

## The Veterans

Once a week Roman takes part in a therapy session together with 15 other men. Most of them are in their mid-eighties and fought in the Pacific during World War II, in places like Iwo Jima, Saipan and the Philippines. A couple of men participated in the Korea War and the rest in the Vietnam War. I met the group after filming Roman for almost three years. I got to know them and was allowed to attend and film a couple of their sessions. Bill Brannan, Brian Turner, Robert Curtis and Ed Naulty all belong to Roman's therapy group that is led by Dr Guy Grenny and psychologist Christopher Hoy. These excerpts are from interviews made in September 2004 after they saw a rough cut of a film version of the installation "The Two Faces of Roman Martinez". I met the veterans Steve Hassna and Doug Yelman, the writer and psychiatrist Jonathan Shay and the writer and activist Daniel Hallock on the journey. Longer versions of these interviews are shown as part of the exhibition.

### **Bill Brannan**

*Served with the 101 airborne division during World War II.*

I know you're going to find this hard to believe, couldn't wait to get into combat! It wasn't that I was brave or courageous. It had nothing to do with that. I wanted to be in combat. It's kind of hard to explain that. But I couldn't wait for it. Of course we had to get across the ocean. We landed in Italy. And then that day came when we were committed. It was a little town called Grosseto, north of Rome. I was the lead scout. B Company was on the left. We were the A Company and I was the lead man. And I heard the German machineguns firing over the hill. I ran up that hill to attack. Me. Like a darn fool I might add.

I think back. How could I be so stupid? Nobody followed me. I ran up and hit the top. And they unloaded on these German machineguns on me.

Unfortunately they were shooting high. But I could feel those bullets over my head. I hit the ground and I put my head in a little crevasse. I don't know how much good that did. Being flat there and because they were down below they couldn't get a line on me. And I'm lying there thinking of what I just did...

In our squad we were twelve men... Out of twelve men six were killed... That's fifty percent... That percentage is high. Of course there are some that are higher than that. But six of my real close friend where killed in southern France and in the Bulge. So it was not a good experience...

### **Brian Turner**

*Served on a patrol boat during the Vietnam War in 1966.*

... a friend of mine, I had talked to him two or three times before. I didn't really know him. And I asked him: "When were you there?" And he says, "When was I where?" "When were you in Nam?" He had no idea that I knew anything about him. And he said "I was there 69-70... how did you know that?" And I said I could see it. "You know. Your eyes..." And its true, not everybody... But there is a look guys get...

### **Robert Curtis**

*World War II veteran. Sailor, first class, on USS Minneapolis and USS Franks.*

I felt like any combat veteran would feel when he hears Roman's story. I know what he went through. And the stuff he's done. He had orders to do it. An ordinary man, he wouldn't do it unless it was under those kind of conditions. Then you do it. It's survival of the fittest. That's the way I looked at it when I was in the service. When I fought overseas. And it brought tears in my eyes. It really did.

When I came home I was fit for nothing. I was a drunk. I would get into fights with people. But I worked.

It's something you can't erase out of your head. That thought is in your head. From the time you get home until the time you die. That's the only time it probably will be gone...

I guess it must have been love at first sight. So we got married... I never did tell her my problem... My war experiences. Nothing... She knew there was something wrong. I had one of these ideas, and I guess a lot of veterans have the same experience. I'd go off by myself. For a week, for two weeks, for three weeks at the time. But I'd come back. I did not want to associate with anybody. I didn't want anyone to talk to me. And I told my wife the same way. I said "I don't want you to talk to me". I probably treated her pretty rough that way. But that's the way I felt. I would go out in the woods and sit down. I would pick up little dead sticks and break them...

I would get a little pile... Maybe a foot high. Just break them. Listened to the chipmunks. Listened to the birds. Thinking about the stuff I

went through. But I'd come home. I told my wife, don't bother me. Don't even ask me what I'm doing... So that went on... Maybe six months I guess. And I finally told her. Excuse me. ( *Robert starts crying* ) I finally told her. I said: "Pauline, the reason I been doing what I been doing. I'm still fighting the war." She said "I figured something like that..." And she hugged me. She said "Don't worry we'll make it..." And we went on and on. And we did. We did make it... But the thing is. It's tough at night when I go to bed. And you get these flashbacks; I had them where I would be dodging machineguns. And all that stuff. It would be no good. If the bullets are going to get you, they're going to get you... And the last time I had a flashback. I'd jump out of bed. I was sweating. I was still half-asleep. I jumped out of bed. And the wife said "What the heck is wrong with you... Are you having one of those...", she had a name for it... I forget what she said it was... I'd say yes. She said, "What's wrong?" I was pointing up the ceiling and I said, "That Japanese Zero is trying to get me". After all these years things like that happen.

Then I'd have things like helping my buddies when they are hit... Pulling them back to safety. And Kamikazes. Watching out for Kamikazes. Torpedo defense... Landings on the beach... Stuff like that.

A Banzai charge. That was the worst. The Marines would have machine guns set up. Mow them all down... Then they would retreat. Then they would come back again. Banzai! Banzai! Just screaming... And the Marines would mow them down again... One time the piles of bodies got so high, they had to go out there and move the bodies. The Marines did. So they could depress the guns far enough so they could get the next charge... They died for the emperor. That was what it was...

But my wife stood by me all these years. Even up till now I have problems. She knows. She understands me. You know it's amazing.

I quit drinking. Heck I'm not a normal person. But as I'm talking to you on camera and all, and I know I'm not... I tell her I'm worried. I hope I'm not violent sometimes. If I was, that would kill me... But I think I'm over that. Like Roman said, going on about that pit. I'm the same way. I'm in the bottom of that pit and I can't get out. Poor guys that don't have wives like that...

**Erik Pauser:** *How can they deal with it you think?*

I don't know... I think they just have to do like me and be loners... Lot of them are loners. I feel sorry for them. I go up and I talk to them. And I tell them... I ask them if they have been in combat. And they say yes. Well I tell them. I love you guys.

I say I'm a combat veteran. In World War II... I'm no better than you guys... You're just as good as I am. But you got to get together and talk these things out. And they say we can't talk to nobody. The only ones we can talk to are our own kind. Well I say, come to our meetings. We have meetings to help you. Dr Grenny is the one who helped me.

**Jonathan Shay**

*Psychiatrist at the Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston.*

*Author of the books Achilles in Vietnam – Combat trauma and the undoing of character and Odysseus in America – Combat trauma and the trials of homecoming.*

One of the reasons I love the work I do is because it brings me into contact with the deepest manifestations of humanity. For sure not always beautiful or uplifting. Sometimes hideously ugly, sometimes terrifying, but never trivial. And it's been a profoundly interesting life for me the 16 years I have been working with combat veterans.

Nothing in my formal training in psychiatry prepared me for what I encountered...

The basic psychological injury is fairly easy to understand... Simple psychological injury is persistence into civilian life of the absolutely valid and successful adaptation to a situation where people really are trying to kill you.

What are those adaptations? Number one, a tremendous amount of alertness, constant mobilization of the mind to mortal danger. If you bring that back with you into civilian life it can be very disruptive. People getting up in middle of the night. Or remaining awake all night to, as they say check their perimeter. To go around the house locking and re-locking every door and every window. Peeking out to see that there is no people sneaking up... This is the persistence into civilian life of something that was very real in combat. In combat you have to shut down all emotions that do not contribute directly to the survival. So it means that you shut down grief, and there is plenty of grief in actual warfare... You shut down tenderness. You shut down fear. The only emotion that don't get shut down, and there is some controversy around this, is anger...

Do we truly regard a returning veteran as part of our future? Do we look a veteran in the eye and say: I'm part of your future and you are part of mine?

Homer's *The Odyssey* is the story of a returning veteran. It takes him ten years to return... There are all kinds of marvels on his journey. There are witches and monsters and ghosts and all of those things. But if you look at the story of Odysseus, he spends a lot of time jumping from one woman's bed to another. Which has been in the story of many returning veterans. Sometimes wild promiscuity. He engages in a whole variety of criminal behaviors. Within the sort of piratical world of the archaic Greece, maybe it where not as morally negative as it is today. Nevertheless this is a very rough character that engages in a lot of piracy. The wonderful aspect of Homer's poems, especially *The Iliad*, is that these people are mortal, just like us. They are not gods. They are not beasts. They are in this strange middle place, being human and mortal. And Achilles is mortal...

This is the surface story of *The Iliad*. Betrayal of what's right by a commander. Withdrawal and shrinkage of the moral and social horizon. Death of the closest comrade. Grief. Guilt. Feeling like he is already dead. And going berserk. And as I simply pointed out in *Achilles in Vietnam*. This story means something! And I set that story next to the narratives of veterans I worked with. And you see right away that war hasn't really changed in 2,600–2,800 years. What matters to a soldier is the moral and social world that he inhabits. Yes of course the enemy matters. The danger matters. The physical privation and the physical exertion matters. But the moral and social world of the soldiers' own forces are what determines in the long run what that soldier carries back with him into civilian life.

My idea is that severe trauma actually creates an experiential category of the sacred. And by the sacred, I don't mean good, but incredibly fascinating! Incredibly powerful!

Rudolf Otto, whose classical work *Das Heilige* was published shortly after World War I, talks about how fascinating, and at the same moment, how terrifying the holy is, the sacred is. This is a work of phenomenology in my view. And this isn't my idea alone.

Domicile, a French scholar, said that the task of the returning warrior is de-sacralization, to remove the sacred from the warrior so he can safely return to the secular profane everyday civilian life. And it's an enormous challenge, because the heightened sense of existence is a kind of religious exaltation.

There are many reasons to be uncomfortable with many of Nietzsche's writings but I swear I hear the voice of a combat veteran. Some of Nietzsche's writings about the oldest festal joys of mankind. Triumph over an enemy. Cruelty. Sex. Music. Dance. The dance of powers in the body. This kind of overheated rhetoric that we hear in Nietzsche, is something I believe is the product of severe trauma. Now of course Nietzsche never was a combat soldier. He was invalidated out of his unit after an accident on his horse, but he volunteered as a medic in the Franco-Prussian war and there is very poorly detailed mention of him being shut up in a railway carriage with wounded and dying soldiers during the Franco-Prussian war. And I don't want to make a mountain out of a molehill as we say... but I can tell you I hear the voice of a combat veteran with psychological injuries who try to make sense of it all in a fair amount of what Nietzsche wrote...

### **Steve Hassna**

*Former drill sergeant. Served with the 101 airborne division during the Vietnam War.*

I was born 1946, so I was raised all through the 50ies, from the beginning of the cold war. That was part of my generation's life. The television era started. The cold war was going on. We were being fed this whole political thing between USA and Russia. I grew up as an average kid. I was taught to get under my table in school to help protect myself from nuclear attacks. So we grew up in a constant... I guess you could say something like fear of a nuclear war. So it became, my country, right or wrong. I'll defend democracy. The communist hordes are coming, socialism is so bad, and all other stuff.

In 1946 the military changed one word which completely changed the whole focus of what people thought they were doing. Up until 1946 it was the Department of War. Real clear what it was. After 1946 it became the Department of Defense. So we were thinking that we were defending ourselves the whole time we were waging this whole arms race and carrying on this militaristic attitude all around the world... It's a psychological thing.

It was like the adventure of my life to find myself actually in a combat zone, being an infantry paratrooper and carry a weapon and hunt for the quote "bad guys"...

Then I became the new guy. I became the new body on the block so to speak. And here are all these guys who had been there for any length of months. I was basically told to shut up and "If you're still alive in a month we will talk to you..."

So the shock is progressive. The next thing you know you find yourself in an actual infantry company. With all these guys carrying guns and bad attitudes, so that accelerates the chock. And then you do your first

heliborne assault and guys are loading their weapons... And after a couple of months you move into numbness.

Your job gets pretty clear. Try to stay alive. The job description for an infantry soldier is real simple. It's: Seek out. Close with. Engage. And destroy the enemy. That's it. It's a very small float chart on this job description. And that's what we did. If we met any resistance, then we dealt with it. We went out to look for trouble.

Anybody who says they were not scared in combat. You don't want to be near them. These people are not sane. I don't care who they are. We call it the "pucker factor". Your rectum tightens up... like this, and you go, "Oh this guys are trying to kill me".

A lot of Vietnam veterans got stuck in time. It was so traumatic that it just wouldn't go away. And a lot of them, I realized, is not going to go away. So OK if it's not going to go away... It's not going to drive me nuts either...

My unit, because what it was, was put into every hotspot in the country General Westmoreland could find. We took heavy casualties. In the year I was with my company. I would say on three different occasions... It was wiped out. Essentially it became a unit on paper only. We landed on a LZ (Landing Zone) on June 8 1967 in Duck Pho province and three days later I was wounded and my company went from about 120 walking to 40... in three days.

We killed and wounded a lot of Vietnamese in those three days. Don't get me wrong... It was like that continually... You become numb to the whole thing. You just shut off. I stopped talking to people... I could understand that when I got there the guys said, "If you're alive in a month we'll talk to you..." Because if you bond or have a friendship of some kind with someone and they are killed or wounded for some reason... Part of you dies also. When I started to see people killed all around me and my self being wounded. I just got numb. I just shut off... It was a survival thing. It came to a point where no matter what would survive.

Whatever I had to do to get out of this country alive I would do...

When you take a human life... when you do that you are affected. I never really understood that... I did not understand what that effect was going to be on me. It's something that doesn't go away. You just don't kill people and then suddenly everything is wonderful and all that other stuff...

It's depending on who you are that will determine how you will relate to that experience the rest of your life...

And I was into it. I was a paratrooper. I was a drill sergeant. I did my job well. I trained 1200 people to go where I just gone... And then I had to realize that indirectly I killed Americans. Instead of saying go home... This is not a good thing... So I carried for a long time a heavy double-edged guilt.

I was on Search and Destroy all the time. We went out and found the North Vietnamese army and we killed them. And they killed us. I mean it was flat war. We didn't even bother with the Viet Cong. The civilian individual type guerilla, farmer at day, guerilla at night. Black pyjama type of thing. These guys were in uniform just like us. They were equipped just like us, but with eastern block, Soviet weapons.

They were formed into a military unit. They operated as a military unit, as an army. So did we. We fought. We would go out and find each other and kill each other. Pretty ridiculous concept when you think about it. (*long laughter*). You become like an android. You just do things. I would be using my weapon. I change magazine... And I wouldn't even realize what I was doing... And then just chaos. When the shooting starts the battle plan goes out the window. It's total and complete chaos. Everything is going nuts. Everything is going crazy... There is people being shoot at. There is people being wounded... People being killed. People shooting back... All in this whole... blur... Slow motion. Then there become the two people: The dead and the about to die. After a battle it takes you a while for your adrenaline to go back down... Cause when the shooting starts you go to a 100 percent adrenaline... And you stay there. Once you're locked into that battle mood... You never get right back down to what we consider a normal level of agitation. That's why you find a lot of Vietnam veterans that startle... or like myself, If I get into a situation where I all of a sudden have to become alert... say driving a car and all of a sudden I see that there is an accident in progress... or there is a situation happening around me that bring my alert status up. I go straight to a 100 percent... A lot of people will become alert and ready or whatever in gradual stages. I go right up to a 100 percent and then I delete down. And a lot of Vietnam veterans are like that. If you don't understand that. If you don't understand what is happening, it can really mess with your mind... You can over-react.

You are no longer who you were when you come out of a combat situation... When you have gone into that realm of destruction and mayhem, like the Marines at Khe Sanh. Or the Au Chau valley, or the Tet offensive or Normandy... Whatever. You are no longer who you were before you went there... And you never can go back... You cannot go home. I came back but we never came home. Because you can't go home. Because you're not the same. You're different. You look at life differently... I tried to fit back into society. I tried to go back and do things I did in my high school days, because that was my point of reference... You can't go back to be a high school kid. So I had to work through that.

It was like I had been in summer camp for a year... That's what my mum and dad thought. They could not

understand why I was so different... And I said, wait a minute... I just got done with getting shot at by a bunch of people that didn't like me and tried every day to kill me in one way or another, what do you expect me to be like...

Your mental make up is going to determine how you are going to react to this trauma, and unfortunately for a 100 000 or so Vietnam veterans... Suicide was a way out...

Everybody turned their backs on us... For years every time there was a movie about a Vietnam veteran he was a psycho, a psychopath with a machinegun... You know for years if some guy would go ballistic and kill a bunch of people... and I would go..."Oh please not a Nam vet. Don't let it be a Nam vet." Because we had such a bad image.

It's not POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER... there is no such thing. That is a buzzword that the Veterans' Administration came up with... Man, it wasn't POST. It was IMMEDIATE... The first time I got shot at in Vietnam the stress started. And it never left me...

It's been difficult... Who wants to talk to their children about shit like that? Children shouldn't have to deal with that kind of reality of the human species that we are so capable of... We are capable of building beautiful structures... and art... and literature and everything and yet we are also capable of total inhuman conduct. To each other. It just blows my mind... we are such a contradiction.

### **Doug Yelman**

*Served on a riverboat in Vietnam 1966. After the war he's worked as a counselor for Veterans. He is now retired and has taken up painting.*

One of the vets told me that he was escorting a prisoner who had a blindfold over his eyes. And the prisoner said that he couldn't see. So the man took off... And the man is a decent man. He didn't seem like a malicious man. He took...the blindfold off. And he took the mans eye out... So it just dangled by the nerves and stuff. And he told me that. And I just... I just went. I went away. And one of the people that saw me said I had that thousand-yard stare... I actually didn't want to do much more counseling after that. I was glad getting out of there.

### **Erik Pauser: Did the man explain why he did it?**

He didn't have to. I understood. I can't tell you. Not that I would do it myself. Maybe if I had been there and seen more Americans being slaughtered or... their body-parts cut off, you know. Or have my buddy's brain splatter over me... Maybe I could have done that. But I understood how he could have done that. But I can't explain how he did it. I don't have the words for that.

A lot of people didn't want to face the fact that they could do horrible things and shoot people and kill people themselves. So they are more likely to be... judgemental in a very negative way of the people that has done those things... You just have to look inside your own heart. If someone had killed you own family. Would you just forgive them? Would you be like a Buddhist? Or would you get angry and kill them? I think I lived more in those four months than most people do in a lifetime... Living in a war zone you're very alive because you don't know if you're going to be dead the next second or not. You don't worry about things. How you look. What people think of you. What car you drive. Those kinds of things. It's very intense.

For my graduate work I did a research project on how the war affected the veteran and his family. I believe, I still do, that we pass it on. Our wives get it vicariously, a second hand trauma. But I think our children actually get Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from being around us. I love my daughter. And she actually loves me. But I think of myself as The Beast. I was so angry when I was raising her. But she is forgiving me... We are like family... It's a miracle.

There is almost constantly a rage. I can go into a rage at any second. Over any little thing. Real or imagined. It's hard to live with that. And the adrenaline. I have a heart problem because the adrenaline is still going... it affects the body, the mind and soul.

The title is "untitled". It's acrylic. ( *Doug shows a painting* ) It's a scene that I experienced in Vietnam after an incoming at Dang Ho. They did it at two o'clock in the morning every other night to harass us...

Somebody came in and asked for volunteers to carry two Vietnamese in from the river to the medical tent. I volunteered. We went down and carried them up. And we were all standing around the operating table. The table where the Doc was looking... It must have been a seventy-year-old woman and a man, both. Maybe they were husband and wife. They had been wounded with M-16s. And the woman, her left arm was hanging on by a thread, and the man's leg too. The doc said, "They are Viet Cong". He could tell by the tattoo. But I didn't see the tattoo. He took the clothes off to take care of her... And I remember the old woman looking at each man in the circle. Looking for compassion or something. Because she was in great pain. And I decided before she got to me not to show her any emotion. I thought that was my duty. It was almost like I felt a door slam down. And I think that has affected me in my relationships with other people.

Not being able to feel sometimes. Not being able to show feelings.

**Ed Naulty**

*Served with 106th-infantry regiment in Korea.*

Finally what they did, I think the third or fourth week of the Basic training, they got a rubber-bag out, which was a body bag. They told one of the guys to lay in it and zipped it up and took his dog tag off. "This is what you guys are going to end up in". So then it came home to you...

In Korea, usually when the Chinese or whoever made an attack, they started blowing bugles... And you get all revved up. So it was the idea of you sitting there waiting for them. You don't know what is going on and the sweat is coming... You've got all your buddies... And you're bonded together. First guy who got killed landed in my arms... I tried to save him... But he was dead. I didn't know he was dead. And then after a while it doesn't bother you. You go in and do it. And then you come back in the United States and it's about the same thing. And you don't know how to deal with it.

It's just like branding a cow. That brand is on you and never comes off. I think that anybody who's been in the service should get a 100 percent respect. What's happened to Kerry... Even his own people are going against him. That is a disaster. That's not right. You never do that. Never do that.

My wife used to call me the Gestapo. I was so bad. You came home and other guys didn't. You live with that. So it's a different story.

We'd bring in bodies to graves-registration; they are on the line. And then we'd go through their clothes. Chinese. And one has affected me real bad. The guy had... They strip them down completely. And shit was running down his leg. And they went through his wallet. And he had a photo. It must have been his wife and kids. It's sad. I don't know who that guy is. He might have wiped out some of our guys... But it sticks in my mind... But what they would do was they would use woman and children run up if they were going to make a push. And we'd be shooting at them...

**Daniel Hallock**

*Author of Hell Healing and Resistance – Veterans speak. Former constructor of flight simulation software for the military and defense industries.*

We have to listen to the message that the veterans are bringing. I think as a nation we have believed, especially throughout this century that you can fight a war and you can come home and very quickly assimilate into normal life and then move on to the next war. In reality what veterans are telling us is that that's not true. War never ends. And the wounds that they carry with them they carry with them for a lifetime. And to a large degree the American people haven't really listened and taken those lessons in like they should.

What we wanted to do with the first part of the book is to say, "Look we are going to tell it like it is. This is the way war really is, let's not kid ourselves. This is what happens when you fight in a war." But if the message stopped there I think that the message in the book would fail. What I hope is that... The most important part of the book is the second half where we follow the veterans as they go on their quest for healing. For personal healing. And to me those stories are profound because they teach us some very deep lessons about forgiveness. About reconciliation. About re-humanizing an enemy that had to be de-humanized in order to fight them.