

Running Head: THE UNITED STATES ARMY'S

The United States Army's Successes and Failures in Applying PTSD Lessons Learned

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Class #58

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March 18, 2008

### Abstract

It is important for military professionals to take the time to study military history because the lessons learned can directly affect the success or failure of the Army's future missions and the welfare of the Soldiers. This essay will discuss how the United States Army failed and/or succeeded in applying lessons learned from a previous war or conflict in relation to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I will contrast the Civil War to World War I, World War II to the Vietnam War, and the Vietnam War to Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom. I intend to show how some situations were detrimental to the Soldier and how others were beneficial.

## Outline

Thesis Statement: It is important for military professionals to take the time to study military history because the lessons learned can directly affect the success of the Army's future missions, operations, and conflicts.

### Outline:

- I. Introduction
- II. Civil War PTSD compared to World War I PTSD
- III. World War II PTSD compared to Vietnam War PTSD
- IV. Vietnam War PTSD compared to Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom PTSD
- V. Conclusion

## H100 Historical Argumentative Essay

It is important for military professionals to take the time to study military history because the lessons learned can directly affect the success or failure of the Army's future missions and the welfare of the Soldiers. This essay will discuss how the United States Army failed to apply lessons learned from a previous war or conflict in relation to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I will contrast the Civil War to World War I, World War II to the Vietnam War, and the Vietnam War to Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom. I intend to show how some situations were detrimental to the Soldier and how others were beneficial.

### Civil War Compared to World War I

Medical advances during the Civil War era were primarily physical in nature. Society and medical professionals often viewed mental illness as an incurable disease that was a burden on society. Most treatments, such as electroshock and lobotomies were experimental and did nothing to help the illness. Rather, these barbaric medical techniques left the patient mutilated and brain damaged for the rest of their life. Soldiers during the Civil War were commonly diagnosed with "Soldier's heart". The recorded symptoms and diagnoses from Civil War era medical journals mirror those of today's post traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Rightfully so, with one in 65 dying in combat, one in 10 being wounded in combat, and one in 13 dying from disease. The major difference is that during the Civil War, the symptoms were viewed as weakness and cowardice by fellow Soldiers, families, and society in general. Victims of "Soldier's heart" were discarded by their service, left without any medical or financial benefits from their country, and most spent the remainder of their life homeless, destitute, and in turn died of exposure or disease.

In contrast, Soldiers serving during World War I were privileged to have their services and their country recognize their disorder as an official medical diagnosis. When Soldiers experienced the feeling of imminent death or the death of fellow comrades, they were diagnosed as having “shell shock”. Unfortunately, they were still viewed as weak, spineless cowards who were a disgrace to the uniform and their country. Most were afforded very little time to cope with the atrocities of war and were inadvertently thrust back to the front. World War I is famous for the technique of trench warfare, which saw month long stalemates that focused on attrition by artillery fire rather than combat by maneuvering forces. This type of warfare, which consisted of Soldiers being close to guns that were pounding out artillery on both sides of the trenches, was thought to disrupt neuronal connections resulting in “shell shock”. The only advantage that a World War I veteran had over a Civil War veteran was the creation of the Veterans Administration, which provided Soldier’s homes for the homeless and some medical and financial assistance.

#### World War II Compared to the Vietnam War

World War II’s veterans, regardless of their branch of service, are known as our country’s greatest generation. The bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 pulled the United States into a war that was raging on five continents and saw participation from almost every nation in the world. The violence from World War I weapons was magnified ten-fold during World War II. Every weapon was larger in terms of caliber, rate of fire, and bomb poundage. This was compounded by the technological advances in fighter planes, naval gunships, and tank development, but the primary component on the battlefield remained the Soldier. With the technological advancements of weaponry came the increase of casualties and war atrocities. Consequently, medical advancements created the need to replace the term “shell shock” and mental health professionals

coined the term “battle fatigue” to compartmentalize those individuals who were mental casualties of World War II. This was without regard to contributing factors such as witnessing death or dismemberment, handling dead bodies, or the killing of others. Once again, there existed the need to group everyone into one comprehensive category to explain why some Soldiers were unable to perform in a combat environment. Some reactive measures that were instituted to assist Soldiers in dealing with the stressors of combat were psychiatric counseling, psychotic pharmaceuticals and rest and recuperative leave. However, all of these were designed to return the Soldier to his unit as rapidly as possible to facilitate the needs of the combat units. Most Soldiers showed immediate improvement upon removal from front-line fighting, but the symptoms returned shortly after returning to their unit and were more severe the second time around.

The Army is credited with one immensely positive method that assisted Soldiers in coping with the stress of combat and especially the act of killing. When the war was over, Soldiers remained with their units during the entire re-deployment process. Most often, this was by means of naval transport, which allowed them to decompress from the war zone by talking with their comrades about what had occurred during their combat tour. Additionally, thousands of awards for valor were issued which validated the Soldiers actions while engaged in combat as they returned home to a grateful and appreciative nation. This combination of events assisted our greatest generation in coping with the hundreds of thousands of men that had died world- wide from dozens of nations during the war.

The actions utilized to treat or prevent “battle fatigue” during and after World War II would be lost by the onset of the Vietnam War. Most of the Soldiers of the Vietnam era were drafted, but many still volunteered just like the World War II era. Policies that were instituted

and the advancement of the media during this era would leave an entire generation of Soldiers scarred forever. During World War II, Soldiers deployed as a unit, fought as a unit, and re-deployed as a unit. Withstanding serious injury, the Soldiers who left for World War II came home when the Allied Forces were victorious. The Vietnam era was marked by individual replacements that were tasked to perform a one year tour in Vietnam. Soldiers arrived individually and were integrated as quickly as possible into a unit. The emphasis was on Soldiers trying to survive the jungles of Vietnam for one year and go home just as quickly as they arrived. There was little or no decompression time at the end of a tour and there were few "battle buddies" to share wartime experiences with because they left before or after the Soldier or died while in Vietnam. The media focused on the political agendas of the time and greatly influenced the hostile environment that Soldiers returned home to find. Soldiers were subjected to harassment from protesters that burned flags and uniforms and verbally assaulted them with phrases like "baby killer".

#### Vietnam War PTSD compared to Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom PTSD

The lessons learned from PTSD from the Vietnam War have been difficult ones. Our nation is changed from watching a generation of veterans suffer from the debilitating effects of PTSD. However, the generation of Soldiers who are executing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are benefitting from the maltreatment of Vietnam veterans. Unparalleled medical advancements in diagnosing and treating PTSD have led to an understanding about the long-term traumatic effects of PTSD. Soldiers are provided medical care and counseling at the first sign or symptom and are not limited to the length of treatment. Facilities are available world-wide to provide care and family members are often involved in the healing process. Soldiers are encouraged to talk with one another about the traumatic events they experience and to ask for

help in coping with combat-related stressors. Health professionals are specially trained to spot symptoms of PTSD, but Army leaders are also taught what behaviors to watch for. Specialized Warrior Transition Units are now located at over 20 locations to provide long-term care and assistance to Soldiers who have suffered severe physical, mental, and emotional trauma as a result of combat action during Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom (OEF and OIF). Additionally, the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration are supplying unprecedented medical and financial assistance to these Soldiers and their families. Soldiers who are blind, deaf or amputees are now receiving cutting-edge surgeries and prosthetics to assist them in leading a productive life regardless of their disability. Our society has always been acceptant and tolerant of our veterans who are physically disabled, but now the veterans who have the mental and emotional scars of combat are gaining acceptance and tolerance.

### Conclusion

In summary, it is important for military professionals to take the time to study military history because the lessons that we learn about post traumatic stress disorder directly impacts the success or failure of the Army's future missions and the welfare of the Soldiers. This essay discussed how the United States Army's successes and failures impacted generations of veterans from the Civil War, through two World Wars, to the Vietnam Conflict, and through today's battles in the Global War on Terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although, it took five wars and multiple conflicts it appears that the lessons learned are now embedded into our Army culture as we strive to help and protect our veterans who suffer from the effects of post traumatic stress disorder. The most difficult task is preserving these lessons and ensuring that the mental and emotional health of our Soldiers and veterans remains as important a priority as their physical health.