on a new duty station, we are going to inevitably leave that duty station at some point. This may be a welcome blessing...I'm looking at you, Fort Polk...but it may also be a dreaded occurrence. I've known people that spent nearly their entire career at Fort Bragg, and I sure did what I could to stay at Fort Carson for the final third of my career. There are things that we just can't influence, no matter how much we want to.

There is a concept in Dialectical Behavior Therapy called Radical Acceptance<sup>8</sup>. Here is a recap of what it means to radically accept reality:

- Reality is as it is (the facts about the past and the present are the facts, even if you don't like them).
- There are limitations on the future for everyone (but only realistic limitations need to be accepted).
- Everything has a cause (including events and situations that cause you pain and suffering).
- Life can be worth living even with painful events in it.

So how do we apply radical acceptance to an insurmountable problem? What do we do when we lose a loved one, despite our best efforts, or a brother or sister in arms takes their own life in spite of how we tried to save them? When the relationship ends, or the kids leave, or the job we love (or need) is taken from us? How, in other words, do we accept the fact that we can't overcome

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

something? That we, as we describe it to ourselves, *fail*? Here are some thoughts:

### **These Weren't Your Obstacles to Overcome**

Many of us have a challenge accepting defeat. It's the no-quit, never-say-die attitude that generates success. But how often do we place that on something that is not ours to conquer? It may not have been my fight, and I need to learn to be okay with that. It may have been an impossible fight against unbeatable odds; that does not diminish my effort, and it does not require my despair at the loss. As I've often told my Soldiers when I was in the Army, "Sometimes you have to fight the fight that you know that you just can't win, in order to be able to say that you fought." Acknowledge the effort, appreciate the struggle, but understand...it may not have been your fight from the beginning. And then, knowing that it would still end in defeat, if you had it to do all over again...still you would fight.

### **None of Us are Superheroes**

I am not going to stop the flow of Niagara Falls. I am not going to stand against a hurricane. The forces of nature that are arrayed against me...there is no way that I am going to make any amount of impact on those things. The list of things that I can't control are numerous: the rotation of the earth, the impact of gravity, the actions of another person. These are simply *beyond my ability*. Is accepting the limitations of my ability defeat? Is recognizing that I'm not a superhero, but a fallible, mistake-prone human being, a failure? To me, it's reality. Thinking that I have the ability to beat the game when the odds are stacked so much against me, or that I can achieve the impossible, can lead to frustration and despair.

### **What We Call Things Changes Things**

Words have power. We all know that. We can talk about euphemisms, and trying to clean up something to make it seem like something more than it's not, but a sanitation technician is still the garbage man. The Motor Transport Operator is still a truck driver. We can call it mental health, behavioral health, mental wellness, mental illness, but it's all still talking about the same thing. The difference is, the *meaning* that we place on the words.

If we call the end of the struggle against an impossible foe "defeat," then we're going to feel defeated. If we say "I failed" against something as inevitable as death, or a natural disaster, then we will feel like a failure. This isn't a "circle of life" discussion like in the Lion King, but then again, it sort of

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

is. If we see the end as the true end, and our inability to control inevitability as a failure, then we will have truly been defeated.

### **Focus on What You Can Control**

So how do we deal with it? Sort of like the moment after the punch, there is a moment that exists after the fight ends. What we do next, how we think next, is going to determine our future success. We are now someone who has weathered a great storm, and we may be bruised and broken, but we are wiser. There is more that we understand. We know the sting of pain in a way that we did not know it before, and, brothers and sisters, that's a valuable lesson. That's what we can control...our reactions to the inevitable. As Kipling said in "If-,"

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew

To serve your turn long after they are gone,

And so hold on when there is nothing in you

Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

I can control my will in the moment after life has knocked me down. I can control my heart, my nerves, my muscles and bones, to continue on in a life after the inevitable end. Learning that, too, is a valuable lesson.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## PART 4

### Developing Skills to Apply to Our Post-Military Life

*"You can cut down a tree with a hammer, but it takes about 30 days. If you trade the hammer for an ax, you can cut it down in about 30 minutes. The difference between 30 days and 30 minutes is skills." -- Jim Rohn*

You can think and talk about how you're going to react to a situation all you want, but your time is going to be wasted if you don't put it into action. Every military school I ever attended had both the classroom portion and the hands-on portion. You can study and you can learn, but if you don't apply what you've learned in real life and in real time, then you're not truly learning.

Skill development is a key part of success in post military life. There are those skills that all veterans are told that they should develop, such as resume writing, interviewing techniques, dressing for success, networking. What is often overlooked, however, are the mental and psychological skills that support these. How to handle criticism, because no two resume advice givers are going to agree on your resume. How to handle rejection, because that's going to be a part of the interviewing process. How to *want* to dress for success, *why* networking is important.

The skills discussed in the following collection focus on how to react to stressors in our post military life. How to protect ourselves when someone attacks us verbally, or when we get involved in office politics. Practical ways to respond to adversity, or that moment in the middle of the night when your eyes pop open and there's a storm in your head. Conflict is going to happen after we leave the military, just as it did when we were in the military, only it's going to take on different forms and have different impacts. How effectively we respond to conflict is a reflection of our skills.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Four Ways to Calm the Storm Inside of You

Welcome to the middle of the night.

It's 1AM, and there's a storm inside of you. There's thunder in your heart, and lightning in your brain. Whatever happened, whenever it happened, really doesn't matter: it's the middle of a sleepless night and the storm is raging. It might be fear; for many veterans, it's anger. That's the emotional part, the thunder. The lightning is the thoughts, the rubber bullets bouncing around in your brain that are flashing and crackling.

The problem is, the storm is not beneficial. Not right now, anyway. What, really, are you going to accomplish in the middle of the night? If someone caused the storm, then guess what? They're sleeping right now. That's not meant to increase the intensity of the storm, although it might, but it's the truth. Chances are, they didn't cause the storm as much as your thoughts and rules inside your own head. Fear is the response to a threat, Anger is the response to a violation of something that's important to us. THESE are the seeds of the storm, not the words that were said or the actions that were taken. If we allow others to control our internal weather, then sunny days...and sleep filled nights...will be few and far between.

If you find yourself staring at the ceiling in the middle of the night, disturbed by the raging storm inside of you, consider these thoughts:

### **Let The Storm Pass**

Even the most destructive hurricane, the most devastating tornado, eventually runs out of energy. The skies clear, the weather subsides. Somehow, that doesn't seem to happen to the storms inside of us, though...because we keep feeding the storm. Every time the energy of the storm starts to wane, we whip it back up again with a thought or an emotion. We're up, we're down, we toss and turn, and more lightning flashes: *great, now I can't @#%\*!## sleep. I have to work in the morning! Why is this crap still happening to me?* The more we let the lightning flash, the more the thunder is going to roll. One way to calm it...let the energy die down. This is where mindfulness comes in; if you start to notice more thoughts, the lightning flash ones, then learn how to bring about thoughts that calm yourself. Stop feeding the storm, and eventually it will go away.

### **Don't Try to Control The Storm**

One thing that I've noticed, the more I try to control something, the less

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)



## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

actual control I have over it. From my soldiers to my kids, from driving to exercise, the more I try to impose my will on it, the less things happen the way I want. Trying to control the storm, forcing myself to sleep, only leads to more frustration, more thunder, more lightening. Instead, if I acknowledge the storm, stop trying to fight it, and come to the awareness that there's nothing I can do about it, then there's a chance the storm will die out on it's own.

Another way that many veterans try to control the storm is to artificially suppress it. Not just with sleep meds, which may or may not be effective, but by other means. Alcohol, narcotics. Trying to control the storm by suppressing it by external means is not controlling the storm at all, but really pushing it below the surface. It's not gone, you just deactivated the part of your brain that notices it. That kind of delay doesn't solve anything, and could create more problems on the other side of artificial sleep.

### **Don't Let The Storm Control You**

We have power over our thoughts and our emotions. We may not think we do, but it's a scientifically proven fact that we have the ability to consciously modify our thoughts and emotions. It takes work, of course, but the type of work that will lead to lasting improvement. If we let the storm control us, then we won't get anything done in the morning, because we'll be so tired that we can't think straight. If we allow the crackling power of the lighting of our thoughts to continue to streak across our mind, then we're just going to keep the storm going. Instead, going back to point one, let the storm die out on it's own.

### **Don't Keep the Storm Contained**

I hear what you're thinking: *“easy for you to say, big guy. I bet you sleep like a baby.”* Really? Guess what time it is when I write this. Well past 1AM, I can tell you that. My way of calming the storm? This right here. Getting it out of my head and into the world. Opening Pandora's Box and letting the crap out that's keeping me awake. Letting the rubber bullets of my thoughts out (in a non-destructive way) so they don't do any more damage to my sleep. Now, unless you have a really great battle buddy or a really understanding partner, you're probably not going to get a good response when you wake them up in the middle of the night for a chat. There are, however, options for you to be able to talk, if you want. Search “24/7 hotline” in any search engine and you'll get over a million results in over half a second. Not only that, I guarantee you're probably not the only one up in the middle of the night...there are online chats, I even checked my social media and have at least three contacts

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

online right now. Getting the storm out of your head and into the world can be a key factor in letting it calm down.

How do you calm the storms inside you? Maybe you do choose the medicinal route, and it works for you. I have no problem with that, whatever works, right? Just make sure that you're not doing more harm than good. But maybe you have a way that calms you to help you sleep. A colleague of mine teaches Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia, another connection and I were talking earlier today about mindfulness meditation, and there are likely more ways to calm the middle of the night storm. The more we know, the better we are.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## PART 5

### Personal Satisfaction in our Post-Military Life

*Humanism believes that the individual attains the good life by harmoniously combining personal satisfactions and continuous self-development with significant work and other activities that contribute to the welfare of the community. - Corliss Lamont*

One thing I've learned after reflecting on my own military career is how personally satisfying it was. It gave me both meaning and purpose. Meaning, in that it satisfied me, and purpose, in that it accomplished a goal. Finding something in our post-military lives that gives us as much satisfaction as we had when we were in is critically important.

I find the work that I do regarding veteran mental health and wellness as satisfying as anything I did when I was in the military, and sometimes more so. It can be seen as a logical extension of leadership, caring for the troops, and all that. It is many times more than that, though. It is something that gives me meaning, because I am pleased and satisfied when I help a veteran understand more about themselves, and it gives me purpose when I see veterans making the changes in their lives to live the peaceful post-military life they desire.

The collection in this section is much more personal, sometimes shockingly so. It is an attempt to help others understand why I love my job so much, why I have such passion about the work that I do. If you can find as much satisfaction in the work that you do that I find in the work that I do, then maybe you will find that peaceful post-military life that you desire.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## The Greatest Gift is the Opportunity to Help

*I hold the hands of people I never touch.*

*I provide comfort to people I never embrace.*

*I watch people walk into brick walls, the same ones over and over again, and I coax them to turn around and try to walk in a different direction.*

*People rarely see me gladly. As a rule, I catch the residue of their despair. I see people who are broken, and people who only think they are broken. I see people who have had their faces rubbed in their failures. I see weak people wanting anesthesia and strong people who wonder what they have done to make such an enemy of fate. I am often the final pit stop people take before they crawl across the finish line that is marked: I give up.*

*Some people beg me to help.*

*Some people dare me to help.*

*Sometimes the beggars and the dare-ers look the same. Absolutely the same. I'm supposed to know how to tell them apart.*

*Some people who visit me need scar tissue to cover their wounds.*

*Some people who visit me need their wounds opened further, explored for signs of infection and contamination. I make those calls, too.*

*Some days I'm invigorated by it all. Some days I'm numbed.*

*Always, I'm humbled by the role of helper.*

*And, occasionally, I'm ambushed.*

A friend forwarded me this quote the other day. It's from the book *Critical Conditions*, by Stephen White<sup>6</sup>. I haven't read it before, but once I did, I understood it. The veterans and military spouses I work with offer me their time, their thoughts, their greatest hopes and their deepest fears, and I honor it.

*I watch people walk into brick walls, the same ones over and over again, and I coax them to turn around and try to walk in a different direction.*

We all know Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting a different result. I see strong, proud people who seem to be tripped up by the smallest hurdle, or confused, angry people who can't understand why they've hit a dead end. My job, as a counselor, is to help veterans understand where they went wrong. To help them understand that there's a different way, a way that can help them find peace and an end to running into walls.

*People rarely see me gladly. As a rule, I catch the residue of their despair.*

When a veteran first comes to see me, it's because things have gone off the

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

rails. Maybe they're told to come see me, by a family member or the courts. Maybe they've finally reached the tipping point of their frustration, and think they have nowhere else to turn. I welcome their skepticism, their mistrust, because I'm confident that I can show them a part of themselves that they don't understand. The word "catch," here, as in a vessel, I give them room in which to contain their grief. Their rage. Their misunderstanding.

*I am often the final pit stop people take before they crawl across the finish line that is marked: I give up.*

There are two ways out of this pit stop. The long way, which is life, and could be a life of peace and wellness, or the painful way. Painful to the veteran, painful to those who care for them. It's not a place of desperation, but a hopeful refuge, a paradox that contains all hope and no hope in the same thought. It's the fork in the road, the ultimate decision point, where we can choose to grow, maintain, or decline. It could be the delineating point in a veteran's life, when they finally stopped, set down their burden and said, "THIS is what I'm carrying. Will you help me understand?"

*Some people beg me to help. Some people dare me to help.*

Talking to a veteran online recently, and he said a phrase that has stuck with me: "Kicking down doors is a heck of a lot easier than talking about kicking down doors." And this came from a veteran who did both, and knows what he's talking about. For many veterans, the chip on our shoulders is the size of a city, or a valley, or an entire nation. We carry the burden of grief, of pride, of honor, and shame, and dare someone to try to figure out what to do with it. I have seen veterans who come to me in pain, but bare their teeth and growl in the same manner that a wolf would when their leg is caught in a trap. And I put up with the growl, the teeth, the anger, the pain.

*Some people who visit me need scar tissue to cover their wounds. Some people who visit me need their wounds opened further, explored for signs of infection and contamination.*

I've met veterans whose wounds have not been allowed to heal, years and sometimes decades after being hurt. They've not wanted them to heal, not allowed anyone to approach, until the pain and the wound become part of who they are and what they do. They long for a time before the wound, while also not wanting to give up the part of themselves that is wounded. Sometimes, the wound has healed, but healed imperfectly, like a broken bone that was improperly set. In those times, after trust and legitimacy has been established, we explore the wound together. And continue to work through

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

the pain.

*Always, I'm humbled by the role of helper.*

*And, occasionally, I'm ambushed.*

I'm often caught by surprise at the depth and breadth of emotion. Of the seriousness of it all. I'm ambushed by my own thoughts, by the weight of the responsibility that someone has trusted me with. I am always appreciative of the fact that I, and others like me, are trusted with some of the deepest secrets of the strongest people I've ever had the honor to know.

And I'm thankful for those who have chosen to support me.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## PART 6

### The Importance of Remembrance Post-Military Life

*“You silent tents of green, We deck with fragrant flowers; Yours has the suffering been, The memory shall be ours” — Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.*

One of the unique aspects of military life is the impact of memories and remembrance on our post-military life. While someone who has never served in the military can be moved by the sights and sounds of battle, they will never feel the same impact as someone who understands the full measure of the impact of military service. An old soldier recognizes an old soldier, not just because of the way they carry themselves or the words they speak, but the look that comes over their face when they are in the process of remembrance.

Remembrance and nostalgia are key parts of our post-military life. We honor those who did not return from battle, the true heroes. We are, unfortunately, sometimes haunted by their memory as much as we are comforted by it, sometimes more so. For many veterans, Memorial Day or Remembrance Day does not happen just once a year, but multiple times throughout the year. Without recognizing and embracing this very real part of our post-military life, we are robbing ourselves of the richness of our experience.

These collected articles focus on the impact of remembrance, both good and bad. It is a very real part of any service member's life. It was real when we were in the military, and it is just as real now that we're no longer in it. If we get lost in the past, however, we are well and truly lost; it is the ability to visit the past, but not make our home there, which brings us peace in our post-military lives.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Memorializing the Ultimate Sacrifice

*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends – John 15:13, King James Version*

Sacrifice. The ultimate, final sacrifice of one's life for others. This is the true secret that lies at the heart of military service: it is one of the few occupations where one could theoretically, and often actually, make this sacrifice. There are several others that are similar, and not all who have served would willingly make this sacrifice, but the fact is that the potential always has been and always will be there.

When I was on Recruiting duty from '03-'05, I was keenly aware of this sacrifice. Luckily, in my eyes, I was stationed outside a military installation, so the majority of the recruits I enlisted were aware of it as well. Recruiting outside a base keeps an honest person honest; there's no point in telling people BS, because they would just go back and talk to their mom, or dad, or uncle, or whoever, who would set them straight.

I once had an astute young man ask me the question: what's the worst thing about being in the Army? It wasn't a trick question, and the answer wouldn't have mattered, he was going to join anyway. He just wanted the information. I thought about it for a while; people yell at you. A lot. Sometimes there can be the senseless tasks that come with any bureaucracy. You cut a lot a grass and rake a lot of leaves. Then, it struck me:

The worst thing about the military are the Memorial Ceremonies.

The inherent danger of service in the military, regardless of combat or not, means that people will lose their lives. When a unit loses a service member, we honor them not with a funeral, but in a uniquely military fashion: with a ceremony. Unfortunately, putting these ceremonies together was something I became pretty good at. There is a right way and a wrong way to do it, just like any other military ceremony.

There are many reasons, psychologically, that we would honor those we have lost in this way. That's a key point: to honor the memory of the brother or sister. If the ceremony is held at a stateside base, much of the ceremony is for the benefit of the family, that they may know that those who served with their fallen loved one held them in great esteem. It's also a form of catharsis for the members of the unit themselves, a way to acknowledge the grief and loss in a way that may help the grieving process. My particular branch of the service, the Army, does things literally by the book, and that includes writing a book that makes sure guidelines are adhered

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)



## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

to. In our case, it is Army Training Publication 1-05.02, *Religious Support to Funerals and Memorial Ceremonies and Services*<sup>1</sup>.

The publication describes the need for these services and ceremonies in this way:

*Memorial ceremonies honor our fallen Soldiers and provide an environment for survivors to grieve. The opportunity to grieve can provide healing and renewal to the living that allows the unit to move forward with its collective mission.*

For me, the most difficult part of the entire ceremony is the end, and in particular, the Last Roll Call. This event is so emotionally significant that the above manual recommends preparing any family members attending the ceremony for the Last Roll Call.

If you've never been in the military, let me paint a picture for you. It's 3:30 in the morning, and you and a bunch of your battle buddies are in formation. The person on charge of the whole group is checking to make sure that everyone's where they should be, which is right here along with everyone else. One of the easiest ways to do that? Respond when you hear me call your name. Private Smith? *Here*. Sergeant Jones? *Hooab*. Specialist Anderson? Anderson? Hey, where the @#%\$ is Anderson? Imagine Ben Stein in Ferris Bueller's Day Off calling for someone who isn't there...only the consequences are much, much greater in the Army.

The same thing happens in a Memorial Ceremony, only for vastly different reasons. At a particular point in the ceremony, the enlisted leader in charge of the unit will go to the front of group and conduct a roll call.

Private Smith?

*Here, First Sergeant.*

Sergeant Jones?

*Here, First Sergeant.*

Specialist Anderson?

*Here First Sergeant.*

After each name is called, the service member stands at attention. After the last service member in formation is called, the name of the fallen is called three times. Rank, last name. Rank, first name, last name. Rank, first name, middle name, last name.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

Sergeant Wolf.

*silence.*

Sergeant Eduvigis Wolf.

*silence.*

Sergeant Eduvigis Guadalupe Wolf.

*silence.*

It is in those silent moments that the reality crashes home. They will no longer answer the call, because they have answered the ultimate call. They are no longer physically in the formation, but they will always be in the formation.

They are no longer with us. They have demonstrated their ultimate love for their brothers and sisters by laying down their lives for us.

For every fallen brother or sister, those of us who remain behind feel their loss keenly. We know the sacrifice, we know the pain of loss, and we gladly bear that loss on behalf of a nation that may or may not understand. We don't have to consider this only on Memorial Day, but at any time. And at all times.

And be grateful for the sacrifice of those who have given all so that we may enjoy what we have.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## PART 7

### Applying Lessons Learned to Post-Military Life

*There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure. Colin Powell*

Life is a great teacher. What we learn, we may not always enjoy, but if we don't learn it correctly, the lesson will be repeated over and over again until we figure it out. We can learn painful lessons by ourselves, or we can learn from others who have experienced the pain and shared the outcomes with us. That is the key to any successful military training: this is what has been tried before, this is why it doesn't work, so don't do it.

Life lessons can be shared among veterans, and often is. Balancing what is learned with our own experience gives us a greater chance of success in the future; if a trusted brother or sister says to me, "this is what I learned," I will give it more value, and then test it myself to see if what they say is accurate or not. In this way, we can take the lessons of others and apply it to ourselves.

This collection provides some lessons I learned while I was in the service, and how I apply them to my post-military life. They are different perspectives because they are generated from different experiences. They may be helpful, if you find yourself in the same situation, or they may not apply to you at all. In any event, we should never pass on the change to benefit from someone else's experience.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Four Lessons Learned from Failing Jumpmaster School

The 82nd Airborne Division Advanced Airborne School Jumpmaster Course is three weeks long. It took me six months to complete it.

There's not a leadership course that doesn't talk about the lessons that can be learned by failing. Failure lets us know that we're not perfect; it helps us understand how not to get the job done, and builds resilience and perseverance. I've screwed up more times than I can count, but when asked about one of my biggest failures in my military career, I always point back to this one. There are some pretty big lessons that I learned during that year, ones that have stuck with me nearly twenty years later.

Sometimes the best goals are the ones other people give you

I didn't want to be a Jumpmaster. Not really, not at the beginning. I wasn't alone in that, either; you didn't get any extra money for it, and Jumpmasters were always running around doing stuff while Joe put on their parachutes and then took a nap waiting to load the aircraft. No, I was in a unit with a large number of Noncommissioned Officers, but few Jumpmasters.

Our First Sergeant didn't like this. In the summer of '99, our unit had two Jumpmasters, and it was supposed to have six. So he decided to assist in obtaining the motivation to serve the unit, rather than serve ourselves.

To get into Jumpmaster School, you had to pass the Jumpmaster Pre-test. This is a written test on the proper nomenclature of every item of equipment on a parachutist's rig, and then a rigging test in which you had to properly assemble a rucksack, a release harness, and a lowering line. The written test is a 25 question test, but there were something like 150 (or more) different variations.

Our First Sergeant, in order to establish the appropriate motivation, decided to hold weekly Leadership Development courses. This was held on a Friday. After all of the Soldiers had been released. Starting at 1700 (5PM). First, we would all be in the conference room, and have to take the nomenclature test. Not the 25 question test, but the 150 question test. After that, we would be required to go outside and take the rigging portion of the test. This would typically take an hour, maybe more if a bunch of us screwed it up...which we did. Weekly.

The only way to get out of this torture was to take and pass the Jumpmaster Pre-test...we would then be excused from the weekly "leadership

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

development.” Needless to say, I started studying my butt off, and took the Pre-test just to get out of the weekly training...which, I am certain, was the whole point.

### **Sometimes The Goal You're Aiming For Isn't The Goal You Need**

At about the same time, the 82nd had a bunch of slots to go to Pathfinder school. I may not have wanted to go to Jumpmaster school, but I sure wanted to go to that one! I had a mentor who was a Pathfinder, and it was my goal to eventually get to Fort Campbell. My uncle had been in the 101st in Vietnam, it was close to family, and...truth be told...another badge wouldn't look too shabby, either. What can I say, I was young and stupid.

So not only was my First Sergeant the master of the stick, he was also the master of the carrot. As we started getting our names in for Pathfinder school, the old man decided, “well, Pathfinder school does nothing for the company. It's good for you, but we're not going to use it. Nobody's getting on the list to go to Pathfinder School until you go to Jumpmaster School.”

That was it for me. I passed the pre-test. I had the incentive to go. I might as well make it happen.

### **Running Into A Brick Wall Only Makes You Want It More.**

When I went, and it's probably the same now, Jumpmaster school was broken up into three weeks. The classroom portion, the Jumpmaster Personnel Inspection (JMPI), portion, and the Aircraft portion. I did pretty well in the classroom portion, but...like many, many other aspiring Jumpmasters...the JMPI portion was my downfall. If I remember correctly, you had three chances to pass the test.

You have to inspect three jumpers within five minutes, not missing any deficiencies identified as “major” and only two identified as “minor.” With each successive NoGo, my frustration level increased...as did my desire to succeed. After being dropped from the course, I returned to my unit, frustrated and defeated. The only question from the ever-present First Sergeant:

“When are you going back?” By that time, I was all in. Wild horses couldn't have kept me away.

### **Maintain Awareness, Or You Might Miss Success.**

It took another cycle for me to get back into the course. I had practiced my JMPI sequence in the meantime; my First Sergeant knew some people who

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

packed the parachutes, so we got an extra one and rigged up a Soldier so we could practice. We gave him some comp time, and I got some practice time. I hesitate to say it, but I also bent the rules a little bit by taking the parachute home with me. What are you going to do, kick me out of the Army? Like many Airborne wives, my beautiful and long-suffering wife allowed me to have her put on the parachute and practice my JMPI sequence at home!

Now I'm back. My motivation has been established, my failure smacked me in the face, and I never wanted anything more than I did at that time. When you come back into Jumpmaster school, you don't get three chances, you only get two...and I needed both.

There I was, on the edge of failure again. I remember it plain as day...I was testing in between Bragg's famous 34 Foot Towers, and when I completed my last Jumper, I stood there frozen. Did I miss anything? Did I not make it in time?

"Jumpmaster, move in front of the second Jumper," the Jumpmaster Instructor said. My heart sunk. I couldn't believe it...I was on the outer edge of my recycle window, if I wanted to come back I'd have to do the whole course again. I moved in front of the second jumper.

"Take a look at his reserve parachute, Jumpmaster," he said. At this point, I knew I was trashed. The only thing that could have been wrong with his reserve was a major malfunction, which means I missed it, and failed. "What do you see?"

I bent over, gripping the reserve parachute so hard that it, and the guy wearing it, was shaking. I'm surprised the heat from my gaze didn't make the thing catch fire. "What do you see, Jumpmaster?" He said again. Through clenched teeth, and an angry haze directed at my incompetence, I finally told him, "I don't see anything, Jumpmaster."

"That's good," he said behind me. "That's because there's nothing there. JUMPMASTER." At that moment, it hit me that he'd been calling me Jumpmaster the entire time...I'd passed!

When I stood up, I'm not sure if he thought that I was going to crack him one or give him a hug. To this day, I'm not sure which one I was going to do, either. I stood there staring at him, while the three yahoos I was inspecting were laughing at me. I probably had the goofiest grin plastered across my face, and he said, "Get out of my testing area, Jumpmaster!"

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

I must have set a land speed record back to the classroom. You could tell which of us made it, and which of us didn't, and I was glad to be on the side of those that had.

It was the most challenging school I attended in my 22 years, and rightfully so. It wasn't something to play with, and people's lives were literally at stake. From among any accomplishment in my career, the ability and responsibility to be a Jumpmaster is the one I'm most proud of.

And I didn't even want to do it in the beginning.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## PART 8

### Veteran Mental Health as Mental Wellness instead of Mental Illness

*Wellness seeks more than the absence of illness; it searches for new levels of excellence. Beyond any disease-free neutral point, wellness dedicates its efforts to our total well-being - in body, mind, and spirit. - Greg Anderson*

Among many of the challenges that veterans face regarding mental health, the stigma against seeking support is one of the biggest. In a U.S. congressionally mandated study about mental health services in the Department of Veterans Affairs<sup>1</sup>, it was identified that over half of veterans who needed mental health services did not perceive that they had a need for them. Much of this lack of perception might be caused by the idea of the need for mental health services is accompanied by a connotation that this must mean the veteran is “sick” or “damaged” or “broken.”

One of the ways to change the way we think and talk about veteran mental health is to focus on wellness instead of illness. Working with a mental health professional is not about curing a sickness, it's about identifying strengths to sustain while working to improve deficits.

The following collection of articles looks at veteran mental health from a perspective of building wellness instead of treating illness. It does not assume that the veteran is a broken warrior, pitiful victim, or charity cases that must be handled like fragile merchandise. It is a perspective that acknowledges that veterans are what they are: humans, fallible, and capable of amazing things in the future just as they did amazing things in the past.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)



## Building Veteran Mental Wellness Rather than Treating Mental Illness

I don't know about you, but I don't enjoy being sick. It's no fun. Headache, congestion, pain, no energy, can't get anything done. We all have things we want to achieve in our lives, and if we're just feeling run down, it's not enjoyable. As a veteran who served 22 years in the Army, I have an extra added sense of resistance against sickness. Or maybe it's just a guy thing, as my wife says. Bottom line is, nobody likes to be sick.

If that's how we feel about being physically sick, then it comes as no surprise that we feel even more strongly about resisting the concept of mental illness. That there's something wrong with us psychologically. As a clinical mental health counselor, I work with veterans daily, and they're some of the strongest, most courageous people I know. They're also hurting and in pain.

This is a challenge that I often see when it comes to veteran mental health: many think that having to work with a mental health professional, aka "shrink," aka "going to see the wizard," aka "talking about your feelings and all that psychobabble crap," means that we are somehow weak, broken, mentally ill. With that kind of self-judgment, which is reinforced by our peers and society at large, is it any wonder that a veteran avoids talking about their mental health and wellness?

Unfortunately, it's also a subject that needs to be discussed. A mentor of mine<sup>2</sup> described avoiding the topic of veteran mental health is like avoiding having "the talk" with our teenagers, and silently hoping that we don't become grandparents a heck of a lot sooner than we were expecting. Perhaps, instead of focusing on veteran mental illness, we should start talking about veteran mental wellness.

### **Rejecting The Label Of Mental Illness**

The term "mental illness" conjures up images of a padded room and a straight jacket. We think about that, then we think about *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and we categorically reject any thought that this label may apply to us. More importantly, for veterans, we never wanted to be "that guy" or "that gal," the sick call ranger who couldn't be counted on to pull their weight. What if we stopped looking at it as sickness or illness, though? We all know we have good days and bad days. Sometimes we're just not at the top of our game. It happens, even to elite athletes and high-powered executives.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

The problem with that is, rejecting the thought that there's anything "wrong" with us may be rejecting reality. If we find ourselves working too much, drinking too much, fighting too much, or doing anything too extreme, then we're not facing facts: we're not working towards the best us we can possibly be. Does that mean we are "mentally ill?" Of course not. It means we're human.

### **Striving Towards Mental Wellness**

Instead of looking at veteran mental health as something that is sick that needs to be fixed, how much better would it be if we looked at it as something that is working less well and making it more well? You can see the positive spin here, but it's not a "spin," it's an outlook on our life. On the world around us. If one of the rules we tell ourselves is that we only need to go see a mental health professional if we're "crazy," then we're going to reject the label and avoid getting help. If we instead change that rule to say that going to see a mental health professional means that we're focused on being the best possible us that we can be, the stigma falls away on its own.

Consider mental wellness along the same lines as physical wellness. If you step on the scale and don't like what you see, or you go to the doctor and don't like what you hear, an appropriate response is to make some changes in your life. Perhaps you get some help in doing so. Why should working towards improving your mental health be any different than improving your physical health?

We can spend all the time we want in the gym, on the road, at the range, pushing ourselves to operate at the next level. Maybe that's all the "therapy" you need. Other times, though, we might need to take things to the next level and talk to a mental health professional.

It's being able to recognize the difference between the two, and then reaching out for the support you need, that can make all the difference in the world.

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

### Acknowledgements

A sincere and grateful thanks to everyone that helped me become who I am. My parents, Mary and Duane, instilled in me discipline, respect, care for others, and a servant's heart. While military service was not their first choice for me, they supported me all those years ago when I made the choice to join. My wife, Connie, thought knew what she was getting into when she joined me at Fort Bragg nearly twenty years ago to start our life together, and has remained a constant support for me through all the twists, turns, ups, and downs that have come along since. My children, Christina and Daniel. The pride and love that I have for you is greater than you may ever know, and it is my sincere hope that you will live lives of joy and peace, never experiencing the sounds of war. To my sisters, Tammy and Jennifer, and my brothers, Brett and Jesse, and my aunts, uncles, nephews, and cousins (way too many to mention); though life, time, and distance has spread us out across the nation and the world, your love and support for me is a constant reminder that we're never truly alone. For all of those I served with, from Germany to Bragg to Germany to Recruiting Command to Fort Carson: a huge number that I lived, loved and fought alongside (and sometimes with). Any amount of success that I had as a Soldier and a Leader is directly due to the brothers and sisters around me. To my mentors in my second life as a mental health professional: Susan Varheley, Jared Theimann, your instruction and guidance at the beginning of my career were invaluable, and made me proud to be an Adams State University alum. For Jenni Guentcheva and Donya Boudeman, in taking a chance on a bold combat vet who had no idea what he was getting himself into when he said he wanted to help other combat vets; your supervision and guidance were and is still invaluable. For Drs. Chuck and Rae Ann Weber, and all the team at the Family Care Center, your support for me is nothing compared to your unwavering support for our service members, veterans, and their family. To the National Board of Certified Counselors Foundation, especially Sherry Allen and (of course) Drs. Dannette Patterson and Greg Frazier; again, taking a chance on me and providing the support needed to get out of my comfort zone. I am truly standing on the shoulders of giants. To Judge David Shakes of the Colorado Fourth Judicial District Veteran Trauma Court, and the rest of the VTC Team: the dedication you provide to our justice involved veterans is inspirational, and I'm proud to work with you. To retired Command Sergeant Major Dan Elder, your continued support and encouragement helped the Head Space and Timing blog get off the ground, and none of any of this would have been possible without your guidance and assistance. And finally, and certainly not least, to the family and memory of

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)

## Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy

Sergeant Eduviges Guadalupe Wolf. Duvi, your sacrifice on that terrible October day will always serve as a reminder of the reason why I do what I do. Rest In Peace.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Duane France is a retired U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer, combat veteran, and clinical mental health counselor practicing in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In addition to his clinical work, he also writes and speaks about veteran mental health to a wide audience through his podcast and blog, Head Space and Timing, which can be found at [www.veteranmentalhealth.com](http://www.veteranmentalhealth.com)

To purchase the book, go to

[Combat Vet Don't Mean Crazy](#)