
INTRODUCTION TO VETERAN CULTURE

Thank you for enrolling in this virtual course on Veterans. This is the foundation course in Veterans culture, Basics of Veteran Culture. As we begin a discussion on Veterans culture, I want to give you a little background on me and how I came to be instructing this material.

I served in the military. I served in the Marines for nearly 8 years. And while in the reserves worked my way through college and a full time job in commercial construction project management. In 2009 I was laid off and found myself facing a job offer or opportunity to work with Veterans. Before long I was getting Veterans connected to benefits as a Veterans Outreach specialist at a mental health non-profit.

That was a heck of a culture shock. Military to construction to project management was relatively smooth, they communicate in similar ways actually. Mental Health though, huge difference. Difference in language, difference in philosophy, difference in expectations. I struggled at first to find my place.

Fortunately, I found that I had an aptitude for organizing, creating, and leading and soon found myself having the opportunity to work on developing new programs at a number of agencies throughout Washington State & Oregon and even elsewhere across the country. I've had opportunities to speak, write, consult and more because of this work.

I've had the opportunity to develop a passion. Getting laid off was the second best accident of my life. The first, joining the Marines. But that didn't happen without it's own challenges.

Warning

Some of the language during this presentation may be unfamiliar and even vulgar at times. Please understand this isn't meant to insult, it is meant to educate and expose.

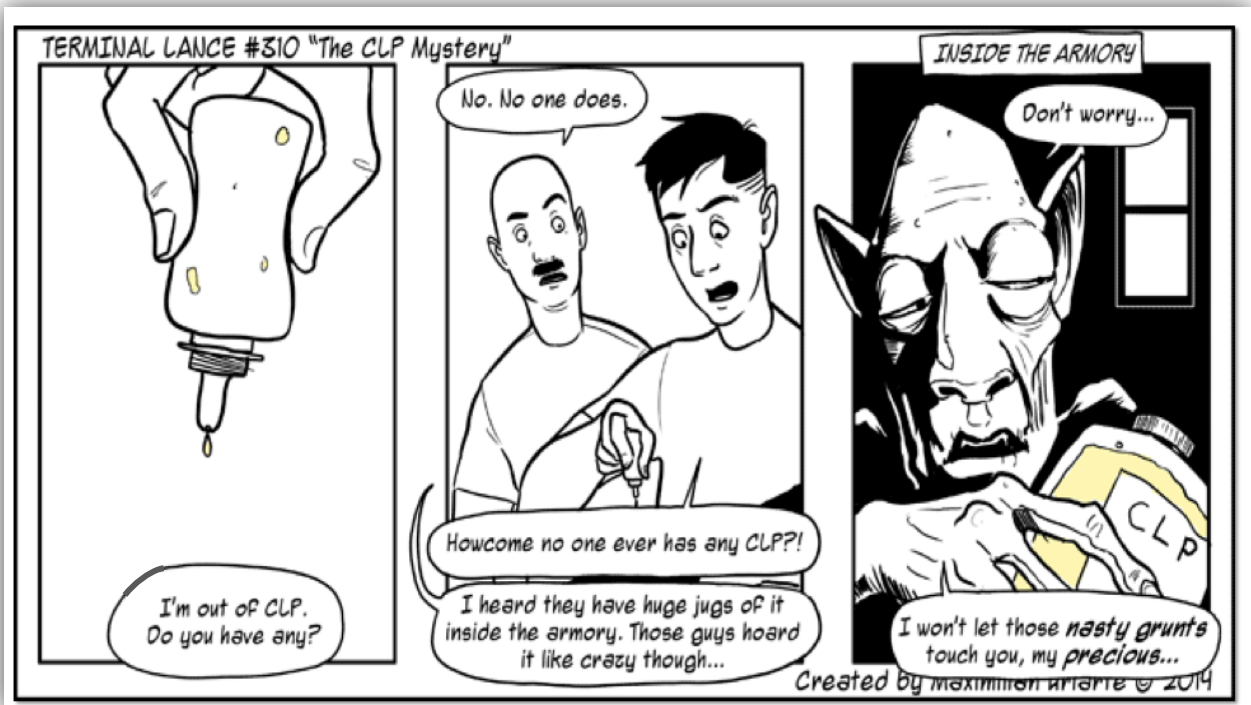
Keep in mind, that You can tell when a Veteran trusts you, because "military language" will start to creep in to their conversation. Please do your best to try not being offended by this.

Basics of Veteran Culture

Culture is defined as, the “way of life” for a society. Includes: Manners, dress, language, history, religion, rituals, norms of behavior, law, morality, beliefs, entertainment, arts and gastronomy.

If you were a fan of the Star Trek: The Next Generation, you might remember that Data, the android (robot), wanted to be human, or at least as human as artificially possible.

In pursuing this goal, he was really engaging on a cultural journey. Data sought to understand humans by understanding humor. Humor is an extremely powerful aspect of culture and cultural competence. Consider all the elements of a joke, like the one displayed in this picture.



Comic from TerminalLance.com

In order to understand the joke, you have to know what CLP is (language), you have to know why it matters that Marines never have enough CLP for their own use, you have to have read or more likely seen Lord of the Rings to get the Sméagol reference in the third panel. And you have to have knowledge of social customs and rules, concerning CLP, the armory, and it's purpose housing and issuing weapons.

There are so many nuances of culture to a joke like this that for me to dissect it makes the joke pointless. The good news you can take from this is, if you can understand the joke, you have some level of cultural competence and are already capable of communicating effectively with Veterans on their level.

Basics of Veteran Culture

You might already suspect if we're going to get to the point where culture is a tool for you, rather than a concept. We need to accept the fact that there's only ONE way you'll ever master Veterans culture. That is to take a four year course in it. You can do this by going to your local recruiter's office and telling them you want to join the military.

If you're not into that, let's strive for competency. Cultural Competency would be the ability to interact effectively with people of a different culture, in this case, Veterans.

WHY SUPPORT VETERANS

Why would you even care to communicate with Veterans? Perhaps that's a mute point, we're all here because we all have some interest in supporting Veterans, right?

But some of our work is not just about accepting personally that Veterans are a special population that we care deeply about, some of our work is about spreading the good news, we support Veterans!

To me, the good news about Veterans is that there are actually a lot of us. There are just over 20 million of us today. That compares to just under 320 million total Americans. Some folks in their flashy statements or attempt to connect with Veterans, will play up a fake fact, "Only 1 percent of Americans serve" or some such junk. The first thing you really need to know when supporting Veterans and providing services for them, is the facts. This is a fact, there are 20 million Americans that are Veterans.

On a side note, of the 20 million, Only 8 million, 1/3 actually access the VA for services (this would include VA home loan, VA healthcare, GI bill, and others). Imagine that for every Veteran you are working with, there are 2 others that you can do the same for, and you begin to realize how powerful our work can become.

A quick discussion about how this population breaks down. That 20 million Veterans equates out to about 9 percent of all people 18 & above (7% of all Americans). 1 in 10 people can use your services, but only about 1 in 30 actually do. Let's bring in family of Veterans – those that are closely related and live with a Veteran: Brothers, Sisters, Parent's, Children. We quickly approach the 30 % mark.

I bring in families because, it's not uncommon to get a lead ON a Veteran directly from family members. For whatever reason, Veterans are not always their own best advocate, and some of them have a hard time asking for help. I realized a long time ago, that family members, through some form of osmosis pick up a great deal of Veterans cultural characteristics: Language, beliefs, laws, norms of behavior, etc. Developing even partial cultural competence will connect you with upwards of 80 million potential Americans. That is an enormous population,

So, NOW, do YOU care about the culture of the 80 million Veterans and Family of Veterans that want to work with someone that knows them?

Let's get you some understanding to get you to the point where you can talk to people who have served.

EXPLORING CULTURE THROUGH: HISTORY, TRAINING, & EXPERIENCES

As we discuss the aspects of Veterans culture your job is not to remember everything. It's to walk away from this webinar with ONE or TWO items that you can remember and relate to.

Relationships are a bridge. There's your side of the bridge and there's the Veterans side. The first span is going to be a topic you can relate to. Locations, names, hobbies, language, vices, virtues. It doesn't matter, commonality is what you seek.

To get to a place of Veterans cultural competency we are going to explore Veterans History, Training, and experience. Remember, to build a bridge of understanding you need to find one item you can relate to.

HISTORY

Three of the Five branches of our military pre-date the union. This is a simple matter of pride for these services.

The Army, the Navy, and the Marine Corps all began in 1775, prior to the birth year of our nation. Next came the Coast Guard in 1790 as the Revenue Cutter Service, commanded by Alexander Hamilton as the Secretary of the Treasury. And finally, developing out of a divorce between the Army and the Army Air Corps, the Air Force became its own service in 1947.

The purposes of the services vary, but they are all a little bit in each other's business. All five services have aviation assets. All of them are engaged in combat and are often deployed in combat zones, including the Coast Guard.

There's old a joke that says our Navy has an Army that has an Air Force bigger than any other Air Force in the world. It's subtle, but if you get it, you kind-of understand the differences. Let me explain.

Our Navy, is responsible for patrolling the worlds oceans and projecting force from the sea. They are the ones with the warships and boats and submarines.

The Marines exist as part of the Navy, albeit an individual component. They are commissioned by the National Security act of 1947 as a "Naval Infantry" projecting ship to shore amphibious forces. In this joke the Navy's Army.

A good percentage of the Marines is focused on the delivery of that force via close in air support. They maintain a significant number of fixed wing (airplane) and rotary wing (helicopter) air craft and employ them regularly in close-in combat support. In this joke, the Navy's Army's Air Force.

Basics of Veteran Culture

Here's a piece of trivia that could bite everyone here in the behind.



The display of the seals, the things shown on the picture above has an order. You may notice the Marines come before the Navy, but after the Army. How can the Marines come before their parent command?

There's a historical reason for this, the Continental Navy disbanded after the Revolutionary war and was not reconstituted until the 1790's. This has the dual problem of creating the anomaly in order of precedence as well as giving every sailor a personality disorder as they never know when the Navy's birthday is (it falls on two separate days).

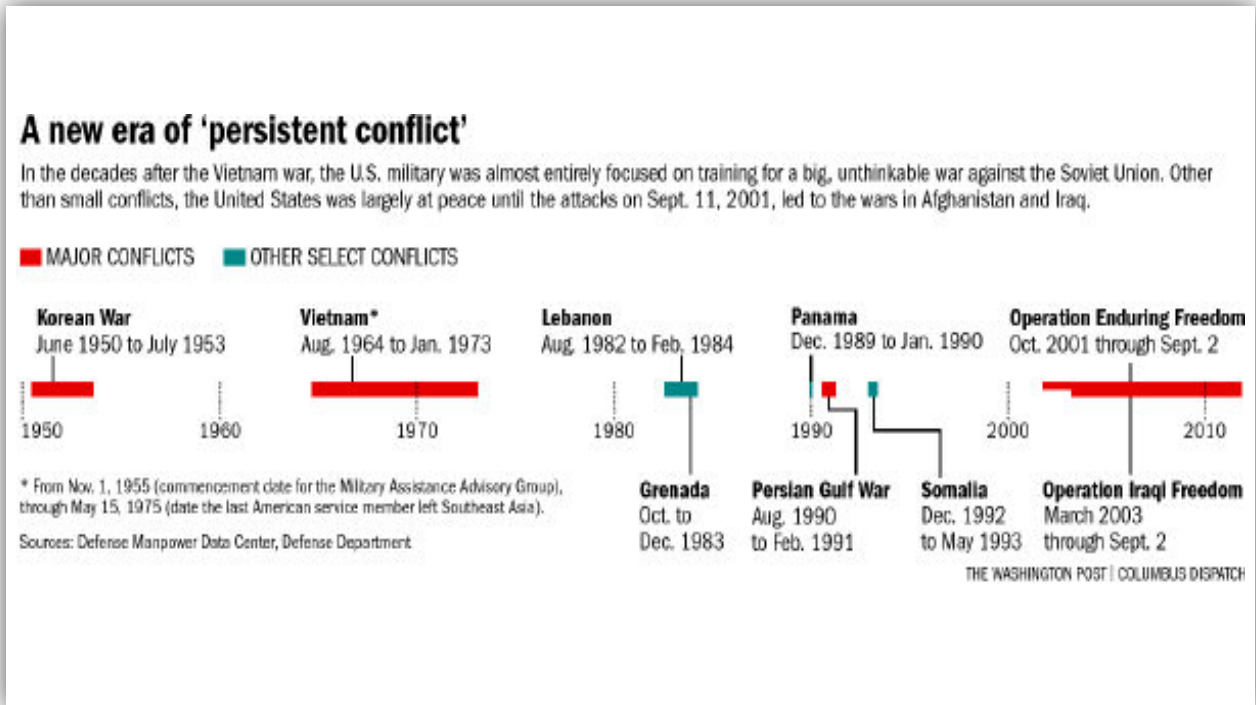
Kidding aside though. Many of you will look to display the seals either in a physical manner or in stationary. You have to know that when working with Veterans/military things, this stuff almost always has a guideline.

The presentation of seals is no different. If I see something that says you're supporting or serving military and Veterans and something as basic as your seals are out of order, the first thing I and others think is, "how can they support or know us if they don't know this basic thing."

Basics of Veteran Culture

Perhaps this is in the weeds. But there are other things we notice too. Ties that don't fall in to the middle of the belt buckle, your belt buckles right side not being lined up on your shirt line (also known as a gig line). Etc.

Veterans notice details. Focus on the small things.



Let's build on that idea that you can't tell who's served where and done something. This graphic above comes from the Washington Post. It describes our current conflict, or time period from 2001 to the present as a "new era of persistent conflict." This sort of blind eye to what it is the military does and has done is extraordinarily harmful to our relationships as Veterans. I say this because, it creates a sense that we have "war time Veterans" and "and peacetime Veterans" and that the two are mutually exclusive.

This is far from the case.

For every decade of American History, America has been at war somewhere. Or more appropriately, her military has. Prior to the turn of the 20th century this was perhaps a little easier for people to grasp as the majority of our wars were on American soil. The revolution, the war of 1812 – where the British laid waste to American cities including Washington DC (burning down the white house), the frontier wars, the Mexican American war where American Troops paraded in victory through Mexico City after extraordinarily bloody confrontations at places like Chapultepec.

Basics of Veteran Culture

By the way have you ever heard the line, From the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli – it's from the Marine Corps Hymn and describes the Halls of Montezuma (Mexican American War) and the shores of Tripoli (the Barbary Pirates War).

For our forefathers it was a forgone conclusion that serving in the military meant serving in war. Nowadays it's quite a bit different, most people don't serve. But those who do, they still deploy and fight at the same rate we always have. The big difference being, now we do it overseas, instead of our own back yard.

***“There have been only 268 of the past
3,421 years fee of war.”***

Will Durant quotes in his The Lessons of History – “*There have been only 268 of the past 3,421 years fee of war.*” It is a sensational statement, but serves to prove the point. We are ALWAYS at war.

To join the military is to train for war. And that history of combat, the esprit de corps that it begets, and the training and experiences you live while serving are focused around this primary point.... The military exists first and foremost to break things and kill people.

That's a pretty heavy concept. But fortunately it only tells about half the story.

The military in it's mission has developed so many other branches and secondary missions that even if we've never trained for combat, deployed, fired a weapon in anger. We can relate.

Making ourselves understand and grasp minute details of military history is going to be a tall order for most. It is such an ingrained tenet of our spirit and pride in our corps (esprit-de-corps), that it's hard for Veterans to communicate this. It's often easier to look at the training and experiences of serving in the military AND to use that as a jumping off point to understand Veterans

TRAINING & EXPERIENCES

As we talk about the military experience, consider again, can you relate to any of these experiences. Even one? Can you use that as a foundation to build your relationship?

Why would you want to do this, is it to connect to the 20 million Veterans and 80 million family members we talked about, or is it to connect with a close relative? Picture your intent, make this story about a person you know or about a client you've worked with

Or even about someone you want to work with. Put them in the story I'm telling or put yourself in their place and live the training and experiences in these slides.

TRAINING

Everyone who's ever served, has this oath in common. Taking this oath is a deeply meaningful event. I can think of few parallels outside of military service. It is a commitment that once taken cannot easily be undone.

Those that have sworn to uphold the constitution in military service have essentially sworn that they will voluntarily give up their life if needed. Have you ever, after the job interview, sworn an oath of allegiance to your company that you will complete all things asked of you even if it means giving your life to do so?

It's one heck of a way to begin a commitment.

Almost immediately your resolve is tested. Boot camp, or basic training, or recruit training, it's called many things. But a walk in the park is never one of them.

Boot camp was personally the most challenging, disorienting, dreadful, impossible place for me, but in it I learned to be hard, to persist, to overcome, and that I was stronger than I ever thought possible. Long before, war fighting tactics, and leadership training, I was beginning to understand the basics of my new family, and their unique culture.

The most immediate barrier I faced, I came into contact with on before even stepping foot on the recruit depot.

Heading through the Airport, San Diego Airport, our plane was late arriving and myself and the other recruits had to sprint to the USO to make it there on time. If you've ever been to San Diego Airport USO, it's in a separate building altogether from the terminal. We made it to the USO as a DI was yelling out recruit names to board "his bus."

Penner, he yelled out. I screamed, "here" and sprinted for the bus. We circled the airport and depot in the dark, our heads were down so we couldn't see where we were going. We were completely disoriented and although we only traveled to the other side of the runway, we could have been on Mars for all we knew.

Another DI suddenly jumped on the bus, started screaming to get off "his bus" and for us to "get on-line!" Once "on-line" he barked, "dress righhhhttdress", "forward," "parade rest." I honestly had no idea what he was yelling at us to do. If you've ever had one of those foreign language classes where the instructor speaks only in a foreign language, you probably understand my mind at that moment.

The military doesn't change its language for the recruit, the recruit adapts to the military lexicon.

Basics of Veteran Culture

One thing you should probably notice, even about the way I am speaking right now is the words and language I am using. It tells you all about my military service.

Recruit depot, board, boot camp, Drill Instructor – all scream that I served in what?....The Marine Corps. If I said, Basic, Drill Sergeant, Ft. Leonard Wood – most Veterans would already know I was in the Army. Our language gives us away to each other and can give you – a clue in to who we are and how we served.

I'll give you one more cautionary tale about how language can flummox our best efforts.

I had a social worker/therapist approach me after one of my trainings and tell me a story about her challenges when working with a Veteran.

Early on one day, they were discussing why he had a hard time sleeping at night. He expressed to her that he had nightmares and that when he had to drive on the freeway he had more nightmares – this was particularly challenging because he had recently got a new job in a city about 15 miles away – a lot of commuting. The therapist, wanting to understand why that mattered inquired along that line – the Veteran responded that while driving in Iraq, he saw a lot of IED's that looked like trash. Seeing trash on the side of the road was causing a great deal of anxiety for him. He went on for an hour and the therapist used her counseling tools to get more information from the Veteran – but as the session was ending, she asked him one question.

What's an IED?

What do you think this did to the Veterans trust in that therapist? Why?

If you can take two lessons away from this point:

1. Veterans weren't always Veterans and the learning a new language part was hard for all of us, though now we speak it fluently.
2. If you don't know what a Veteran is saying because they are using turns of phrase or acronyms, ask, ask ask. Don't pretend to know, that will compromise the Veterans trust in you when they find out.

Trust is very important for Veterans. Since day one of swearing in, reliance on others is a deeply rooted part of who we are.

LESSONS FROM BOOT CAMP

Some people like to say that boot camp breaks you down in order to build you back up again. In my opinion, this is yet another myth or false statement. In fact, I don't know why, but it always seems to me, that folks who have never served are often the biggest culprit. I can even understand why they might say that, after seeing drastic transformations from themselves, relatives, or more.

But like I said, I disagree. I believe boot camp makes us/ made me strong where I was weak.

Americans are individuals – and to succeed where the military needs us to we need to become strong team players. While still disoriented from the introduction to the depot, we are herded into a room, told to stand at attention and then made to look, sound, and act like each other.

What other vestiges of our individuality do we give up when joining the military?

Dress, The ability to say I, initially self direction.

We even give up our name. At least initially. However, for the rest of our service, the more important part of our name is the title that precedes it.

Some basic rules about our titles. We come in three varieties and it's a caste system.

Officers, Warrant Officers, and Enlisted. All Officers outrank all Warrant Officers and all Warrant Officers outrank all enlisted. This is a time tested method of command and control and every military in the history of the world has been organized in a similar manner.

Service wide, the breakdown is approximately 80% enlisted to 20% Officer & Warrant Officer. There are some quirks about rank though.

One is that the senior most enlisted member of the military, basically the guy who advises the guy, who advises the president, is outranked by the newest, freshest 2nd Lieutenant in the entire military. That senior enlisted would have to address the new lieutenant as, Sir, and render them all respect their commission requires of all enlisted members. The second lieutenant though, would want to treat the said senior enlisted member with respect if he or she was to get anything accomplished and want to have a fruitful career.

Basics of Veteran Culture

Another quirk of rank is that rank, rating, and responsibility is not consistent between the service branches and even within the service branches.

My little brother joined the Navy as a contract E-4. Day one of his basic training he was a Petty Officer 3rd Class. I joined the Marines as a PFC, the highest rank you could join the Marines as, and it took me nearly 5 years to pick up E-4, Corporal. My little brother, on graduation day had the same “rank” or as they say in the Navy, “rating” as me. I was quick to retort however, there’s a huge difference between rank and responsibility. As a corporal (e-4) in the Marines, I was responsible for 12 Marines and all aspects of their livelihood, while my little brother wasn’t even (fully) trusted with dressing himself properly yet.

When you get into discussing a Veterans personal story, you often find that they have pretty amazing responsibilities thrust upon them at a very young age. My favorite stories from Veterans are the ones where they were acting way outside their rank, or even pulling a “fast one,” that is being mischievous. You often get these stories from the Veterans with lower rank.

Each rank has its own personality, just like each position in your office has its own rules, jokes, processes, and ways to get things done.

New language, new title, new look, new identity. These are all thrust upon you and you don’t get time to learn it, it’s flying by the seat of your pants until you sink or swim.

Basic military training is a cultural indoctrination by immersion.

- Consider Parallels in life?
- School
- Career?
- Marriage?
- Parenthood?

After these immersions – do we find it hard to communicate the differences to the un-initiated? Absolutely.

Fortunately, we are flexible creatures. It’s been said that given enough time, we can get used to anything. Boot camp, the military is no exception by any means.

Once we do start to catch on, we get to really start becoming warriors.

WEAPONS: LESSONS FROM THE RIFLE RANGE & FIGHTING PIT

We start our journey by learning how to use weapons. 6169451 is the weapon number of my M16A2 service rifle in boot camp.

I joined in April of 2004, meaning I was issued my first weapon more than 10 years ago. I still have that serial number tattooed on my brain.

Weapons are not just instruments of death, for many of us they are objects of identity. We view them as tools and extensions of our will. This may sound a bit abstract, but I don't really know how to convey this concept. Weapons are more than something to shoot at bad guys.

I was working with a Veteran a couple weeks ago. I asked him how he was doing, and he told me, I am feeling great, very relaxed. Always curious, I asked "what'd you do?" and guess what he said? "I went shooting" - why, how is shooting relaxing?

If you do meditation or hypnosis, you may know that breathing, focus, body positioning are important to you being able to get into the "zone," those same things are required of good marksmanship.

Being in that Zen state with your rifle is a wonderful feeling. There are few smells in the world as relaxing and perfect to me as the first round fired through a weapon.

In a follow-on discussion we will talk about how to address the issue that Veterans often like firearms, and are often in close proximity to one, however, for now – if you too are an aficionado – you always have something you can build a relationship with Veterans with right here.

Every person who serves, learns how to use firearms and can speak to some aspect of marksmanship and shooting.

Military recruits learn how focus applies to marksmanship, but they also learn how it applies in more traditional ways as well.

Being smart- but in a way you've never been before. It is important for military members to learn and retain a large amount of material. It is no coincidence that today's military, on average has a higher rate of college completion and a higher base IQ than the general public. These aren't super men and women, capable of doing calculus while completing an obstacle course and rescuing people from a fire, but they are expected to learn their stuff AND know it. In combat, questioning your own knowledge about tactics, weapons, leadership, or any number of other things is deadly (to yourself). Once again, everything has a focus on the delivery end of the military stick. Even what we learn in books.

Basics of Veteran Culture

I've always been relatively smart. What I learned in the Marines wasn't how to be smarter – it was how to be focused. It's not enough in life to have a lot of marbles rattling around in your head, they have to be focused on a purpose.

Veterans will focus on things you tell them and with a well honed B.S. detector. Often they will make their judgment on you solely by the way you describe things you know. BE Confident!

Confidence comes from self-reliance. Can you rely on yourself in any situation, do you have the self realization to know your place when issues arise? Can you say, I am the solution, or perhaps today, my knowledge, skills, and abilities aren't going to be as effective as the other guy's – but I'm going to learn from them?

Veterans of all eras learn hand to hand combat. What is the purpose of this, beyond the basic last resort measure that is most obvious?

The purpose of honing your body into a weapon is to realize that the true weapon in our military is the individual service member. Throw them in a tank, and airplane, a boat, give them a gun, a rocket launcher, a pointy stick it doesn't matter. The purpose of military hand to hand combat training is to bring about that self confidence and realization that in any situation, even when disarmed we are all weapons.

How do you think this presents outside of military service? Veterans may not engage in combat with physical weapons anymore, gone are their days of charging into an ambush or practicing to fight the Russians on the eastern steppes of Europe. But the mentality remains.

Rather than charge into an ambush, they will respond to threats – threaten their knowledge, competency, or honor and you will likely offend them.

By and large, Veterans are not to be feared as their rate of serious crimes are below almost all other populations – but as businessmen and women, you realize this is a deal breaker for many Veterans to challenge their preconceptions indiscriminately.

Carelessly confronting something they know or believe they know to be a truth is entering in to a form of combat. Forget about trying to win, why are you fighting in the first place...?

I know that can be frustrating – we want to pick and choose our battles as well as our adversaries though.

THE WARRIOR ETHOS & THE WILL TO FIGHT & WIN

One of the more invigorating and sometimes frustrating aspects of working with Veterans, is our dogged determination. It is not something we come by easily. We learned, through pain to persist in the face of adversity. I can actually pinpoint the moment I learned this.

In 2004, Marine Corps boot camp was organized into 3 phases.

- 1st phase, was basically the “kick your ass and get you used to this whole military thing phase.”
- 2nd phase was where we learned how to be Marines, which meant firing our rifles, field courses, rudimentary combat and first aid skills, and the Crucible.
- 3rd phase was all polish and checking boxes, getting ready to move on to the fleet.

Back to second phase. All of 1st and 2nd phase led up to the penultimate challenge of Boot camp, the Crucible. A three-day evolution that required us to complete many obstacles over a 40-50 mile course, while sleeping only two hours a night, and having 3 MRE's to last the entire three days. It's physically impossible to do without teamwork, mentally and emotionally taxing, and to top it off, for Hollywood Marines, it ends with a ten mile forced march with gear up a mountain to the base of another mountain known as the Reaper.

I remember standing at the base of the Reaper, having barely eaten in three days, and having already marched 45 miles with my gear and thinking...this is it. I cannot tell you how anxious I was. But also, at that point, how absolutely determined I was to get up that mountain – all the pain, frustration, anger, determination I had boiled up in that moment.

It was one of those moments when no-one has to say anything, our DI looked at us and smiled, turned to his left and said, “route step, march.” I put my head down and started driving my legs. Left, right, left right. I could reach out and touch the sandy slope in front of my face as my pack was pulling me back, but I was going to make it up that mountain. I made it up the mountain. It's one of the proudest moments of my life because it was at that moment, I realized that no matter what happens from then on out, boot camp would never again be that difficult they could run me for miles, I'd do it. They could deprive me of sleep, I'd already done it. They could starve me, I'd done it. It didn't matter anymore, I was liberated. I was a Marine, I just hadn't earned the title yet.

Basics of Veteran Culture

This isn't about putting a chip on our shoulder, though it may appear like that at times. This is about absolute persistence in the face of adversity. Veterans are not likely to say no to a challenge or opportunity. That's why so many of us are here supporting Veterans today.

We understand this at an almost primal level. We know that our brothers and sisters in arms are out there and though most have left their military service behind, we can assist them with other challenges.

We can once again be part of the same team. Even now, years after we have left the service, we are more alike each other than we ever will be different.

We may now dress different, speak different (at times), have new titles, but we cannot forget – for better or worse.

Having become a basically trained warrior means that we joined a brotherhood or sisterhood of folks that have a unique experience on life and death. They are our brothers and sisters and though we don't crash their party for Thanksgiving, we do feel a kinship.

EXPERIENCES

We covered boot camp and the evolution of a civilian to a basically trained soldier, sailor, marine, or airman. So, what's next?

First, more training.

- More Training
- AIT
- Jump School
- Ranger School
- Tech School
- MCT
- ITB
- MOS School
- OJT

Fortunately for the sanity of those that serve, it's not all about the training, there are experiences as well. While serving in the Marines, I had the opportunity to visit

California, Nevada, Maine, Virginia, Maryland, South Carolina, Iceland, Germany, Latvia, Kuwait, Iraq – some places I would absolutely like to see again and yet others I would not have chosen to visit then or probably ever again. Regardless of where I went, I did get the chance to meet fascinating new people and learn aspects of their culture, even if it was ways in which they were different. Many Veterans have traveled far more extensively than I have and their understanding of different cultures is far more diverse than my own.

If you've ever traveled, if you're from somewhere outside the United States or can even empathize with what it's like to come home from another country, you have a stepping stone to build a relationship with a Veteran.

An old Army saying reads "Join the Army, See the world, meet interesting new people, and kill them all."

"Join the Army, See the world, meet interesting new people, and kill them all."

This is an anti-war slogan which many of us in the military have made our own, in dark humor. But the fact of the matter is, ours is rarely the job to kill.

Basics of Veteran Culture

More Veterans are likely to have participated in actively improving other countries, or even humanitarian aid than any other force projection behavior.

My wife's best friend Married a sailor while I was deployed. When the tsunami hit Indonesia, and the other countries in Indochina and Micronesia, he was steaming home on the USS Abraham Lincoln, an Aircraft Carrier that was, at the time stationed at Naval Air Station (NAS), Whidbey Island. Though he had been on float for six months by this point, the carrier group did an about face and headed to the disaster zone, and immediately began rendering aid.

Our military, designed for war, provides so much aid and assistance to people in need all over the world, it's hard to fathom.

Of course it's not all peaches and cream, sometimes our experiences are a bit more... dramatic. We should always remember that the purpose of the military is to apply force to solve a problem.

When we apply that force though, we put ourselves in mortal danger. Death is an ever present companion. And some of us do have a hard time readjusting to civilian life after having served.

I want to re-iterate that many, actually most of Veterans' experiences are relatively benign and not-likely to be stressors in any mental/physical health concerns.

However, in some cases, our traumatic experiences are extraordinarily raw. Most of us don't experience death or serious injury as a byproduct of our job.

This is a significant cultural barrier.

You would not believe how unfair a combat zone is.

- A helicopter in our command literally landed on an Improvised explosive device in the middle of the Iraqi desert. A one ft square area in a country the size of California, and the helicopter skid lands on it – that's beyond bad luck.
- I had a friend thrown from his vehicle 100 feet, by two 155mm mortar rounds. That's an enormous explosion. He walked into chow that evening without even a limp. Two weeks before an entire Humvee crew was killed by a small grenade.
- We had a tank, an umpteen million-dollar fortress of steel and reactive armor, designed by some wizards at a national defense laboratory hit a shaped charge, that just barely, somehow penetrated the bottom armor plating of the tank and killed everyone in there.

Basics of Veteran Culture

- We had a Corporal who was just showing up to her post, get blown up by a suicide vest IED that threw out nails, bee bees, rocks, ball bearings, steel shards, and other stuff.
- We had a Staff Sergeant that instructed his security team to pursue a civilian vehicle into the desert and in the process of escalating force the lance corporal in the turret accidentally killed the two occupants of the vehicle.

We train to be self sufficient, and to kill, or to save, we continue to train to be better, and even after all of that – we often fail. Because in the end WAR sucks. And the Warrior lives that suck.

That suck doesn't go away either, most of us adjust back eventually. And certainly not all of us were ever in much more danger than being in a bad part of town while stateside. But even the experiences and sacrifices of our brethren hit us hard. Remember what I said about being family. For Veterans, this is a visceral concept. It matters to us that our brothers and sisters die and we care.

MAKING SENSE OF IT.

It's tough for Veterans, this is honest. Most of us get busy with our lives after leaving the service, family, school, jobs, careers. But we don't forget that while we've moved on, others are beginning their journey, and yet others are reaching the end of it in a steel box.

You have some knowledge now of what it takes to become a Veteran. There are over 20 million of us, so the stories are going to vary widely. But the basics will remain the same. If you focus on building a relationship through your greater understanding of military History, Training, or Experiences you will earn the trust of Veterans.

Here are some tips to hold on to as we begin to have a conversation about how to incorporate a basic level of cultural competency into our work with Veterans.

- There is a limit to our ability to understand Veterans culture – we can become competent, but may never have a first person understanding if we never served. You don't have to be a Veteran to have a working knowledge of Veterans.
- Veterans are not only Veterans, they identify with many other cultures, one which you may share with them – build your understanding of Veterans culture from a place of mutual understanding.
- Veterans have all been through basic military training and have been exposed to some minimum level of trauma in order to have adapted to military service. We will address these traumas in later workshops.
- Veterans have a unique, and often direct, manner of speaking – it's not meant to be an insult, it's how Veterans communicate with each other. Be confident, know your material, and be honest and you should be fine.
- Veterans are all around us – military connected families make up as much as 1/3 of us.
- Veterans identify with other Veterans via a common culture derived from service to our nation.
- Veterans are what service members turn into when they leave the service.
- Veterans experiences may be intense, tailoring your talking points and relationship building techniques will help you to gain their trust.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for your time, I hope you've found value in discussing Veterans culture and will continue to develop your understanding of Veterans and Veterans services. Please continue on to the next lecture: A Cultural Approach to Supporting Veterans.

...

Thank you for continuing your commitment to supporting Veterans.

Josh Penner
Veteran, USMC-OIF
Core Values Consulting
October, 2015