



Healing the Wounds of

War

When Julie Haskell served in the Army as a nurse during the Vietnam War, she encountered situations she has never forgotten. The horrors of war have been ingrained in her memory, leading to flashbacks and moments of intense anxiety and anger. "Things would build up, and I would make sure no one was around," she said, "and I would yell, scream and slam things. I didn't want anyone to think I was totally crazy and had lost it, so I did it in the privacy of my own room or when no one was around."

In other words, she was experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a condition that is the manifestation of someone who has experienced traumatic events.

War was certainly traumatic for Haskell. She was only 23 years old when she volunteered. She was in a foreign land, far from home, experiencing things she never had to go through before, such as not having any running water, not having all the food she wanted, witnessing huge cockroaches, hearing about soldiers who had snakes crawling on them in bunkers. Then, of course, there were the actual horrors of war. She said it was common for soldiers to walk down a path and in front of them would be a pole with the head of an American soldier on it.

She worked in the malaria/hepatitis and surgical units during her first nine months of duty and the medical intensive care unit during the last three months, she said.

"There was a lot of psychological trauma that was building up," she said, especially when she heard about the things the soldiers had to endure during her first tour of duty. "They were pretty graphic. You never really got to know people. You never wanted to know their names,

so many had nicknames. You didn't want to read that they got killed. It was a superficial relationship with people. All of those pains were suppressed underneath it. Other things happened, which were worse, but I'm not going to get into that, which were triggers too [for post-traumatic stress]."

Her road to Vietnam started with a promise she had made several years earlier, when she was a nursing student at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. She had difficulty in her chemistry class, so she made a promise to God: Help her overcome her difficulties in her class so she could graduate, and she would give two years of her life to serve others.

She managed to get through her chemistry class and graduated from nursing school. She remembered the pact she made with God, so, with the Vietnam War raging at the time, she decided to do her two years in the Army Nurse Corps. She was raised as a Catholic. In fact, she had gone to Catholic school all the way through high school. But she also said she was naive. She had gone to all-girl schools through nursing school.

"I was very sheltered and didn't know how



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to interact with guys,” she said. “My religion was pretty special. I was still faith-based until a certain incident happened over there. Then I lost my real attachment to the Church.”

When she came home, she was changed by her experiences there.

“Post-traumatic stress doesn’t stay there,” she said. “You have a door in your heart, and you put all your hurts behind the door, and it piles up and one day – bam – all of these hurts push that door open.”

Despite losing her faith while in Vietnam, she still went to Mass.

“I went, but it was because it was so ingrained in me,” she said. “It was the only place I knew. I knew God was still there watching over me. There wasn’t that real connection.”

Her husband was not Catholic, and it wasn’t until her daughter was 6 years old that she was baptized, she said.

Over the years, she tried to deal with the memories and the anxiety. She went to the Vet Center, a facility in Indianapolis that helps veterans, and received counseling there. It was a lot of paperwork and documentation, and someone always was writing down what she was saying, she said. That

helped, but it didn’t deal with all the hurts.

“I’m a good one at repressing things,” Haskell said. “I didn’t give it much thought because you go on with your life. You get married. You have a family. There are things you need to do. I felt like I wanted to get back with the veterans. I thought that might help. I got a job at the Indiana Veterans’ Home. Being back among veterans kind of reopened some of those wounds. There was one resident who started talking to me, and he said to me you have to go back to confession. You have to deal with that stuff. That started the healing process.”

Her healing continued when she learned about the Schoenstatt Movement, which was founded by a young Pallotine priest, Father Josef Kentenich, who was given the pastoral care of a student house at Schoenstatt, Germany, from which the movement gets its name.

According to the Directory of International Associations of the Faithful, published by the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for the Laity, “The formation proposed by the movement is based on self-education, faith in Providence, the pursuit of holiness in daily life and readiness and willingness to be instruments in God’s hands. The particular purpose of the movement

is the spiritual renewal of Christians, which is achieved by promoting educational and religious activities and social projects, also in cooperation with other ecclesial movements. ... The Apostolic Movement of Schoenstatt is spiritually centered on Mary.” Father Kentenich was a prisoner of war in Dachau during World War II who kept alive in the prisoners hope through the Blessed Mother. The priest’s connection to soldiers and the sufferings he endured drew Haskell to the movement.

She first heard about it while attending St. Thomas Aquinas Church at Purdue University in West Lafayette, IN. She met a Schoenstatt nun, Sister Ann, there who told her about it. Haskell, whose parents were immigrants from Austria and Germany, felt a kinship to Father Kentenich.

“My devotion to Mary [the Blessed Mother] was always there, but on a superficial level,” Haskell said. “It began to really take more shape and form through Schoenstatt. I lost my father to cancer when I was 7 [years old]. My mother was a wonderful woman, and she was very faith-based, but she also was very private. I really couldn’t talk to her about things. She didn’t share stuff. I think probably I was looking for another mother substitute. Finally, I turned to the Blessed Mother, and she was right there.”

It was only when she started to become part of the movement that Haskell understood that Mary always had been there for her. Before going to Vietnam, her stepfather had given her a medal of the Blessed Mother.

“She was with me when I went over to Vietnam,” she said. “She has always been there. It’s come full circle now.”

As she got to know other women who were part of the movement, she noticed the strong connection and love they had to Mary. Their hearts were on fire with love for Mary.

“They were connected throughout their lives,” she said. “I lost my connection after coming home and not being part of the church for so long.”

Because of her devotion to the Blessed Mother, Haskell started praying the rosary. “I say all the decades every day, and if I don’t, I can’t go to sleep without making sure they are prayed,” she said.

Slowly, she felt herself healing. But a retreat she went to last year really helped her a lot, she said. She went because a friend of hers, a fellow veteran, wanted to attend a retreat offered by Mayslake Ministries, which was designed specifically for veterans who were suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Her friend did not have a way of getting to the “Coming Home to Christ” retreat, and Haskell admitted that she went mainly as a way for her friend to get

help – not realizing that she would also benefit immensely from the experience.

“As I sat there, the Holy Spirit touched me in ways that you could feel the peace and the comfort and support of the people that you’re with,” Haskell said about her experiences at the retreat. “It’s like you can open up, and it was the first time I could verbalize it to anyone. I came back [from Vietnam] with a lot of guilt and anger, and I could never talk about things. I felt embarrassed or felt people would think badly of me. In the ministry there, it was a peaceful haven where you could just unload.”

One of the retreat leaders, Sister Linda McClenahan, O.P., served as a sergeant in Vietnam and knows about dealing with trauma because of war. “I spent a lifetime there wrapped up in a calendar of one year,” said Sister McClenahan, who is known as “Sister Sarge.”

One of the aims of the retreat is to help veterans who are struggling with their relationship, with others, with God and with themselves, she said.

“We want them to look at their trauma in a different way and be able to find a new pathway to spirituality through healing,” said Sister McClenahan. “There are references to Christian beliefs. However, this is not about religion – and everything to do with spirituality. That’s why it’s open to anyone of any faith tradition.”

The retreats, which are held at the Cardinal Stritch Retreat House in Mundelein, help the veterans understand about Post-Traumatic Spiritual Disorder, which is keeping secrets and isolationism and the feeling or inability to not be able to tell your story, she said. And to get them to understand about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which manifests itself when the veteran experiences flashbacks or has trouble sleeping or has difficulty concentrating or has moments of anger, she said.

“It’s almost a sense of tremendous loneliness in the midst of crowds,” said Sister McClenahan.

Veterans may go to the Veterans Administration to get counseling, but “they really can’t get into the spiritual aspects of post-traumatic stress,” she said.

In a safe environment, with other veterans who understand the traumas of war, the retreat participants have the potential to connect with God in a way that they might not have thought possible or didn’t believe was possible again, she said.

“I’d like to point out that most of us think we have a faith, but chances are that we’ve had a belief that’s been shattered,” she said. “Part of this process does include storytelling. When Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples, He appeared with his wounds showing. He didn’t hide His woundedness. Part of that was part of his identity now. The disciples wouldn’t have recognized Him without it. That’s why it’s important for us, in a safe environment, to be able to share our woundedness with others who are wounded, and together we move toward healing and faith.”

What Haskell said she learned while attending the retreat was that her connection and relationship with Jesus and the Blessed Mother will help her deal with anything in life.

“The basic thing I learned is you have to walk with Him,” Haskell said. “You can’t run ahead because you’ll hit yourself against the wall, fall down and then wait until He comes and picks you up. In walking with Him, He makes everything beautiful. So I wake up now, and I think, ‘What kind of fun and games are you going to have today, Lord?’ ”

Haskell, who is 66 years old, retired last year. She said she realizes her anxiety and stress from the war will always be something she has to deal with. But she added that the retreat has been invaluable in helping her to continue healing and deal with her past traumas because she has more peace in her life, knowing she has allowed God to be part of leading the way for her.

“When things go off the beaten path,” she said, “or they’re not working out, I just have to remove myself from the situation and say, ‘OK, [God] take over. You’re in control.’ And He works things out.”

Sister McClenahan summed up what the retreat meant to Haskell and other veterans who have attended: “When things are at their darkest and feeling hopeless, there’s still a ray of hope out there.

“We hope we are helping people find that ray of God’s healing light.”



The next “Coming Home to Christ” retreat for veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder will take place Nov. 11-13 at the Cardinal Stritch Retreat House in Mundelein. These retreats are free to all military veterans. Check-in time on Friday is 6 p.m., and the retreat ends on Sunday at noon. All meals and lodging are included. For more information, go to www.mayslakeministries.org or call (630) 268-9000.