

Unit 12

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Oral History as Therapy

GRADES 9-12

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

During the First World War, soldiers fighting in the trenches often suffered from what was referred to then as “shell shock,” but today this would be called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. To alleviate the symptoms, soldiers were rotated from frontline to reserve positions or allowed to go on Rest & Recreation trips before returning to the front lines. This practice continued during World War II and in Korea. Post-war symptoms of PTSD often included one or more of the following difficulties: “memory lapses, decreased ability to concentrate, interrupted sleep cycles, and problems with employment.”¹

PROCESS

Two accounts from World War II are good illustrations of what happens to many servicemen who serve in combat. In preparation for reading these two accounts, have students read about PTSD. What causes this and what are the symptoms? For a more lengthy study of this disorder, review Eric T. Dean’s book, *Shook over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War*, which analyses the implications of battle for Civil War soldiers and Vietnam veterans.

The first account is from a medic who helped the wounded on the beaches of Iwo Jima and the second is from a navigator who flew firebombing missions over Japan. For more than fifty years neither of these men talked about their wartime experiences – they only began to do so after they had distanced themselves from these events and once they started talking, then healing began. A study of PTSD can also be extended to former POWs.

OUTCOMES

Ask students to relate this situation to their own experiences. Does talking help? Do they feel better afterwards? This exercise also lends itself to contemporary applications such as for those who were eyewitnesses to the events on 9/11 in New York City and Washington, D.C.

A. Navy Corpsman Glenn C. Snyder, 5th Marine Division on Iwo Jima in 1945

Just a week after Glenn Snyder turned 19 years old, he landed on the black sandy beach of Sulphur Island – more often called Iwo Jima in the Japanese-held Bonin Islands. Snyder was trained as a medic in the Navy and transferred into the Marines because they had no medical personnel. His task was to bring emergency aid to wounded Marines as quickly as possible, no matter how difficult the situation.

Although Snyder considers the taking of the island well worth the sacrifice, it certainly did not come without great costs, both then and now.

Social Studies

¹ Frances B. Cogan, *The Japanese Internment of American Civilians in the Philippines, 1941-1945*, (U of Georgia Press, 2000), page 315. The author is summarizing an earlier psychiatric journal article by Dr. John F. Russell.

- Read Snyder’s oral account in its entirety (pages 148-151, I).
- Review causes for PTSD and see if similar examples are mentioned in Snyder’s account. Make a chart or poster of causes.
- Read the last paragraph carefully. *What evidence is there here that Snyder suffered from and may still suffer from PTSD?*

B. Lieutenant Alfred K. B. Tsang, 20th Air Force in the Pacific

Alfred Tsang was born to Chinese immigrant parents in New York City. Tsang’s background was quite unusual in that he had returned to China with his mother before he entered high school, and with the outbreak of war in China in the late 1930s, he was sent back to New York to live with his father. His mother remained in China.

Tsang enlisted in October of 1942 before he had even graduated from high school because “my mother would have been ashamed of me if other women’s sons were to bear my responsibility to the society that gave me refuge from war.” According to Tsang, the Army Air Corps ignored its racial segregation policy, because they made Tsang an officer so that he could help train members of the Chinese Air Force. This assignment changed, though. By late February 1945 numerous islands close to Japan (such as Iwo Jima) had been secured by American forces. Now, B-29 or high altitude bombers could take off and land on convenient runways, saving hundreds of planes and thousands of crew members from crashing into the Pacific if they were disabled or had run out of fuel while on missions.

Beginning in March 1945, Tsang flew thirty-five bomb missions, twenty-three of which were with incendiary bombs. This tactic was designed to ignite a city’s houses that were constructed largely out of flammable wood and rice paper. The dropping of these bombs affected him profoundly. [It is general knowledge that the dropping of the first and second atom bombs resulted in the surrender of Japan – yet, many are unaware that after these bombs were dropped, firebombing missions continued to be flown by Tsang and other crews!]

Tsang’s story is based on his oral history account and his personal notes. After the war Tsang went on to finish high school and advanced degrees, including a law degree. He has saved all of his war-related documents, including operation accounts, photographs from bombing runs, as well as newspaper clippings about the devastation in Japan. In later years he wrote frequent editorial comments for local newspapers and for readers in Japan.

Social Studies

- Study a map of island hopping in the Pacific from 1942 to 1945. Locate the Bonin Islands, Okinawa, Guam, and Kyushu and Honshu.
- Read sections from Tsang’s longer account: “Baptism by Fire,” “Encore,” “The Human Toll,” and “Coup de Grace.” Have students create a chart based on each of these themes in which they identify events that may contribute to PTSD.
- Read the last section, “Self-reflection” and discuss why Tsang may have felt compelled to do what he did after the war. *What is meant by*

the term “survivor’s guilt”? Why did Tsang feel guilty? What has he done to ameliorate this guilt? Is it possible to remove all guilt?

- Find out the mortality statistics for civilians in Japan as a result of these bombing missions. Locate newspaper articles talking about these missions. *What was the U.S. justification for these bombings?*

Additional Activities:

- How did the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan affect later peacetime relations with China, Russia, and Japan?
- Today, how has technology changed in regards to bombing tactics? Do pilots today also suffer from PTSD? Complete some oral history interviews if possible for the recent wars. What similarities or dissimilarities can be identified?
- Interview WWII veterans regarding the use of the atom bomb.
- Interview former POWs from any recent wars and see if it is possible to identify examples of PTSD: e.g. memory lapses, decreased ability to concentrate, interrupted sleep cycles, and problems with employment.
- Read the book, *Dresden*, about the firebombing of a German city on February 13 & 14, 1945. Compare and contrast the toll such firebombing took on those who flew them. A related research topic could show how bombing civilian targets during World War II was counter-productive to the war effort. Examples would be London, Coventry, Dresden, and Tokyo. What contemporary applications are there for this?
- In Erich Maria Remarque’s novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, do the young German soldiers also suffer from PTSD? What was done for them to help them cope?

Selected Bibliography:

Dean, Jr., Eric T. *Shook over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War*. (Harvard University Press, 1997)

Russell, John., M.D. “The Captivity Experience and Its Psychological Consequences.” *Psychiatric Annals* 14, no. 4 (1984): 250-254. PTSD sufferers can also include former prisoners of war.

Taylor, Frederick. *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*. (Perennial, 2005)