

VIDEO: Take No Prisoners, US Marines execute wounded Iraqi to cheers of fellow marines

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Transcript: of CNN Video Clip

Fit To Kill

Aired October 26, 2003 – 20:00 ET

CROWLEY: Wounded, another Iraqi writhes on the ground next to his gun. The Marines kill him — then cheer.

RIDDLE: Like, man, you guys are dead now, you know. But it was a good feeling.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Fire!

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Yeah!

CROWLEY: When the battle is over and you are still standing, the adrenalin rush is huge.

RIDDLE: I mean, afterwards you're like, hell, yeah, that was awesome. Let's do it again.

CROWLEY: Inexplicable to some, but not to generations of veterans.

Complete Video Transcript

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UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Fire!

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Fire!

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The body's still twitching. You could still see the body kind of rising and falling a little bit.

CANDY CROWLEY, CNN NEWS: The stories are hard to tell.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I prayed to God. I was like, just help me deal with this.

CROWLEY: The memories are hard to live with.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: After we killed him, there was a question of was this guy a hostile person.

CROWLEY: The battles don't end when the shooting stops.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Cease fire!

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Cease fire!

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Killing another human being is a pretty goddamned significant act. And there's a lot of feelings about it afterwards.

CHARLES MILES-SHEEHAN, GULF WAR VETERAN: It's something that we spend way too little time reflecting on before we send troops into battle.

AARON BROWN, HOST, CNN PRESENTS: Machine guns fire and shell explode, so many die. Numbers for the world to see.

But what we don't see, what we don't talk about honestly when it comes to war, is the actual act of killing. That is taboo — a taboo that we break now.

Welcome to CNN PRESENTS. I'm Aaron Brown.

No one really knows how many thousands of Iraqis were killed in the war to topple Saddam Hussein. But if history is a guide, some of those soldiers and marines who did the killing will come home to face one more battle — a battle with their past, their memories. How do they cope with the ghosts of war?

The answers can only come from the soldiers who know first hand — those "Fit to Kill." Their stories, however, are at times disturbing. They are graphic. And so, consider that a warning, as CNN's Candy Crowley takes us now from the dark corners of the battlefield to the long road home.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

CANDY CROWLEY, CNN NEWS CORRESPONDENT: General George Patton said, the object of war is not to die for your country, but to make the other bastard die for his.

ANTHONY RIDDLE, U.S. MARINE, IRAQ: Before war, you're thinking, oh, I can deal with that. That's nothing. I'm a Marine. I can handle it.

CROWLEY: Now, Sergeant Anthony Riddle is starting to live with having to kill.

RIDDLE: When their eyes are open, staring right at you, half the faces are missing ...

CROWLEY: He had killed in battle before, but not like this. Not so close.

RIDDLE: Looking at the body just sitting there. And then we were told, hey. We've got to pull the bodies out.

And that's when it really hit me. When we pulled them out and their heads hit the ground and just total lifeless. Nothing going on with that body.

And I had to walk away. I mean, I was like, I can't handle this no more.

CROWLEY: To kill in war is to run the gamut of emotions.

U.S. Marines, Sergeant Riddle's team, searching an industrial area near Baghdad. Along the road they encounter Iraqis who point their AK-47s at the Marines.

RIDDLE: One of my guys got up on his hood and took the first guy out, shot him right in the heart. And he dropped instantly.

CROWLEY: Wounded, another Iraqi writhes on the ground next to his gun. The Marines kill him — then cheer.

RIDDLE: Like, man, you guys are dead now, you know. But it was a good feeling.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Fire!

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Yeah!

CROWLEY: When the battle is over and you are still standing, the adrenalin rush is huge.

RIDDLE: I mean, afterwards you're like, hell, yeah, that was awesome. Let's do it again.

CROWLEY: Inexplicable to some, but not to generations of veterans.

Phil Piazza, lieutenant. World War II, 1944, the jungles of Burma.

PHIL PIAZZA, WORLD WAR II VETERAN: You know what'd be the first reaction? Oh, yeah, sir. At first there is a certain exhilaration, because you've killed an enemy who was trying to kill you.

CROWLEY: Bob MacGowan, a fictitious name he used for this interview. Private, Vietnam, 1967.

BOB MACGOWAN, VIETNAM WAR VETERAN: You certainly get a hunting thrill. I won't say

kind of a sexual sense to — it's a jazzy thing, you know.

CROWLEY: Charles Sheehan-Miles. Private, the Gulf War, 1991.

CHARLES SHEEHAN-MILES, GULF WAR VETERAN: I shot and killed without thinking about it, without taking a moment's reflection of whether or not I was doing the right thing. And then — even for a fraction of a time, I felt good about it.

CROWLEY: They did not teach that part in basic.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Do you understand?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Left, left, right, left.

CROWLEY: At Fort Benning, Georgia, ...

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: See, see.

CROWLEY: ... killing is taught as a professional skill — a way to keep from dying, a way to get the job done.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I got you covered!

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It is turning into a high, capable and competent person — and in this situation, killer — who knows what to do and how to do it, and does it without having to think about it.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Lock and load!

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We don't want to create monsters. We want to create young men who are willing to fight and fill if necessary, to defend our country. But I don't to walk around every day and tell them, you need to kill. Get over here and learn how to kill, and put them through drills about killing, because it's not what's expected.

Target acquisition is a good way to say it. These are targets, targets of opportunity, enemy targets. There's no need to personalize it whatsoever.

CROWLEY: By the end of the process, they are infantrymen. Ready. Often eager.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It makes you want it. It makes you want to be able to do it. It makes you want to be able to just kill — kill the enemy. Because they were willing to do the same thing to you.

It might sound harsh, but that's just how it is.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: There's a target coming, and nobody's shot at it yet. It's very hard to see.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Yes, sir.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: All right? You're going to kill it.

CROWLEY: Ready to do what they would not as civilians.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I'm not looking forward to it if it does happen, but that's why we're Army. That's we're infantry. If we don't do it, no one else is going to do it.

CROWLEY: But Fort Benning is not a war zone. A plastic target is not an enemy. Training is just a shadow of war.

In war, target acquisition means killing somebody.

RIDDLE: You know that you killed them, and you take their life. And I know as me having a little daughter at home and a wife at home, that guy probably had a daughter or some kid or a wife at home, waiting for him. And he's not returning that night.

CROWLEY: In a controversial study of World War II infantrymen, an Army researcher found that at most, 25 percent — only one in four infantrymen — actually fired at the enemy.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: What he found was, in his research, there were certain leaders or certain ones that would fire their weapons, and would be natural, instinctive leaders and would fire. But many others, because of perhaps the way they were trained in the military, or by their ministers or by their families, failed to pull the trigger.

CROWLEY: Confronted with evidence that many soldiers were, in effect, conscientious objectors precisely when they were needed in battle, the Army changed how it trained for combat.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The problem in World War II was that we were firing at bull's eye targets most of the time. But most of the time we weren't making a realistic depiction of what we were doing. We were teaching marksmanship skills and not killing skills.

CROWLEY: After World War II, the Army began using targets shaped like human beings and eventually pop-up targets to get soldiers used to the idea of hitting the real thing.

By Vietnam, firing ratios approached 100 percent. UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It made a tremendous difference, because now, conditioned stimulus is a man-shaped silhouette pops up in the field of view. Conditioned response, you have a split second to engage the targets. With stimulus feedback, you hit the target, the target drops, stimulus response, stimulus response.

And what we've done is, we've made killing an unthinking, conditioned reflex.

CROWLEY: But if killing is an unthinking reflex, the aftermath can hijack your thoughts.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Parade!

CROWLEY: Something these graduates don't know yet.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Present ...

CROWLEY: A hidden burden fully understood only by those who carry it — men like Phil Piazza.

PIAZZA: It's gory and it's gruesome, but it has to be done. It's either you or him.

CROWLEY: Bob MacGowan.

MACGOWAN: There's a lot of feelings about it afterwards. Not at the time. Not at the time.

CROWLEY: And Charles Sheehan-Miles.

SHEEHAN-MILES: I remember my gunner commenting that they felt like it had been too easy.

CROWLEY: Three generations of warriors who were fit to kill tell their stories, as CNN PRESENTS continues.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Left, left, left, right, left. Left, left, left, ...

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

CROWLEY: Across the generations, they join for reasons both personal and patriotic — Phil Piazza.

PIAZZA: Well, I went into the Army the year before Pearl Harbor, because I realized it was imminent. And I felt I wanted to be a part of it.

When Pearl Harbor came along, we had young people actually battering down the doors of the recruiting offices to join the Army.

CROWLEY: Bob MacGowan, a high school dropout in the turbulent '60s, was in search of the ultimate adventure.

He joined the Marines. MACGOWAN: I have to admit, one of the reasons was I wasn't going to miss a war. I was a young guy and I wanted to get where the action was. You know, men feel the call to — or they hear the drums and they want to go.

CROWLEY: Charles Sheehan-Miles was by his own description 18 and dumb and bored in college. He thought the Army would bring meaning to his life.

SHEEHAN-MILES: It's a very close-knit community. The people who serve in the military feel like they're protecting all of us. That was part of what I was seeking.

CROWLEY: So, you wanted a place.

SHEEHAN-MILES: Yes.

CROWLEY: A place where you fit.

CROWLEY: In training, Piazza learned unconventional warfare. His commando group, known as Merrill's Marauders, fought the Japanese in the jungles of Burma.

PIAZZA: We carried a piece of piano wire. What you do is, you sneak up behind them from the rear and put the wire around his neck, pull it tight.

CROWLEY: How long does that take?

PIAZZA: Seconds.

CROWLEY: No smart bombs, no laser-guided missiles. This is war up close and personal. The

idea takes getting used to.

PIAZZA: I remember when we trained with the various commandos, they took and filled a sheep's bladder with blood. And you had to bayonet that thing and let — and the blood would come out all over you, and you had to stay with that stench of the blood on you. And that, believe me, will instill the killer instinct.

CROWLEY: War is no place for wimps. The failure of one comes at the expense of all. It was part of the drill, as MacGowan prepared for Vietnam.

MACGOWAN: Well, I remember being on the rifle range. And there was a number of people who didn't qualify. They couldn't get a high enough score.

The gunnery sergeant gathered everybody together around this flagpole. And he made these guys who didn't pass lie down on their faces on the ground around this flagpole.

And then he took the rest of the platoon of us and ran us again and again over them. And eventually you couldn't control your feet, and you were stepping on their faces and, you know.

And then he gave this little speech about, these men have failed their country.

CROWLEY: When Sheehan-Miles enlisted, the possibility of combat seemed remote. Training felt like a field trip.

SHEEHAN-MILES: Going to gunnery with a tank, for example, was an incredibly fun experience. It was exciting. Everybody had a good time. It was like a high impact sport, only you're firing \$25,000 rounds down range.

You're preparing for battle. You're preparing to kill people. But, at least in my case, as a 19-, 20-year-old, the connection wasn't necessarily there.

CROWLEY: Some experts say military training is a natural fit with the innate patterns of human behavior. Many people acting together will do things none of them would do alone.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: There is a certain amount of instinctive aggressiveness that is most often seen when you get groups together.

CROWLEY: Within the pack, a kind of natural order emerges mirroring the primitive instincts of dominance and submission.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: So within a group there will be those people who show leadership, those people who show powership. And there will be leaders who will work out among themselves which is the top leader.

CROWLEY: But even leaders wonder if they'll be brave enough.

As a junior officer preparing for battle in Burma, Piazza did not fear losing his life so much as losing face.

PIAZZA: I remember the night before our first battle, we sat down on the side of the trail and we talked. And we asked each one, what's your biggest fear? You know, we're going into

combat tomorrow. What is really bothering you the most?

You know what I thought of mostly? All I was afraid of, and having never been in combat — would I lose my nerve in front of my men?

CROWLEY: Pearl Harbor bolstered Piazza's nerve. Anger obliterated moral ambiguity.

PIAZZA: And I could visualize those planes coming down the slot and bombing our fleet.

And they were merciless during that attack. We didn't stand a chance. And those are the things that sort of inspire you, if you want to call it, and give you the incentive to want to battle them.

CROWLEY: Anger.

PIAZZA: That's right.

CROWLEY: Anger motivated you a lot. PIAZZA: It definitely — you have to have a certain amount of anger. Otherwise, I don't believe that you would do what you do do in combat.

CROWLEY: In Vietnam, the cause was being questioned back home. But MacGowan faced his ambiguity about killing with the certainty that the enemy was a different kind of being.

MACGOWAN: You go through a progression, a stepwise regression, and sort of like, well, that's an enemy of my country. Those people — they're trying to kill me. They're subhuman. They're animals. They're going to rape our women and kill our children. Save our children. They're in the way. Kill them.

CROWLEY: Who knew that Iraq would invade Kuwait? That the reality of combat would come to another generation of Americans?

Sheehan-Miles found himself in the deserts of Iraq. Peering into his scopes, he saw things.

SHEEHAN-MILES: It's really hard to shoot at somebody who you identify as a person, as a potential father or mother or child.

When you're in a tank battalion, you're not shooting at vehicles with four people in it. You're shooting at tanks. We kill tanks, not people.

CROWLEY: Three men psyched up for combat, fit to kill.

When we come back, the seconds, the minutes, the battles that changed their lives.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

PIAZZA: We were moving down a trail outside of a little village, and we stumbled on three Japanese who were butchering a cow in the trail.

MACGOWAN: We were constantly on patrol. Snipers were a real problem there, as were booby traps and mines.

SHEEHAN-MILES: I remember being awakened by a call over the radio. Blue six, blue six. There's trucks to your front.

CROWLEY: Their minds were primed for battle. Their bodies were on high alert. They were about to kill.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: You are pitting yourself against the ultimate challenge, which is another human who is also trained and is out to kill you.

CROWLEY: Experts and soldiers say the job is hardest when the killing is up close.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: And then there's something about them that we view, that that's a human being. There but for the grace of God might have been me, might have been my loved ones. And I took that person's life.

PIAZZA: It's implanted on my brain — every single thing that happened to me then.

CROWLEY: Piazza and his men opened fire on the three Japanese soldiers on the jungle trail. Two dropped dead. Wounded, the third staggered off. Piazza followed with his 45-calibre pistol.

PIAZZA: He had run down the trail and he turned to face me.

CROWLEY: And how close were you when you shot him?

PIAZZA: About 10 feet.

CROWLEY: Do you remember placing it?

PIAZZA: You fired to hit a vital spot.

CROWLEY: And what was the vital spot?

PIAZZA: Head.

CROWLEY: An Army photographer took a picture of Piazza searching the body for maps and other intelligence.

CROWLEY: When you're searching through him, is he a person to you?

PIAZZA: He's not a person, no. You — at the time you're preoccupied and looking for any documents that he might have on him. You really don't stop to think of him as an individual.

Quite honestly, if you did, I think it might — it might bear on you.

CROWLEY: He says it did not bear on him then. But now, 60 years later, there are things Piazza can't let go.

PIAZZA: It's his ID card.

CROWLEY: He was just so young.

PIAZZA: Well, we were all — they were young. We were young.

CROWLEY: Tamaguchi (ph) was 22 years old. Along with his ID, he carried his country's flag, signed by friends and officials from his home town.

PIAZZA: It's sort of good luck for the man going away. Obviously, it's in this case, it wasn't good luck for him.

CROWLEY: Piazza hadn't eaten in days, and the Japanese soldier had food.

PIAZZA: And when I stripped him for the identification and papers, I took his rice and sat right there and ate his rice. And I will always remember, my mother, God bless her, used to go to all of our reunions before she passed away. She heard one of my sergeants talking about that incident.

And she said to him, "My little boy? He wouldn't do a thing like that." Mothers, God bless them.

CROWLEY: MacGowan was on patrol in the jungles of Vietnam. His group encountered a North Vietnamese sniper.

MACGOWAN: This guy jumped up a couple hundred meters from me — less, a hundred meters. I shot him in the back and he went down.

Then he got up again. And then I shot him again. And he went down.

And, of course, we're running. And, you know, the helmet was off my head, the straps were around my neck.

And anyway, I hit him three times. And every time he got up. And finally, the third time he stayed down. And, you know, we're looking at this guy. I mean, you know, you see open chest wounds and, you know, he's dying. I hit him square.

And we had a staff sergeant, pulls out his 45 and blew his brains out.

And then we just went on — just left him and went on.

I mean, that's the reality of war. And it's a very odd feeling. It's just — it was just very, very strange.

CROWLEY: it was the first and not the last time he would kill. MacGowan finished his tour of duty, fueled by the rage of war — something he first felt when a U.S. tank rolled over a landmine.

MACGOWAN: And that tank, I mean, just blew up in the air. I mean, oh, boom! Kicked up like that.

And the guy that was the driver — I don't know if he got thrown out, or he was — if they pulled him out. All I remember is that he was cut off below the waist. His legs were gone.

And somebody had laid him on a, like a termite mound or an ant mound. I was going over there to see him. Excuse me. Whew!

But anyway, that guy was covered with ants. The black ants on his red blood. Boy, that was — and I just remember seeing this rage.

CROWLEY: Eventually, MacGowan took the rage, the fear, the guilt — the whole gamut of human emotions and turned them into nothing.

MACGOWAN: You become numb. That's a defense. You just become numb to it.

CROWLEY: Do you ever think about the people you killed? MACGOWAN: I try not to. That road goes nowhere.

CROWLEY: It was nighttime in Iraq. Charles Sheehan-Miles was asleep inside his tank when his commander radioed about oncoming Iraqi trucks.

SHEEHAN-MILES: I wake up and I jump up to my machinegun and I can just barely see these two trucks. It was dark.

One of the tanks opened fire and hit one of the trucks and it burst into flame and it splashed fuel all over the other truck. And men came running out on fire.

So we started shooting.

I fired at one. And then a second guy came running out, and I shot and killed him. And then more came.

And one of them — you know, the gunner fires the main gun. And he's also got a machine gun next to him. And he'd forgotten to switch it back from the main gun to the machine gun. And so he fired and hit a man with a main gun round — 120-millimeter tank round — and cut him in half.

And it was over, you know. We had, you know, killed these people in 60 seconds.

CROWLEY: Sixty seconds running on pure instinct.

SHEEHAN-MILES: I don't know how many there were. I don't know who they were.

What I do remember, and this eventually led to me getting out of the Army, was that when I fired that machine gun and hit that guy and he fell down dead, I felt this sense of exhilaration, of joy.

And that was immediately followed by a tremendous feeling of guilt and remorse. And this was half a second. It was one right after the other.

And that picture of that guy running, you know, on fire as I shot him, stayed with me as I closed my eyes for years and years and years.

CROWLEY: Desert Storm, Vietnam, World War II. They had done what they trained to do. They were fit to kill. Now all they had to do was live with it.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(NEWS BREAK)

(SINGING)

CROWLEY: Have you ever paused to think, I wonder how many people I killed?

PHIL PIASO (ph): Actually no, I think because I don't want to dwell on it.

CROWLEY: It's not that you don't remember, it's that you can put it somewhere.

PIASO (ph): Wipe it out of your memory, sure.

CROWLEY: You can — you know you have it there, but you...

PIASO (ph): You move it to a different segment of your brain yes.

CROWLEY: But in sleep, thousands of miles and years away from the jungle, the mind has a way of wandering.

PIASO (ph): At night, even today after all these years, my wife can't touch me, and I'll come out swinging. It's just sort of a reflex.

CROWLEY: Piasa (ph) it seems easily moved on, in fact most combat veterans are not traumatized for life, and find ways to cope. Piaso (ph) buries Burma's worst moments in the new routines of daily life.

PIASO (ph): Up until a couple of years ago, I couldn't touch rice. My wife always got a kick out of that. I wouldn't eat rice. And maybe that's one of the things that came out of that particular time. When I took his rice off of the dead body and ate it right there.

CROWLEY: There was something else too. Something that crosses his mind every now and then. Something that keeps him holding on to a picture.

PIASO (ph): You know what I wanted to do, and I've been seriously considering it? I was going to get in touch with the Japanese embassy, and see if there was any way they could locate his family, and I would enlarge this and send it to them. Obviously not tell them the gruesome part of the circumstances, but I thought it might be nice that they found out about it.

CROWLEY: Bob McGowan (ph) came home wanting to forget. His family didn't ask, McGowan (ph) didn't tell.

BOB MCGOWAN, VETERAN: I remember when I got home my mother made me an apple pie. And I ate the pie. And then we had dinner. And I think maybe my father said welcome home. And that was it. And they never talked about it, I never talked about it, we just didn't talk about it.

CROWLEY: Nor did he talk to his war buddies. His own system of survival made it nearly impossible.

MCGOWAN (ph): I had two friends. I only made two friends. I didn't give a (EXPLETIVE DELETED) about the rest of them.

CROWLEY: And why do you think that is? MCGOWAN (ph): You don't want to know these people. If you don't know them, you won't grieve when they die.

CROWLEY: Instead, the focus was on a calendar. Just surviving the standard one-year tour.

COL. JIM STOKES: When they died, there might be the quick religious ceremony where the company commander or the Chaplain said something, but there was very little grieving. It was this is the Nam, just keep your eyes on the 365th day, don't get too attached to people

because it hurts so much.

CROWLEY: Back home, nothing seemed to fit. McGowan felt different, edgy.

MCGOWAN (ph): When you come back with a sense of smell about things. When something bad is going to happen, you know it. And nobody else knows it. Unless they've had similar experience. They have no idea what you're talking about.

CHARLES SEAN MILES (ph): The thing I remember is the smell, the smell of diesel fuel burning.

CROWLEY: The 24th infantry division returned to a joyous welcome. She and Miles won a commendation for valor, for rescuing a wounded soldier in battle. He felt neither brave, nor joyous.

MILES (ph): At the time I felt like I was probably the worst person alive.

CROWLEY: Did you talk to anybody about it? Any of the guys with you?

MILES (ph): We'd go to the bar, and we'd drink too much, and talk about what we called the night with the trucks. You know? I actually wrote a letter to a girl I'd been chasing all through high school. But I wrote her a very detailed letter about what had happened, and what I experienced, and how it felt. And then I crumpled up the letter and threw it away. Because I couldn't send it, because I was afraid that if she knew who I was she'd hate me.

CROWLEY: The night of the trucks did not yield in the light of day. He wanted out. He wanted to leave the army.

MALE (ph): Anyway, I went to the Chaplain, and I asked him about it. I said you know, I don't think I can do this again. And it's not that I couldn't, it's that I knew I could. Because it was. It was so easy to pull the trigger and kill people. Yes, I was afraid of what would happen. I was afraid of what it would do to me. What kind of person I would become.

CROWLEY: He was granted conscientious objector status, and an honorable discharge. He was changed.

MALE (ph): I've become a very private person. Even the stuff we're talking about here doesn't really reach kind of into the core, if that makes sense.

CROWLEY: What can you tell me about what's there that we don't see?

MALE (ph): I have incredible self-doubt about everything. Every step I take, every decision I make, everywhere I go, I wonder if it's the right thing.

CROWLEY: When CNN PRESENTS continues, fit to kill, the veteran who no longer felt fit to live.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

CROWLEY: Bob McGowan (ph) drives a British made Land Rover, built in 1964. The year before he went to war. The year he tried do hard to get back to.

MCGOWAN (ph): The way I dealt with it, I said it never happened, I was never there. For 20

years I successfully suppressed that. Like it never happened.

CROWLEY: He got married, studied psychology, and ran a wilderness program for troubled teens. Denial kept him in a life that looked normal from the outside, but sometimes erupted from the inside.

MCGOWAN (ph): Shortly after I got back, this guy insulted me, I have no idea what he even looked like now, or what he said to me, but we were alone in an area up against the wall, and I just about beat him to death.

CROWLEY: He fought his emotions, and they fought back. Eventually, they won.

MCGOWAN (ph): And then I just began drawing away. I could feel myself doing it, and watched myself doing it, and I couldn't stop.

CROWLEY: He found a cabin on an island in the Potomac River. He moved in alone.

MCGOWAN (ph): I couldn't dare to be around other people.

CROWLEY: Why?

MCGOWAN (ph): Well you know, I'm having panic attacks triggering all the time, and I'm in this combat alert status. And those people living their normal life you know. It's just untenable (ph). It just doesn't work.

CROWLEY: McGowan thought about suicide, but hung on, quite literally to a dear life.

MCGOWAN (ph): I used to come here to the cliff when the pain got to bad. And just kind of wish I could jump off. But I couldn't. I have a daughter.

CROWLEY: He didn't have a name for it then, but he does now. Post-dramatic stress disorder.

DR. JONATHON SHAY, PSYCHIATRIST, DEPT OF VETERANS: Number one, the mobilization of the body and mind for danger. And number two, the shutting down of emotions that don't serve survival in combat.

CROWLEY: Around the end of the Vietnam War, scientists found that the hormones boosting physical and mental strength in combat, adrenaline and Kortysal (ph) also effect memory.

JAMES MCGAUGH, NEUROSCIENTIST, US IRVINE: These hormones will activate a part of your brain that's sitting there ready to be turned on. This system gets turned on; it sends instructions to the other regions of the brain where memories are being stored, and in effect it says, make a stronger memory. It's an amplifier system.

CROWLEY: With the right trigger, memories seared in the brain reactivate the bodily responses from the traumatic event. For McGowan (ph), it happened when he saw a woman drowning in the Potomac.

MCGOWAN (ph): This rescue helicopter arrives and hovers right over my head with a guy leaning out just like (UNINTELLIBLE). And all of the sudden I'm in the war. I'm in the war. That was the first flash back.

CROWLEY: And it is physically as though you are there.

MCGOWAN (ph): Yes I was there.

CROWLEY: Why are some vets casualties of PTSD while most go on to live normal lives? The single biggest factor according to many studies is how much trauma they experienced. McGowan (ph) saw and felt it all. Killing, fear of being killed, atrocities on the battlefield.

MCGOWAN (ph): I was one of the guys that volunteered to go in and get the bodies out. And we laid them on the shortics (ph) of this mud bank. It was a red mud bank. And took off all their clothes so we could go through it. So here are these naked bodies of these men, and their gaping wounds. About 10 of them, laid side-by-side. And I looked and somebody had cut off all their ears. I just —

CROWLEY: Post dramatic stress disorder is not inevitable.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The leading preventive psychiatry recommendation for the military is keep people together. Train them together, send them into danger together, and bring them home together. And give them enough time when they get home to digest together what they've been through.

CROWLEY: But In Vietnam, the system often worked against unit cohesion.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The typical picture in Vietnam was that you went over there by airplane and a plane load of strangers, you were sent to a replacement depot, and dealt out like cards as individual replacements to units that needed them.

CROWLEY: Bonds that were formed during combat often broke on the way home.

STOKES: When they left, they of course for the most part left alone, individually on a plane with strangers. Sometimes very short notice.

CROWLEY: And they returned to a nation divided where the war brought home to American living rooms for the first time was increasingly unpopular.

STOKES: That sets people up for PTSD (ph). For having a lot of unfinished unresolved thoughts, feelings, emotions that they can't tell to anybody.

CROWLEY: In 1983 congress commissioned a major study of PTSD (ph). It concluded that more than 30 percent of Vietnam vets would have the disorder at one time in their lives.

MCGOWAN (ph): When it happened, I lost my family. And lost a great job. And I couldn't be with people. It was like trying to hold sand in your fingers.

CROWLEY: McGowan got help at a veterans administration- counseling center. He lives off his disability check. And takes a cocktail of medicines several times a day to help control his anxiety attacks and depression. It is better now, but he remains alone.

If you had to tell vets coming home now that have seen some action, that have killed people, what would you tell them?

MCGOWAN (ph): Stick with your unit for one. Keep your buddies current. Don't withdraw from them. That's your lifeline. I would say also that if you feel different, your right, you are.

You are different. You're a member of a special club of people.

CROWLEY: The final battle. Coming home, as CNN PRESENTS continues.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

CROWLEY: Even in Iraq, there are quiet times. And the afterthoughts come.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Some days I'm just sitting in my rack (ph) here, and I just think about what we did over the wars (ph). Those two bodies always stick out in my head. Or sometimes you dream about it. You just wake up in a sweat.

CROWLEY: Some of the newest warriors are coming home now, finding as they all do, that when you leave the battlefield, it does not always leave you.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I remember talking to my pastor the first time after I got back and going to confession, and mentioning the fact that it had bothered me that I killed people. And like the pastor said, it's a matter of necessity unfortunately, those things happen.

CROWLEY: Sometimes what happens is that no matter how right the cause, the wrong people die. And that is the hardest live with.

STOKES: I think that's of course very difficult when you're dealing with the enemy (UNINTELLIBLE) or civilians being forced to be combatants. And the inability to tell any of those from the true noncombatants who are just caught in the middle.

CROWLEY: In Iraq, Corporal Casey Brummer (ph) remembers the trip along the Tigris to Baghdad, and coming under fire.

CORPORAL CASEY BRUMMER (ph): We called in with some artillery, and some 8-bomb (ph) and things like that. Some innocent women and children got hit. We met them on the road, and they had — I mean little girls with noses blown off, and like husbands carrying their dead wives and things like that. And that was extremely difficult to deal with. Because you're like — you know, shoot, what the hell did we do now?

CROWLEY: The Pentagon is taking unprecedented steps to identify service members struggling to cope. Everyone coming home is screened for health problems, including mental health. On a battery of questions of questions about psychological trauma. Did you see anyone wounded, killed, or dead? Have you had experiences that were so frightening, horrible, or upsetting that you've had nightmares?

STOKES: It's probably more people are feeling it than are showing it. And so many of these people feel I can't talk about it because everybody else seems to be taking it so well, and you know, I'm feeling this. And so I have to pretend not to be feeling it too.

CROWLEY: There are briefings in the field and at home on adjusting to life away from combat. Those with problems are referred to counseling, or a military Chaplin.

LT. COL. ALVIN SYKES: Our whole role is to be a cathartic agent. To try to facilitate ventilation. Because when the soldier's talking through what he's just experienced, it's the first stage in beginning to come to terms with it.

CROWLEY: But getting troops into therapy isn't easy. It's seen as a career ender. A sign of weakness in a macho culture.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: When you talk to your other marines, you want to try to sound hard to them. Yes, I dropped that guy you know. It ain't no big deal. But really you think in your headman, you know it is a big deal.

CROWLEY: It is a big deal. It is sometimes a life changing deal. After leaving the military, Charles Sean Miles (ph) helped found an organization for veterans with Gulf War Syndrome. And now works for a nuclear watchdog organization.

MILES (ph): I felt in some ways that I needed to do penance, that I needed to find a way to serve with my society, to make the world a better place. Because that was why I joined the army in the first place.

CROWLEY: Bob McGowan is a struggling writer, who draws on the war for inspiration. He found a measure of peace when he stopped trying to forget, and started to remember. On his '64 Land Rover, theirs a bumper sticker. The Vietnam service medal.

MCGOWAN (ph): And I'll tell you what, I wouldn't change one bit of it. Anything that happened other than for other people's sake. But to me, no. It's made me who I am. I wouldn't change one damn thing.

CROWLEY: Phil Piaso (ph) often speaks to veterans and to young soldiers about the Burma (ph) campaign.

PIASO (ph): All I can say to them is having experienced it myself, is you have to put it behind you. Look forward to the good things that are ahead of you.

CROWLEY: They learn to live with having to kill. A hidden burden passed now, as today's generation of warriors looks toward home.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I don't want to take it home with me. That's something that I'm not going to share with everybody else. If you wanted to share it with me, then you should have been here with me. No one will ever know unless they've been here.

AARON BROWN, CNN ANCHOR: When it came to war, the German Field Marshall, Irvin Rammall (ph), the legendary desert fox advised his troops this way. In the absence of orders go find something, and kill it. Not exactly the romantic notion of duty and honor and country.

But in war that kind of bluntness can keep people alive. It's what brings them home. And now thousands of troops in Iraq are doing just that. And thousands more are scheduled to come back over the next nine months. Many, most will be proud of what they've accomplished.

Others however, may carry doubts and troubling memories of war. If you know a veteran who needs help readjusting, you can find the nearest vet center in your local phone book. Or call 800-827-1000. That's it for this addition of CNN PRESENTS. I'm Aaron Brown, thank for joining us, and we'll see you next week.

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