

# TAKING CARE OF YOUR OWN

MMA thinks outside the cage...and helps Army Veterans overcome post-traumatic stress disorder.

BY KELLY CRIGGER



The number of soldiers returning from combat with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is higher than it's been since Vietnam. Suicide, alcoholism, and homelessness are plaguing our troops, but luckily we have people who are stepping up to take care of our own, even in MMA.

Former Army Sergeant and lifelong fighter Todd Vance returned from Iraq with 200 combat missions under his belt and a bad case of nightmares.

"I was rated an 8 out of 10 on the PTSD scale at the VA," Vance says. "I drank until I blacked out just to sleep, and I was getting into fights all the time. MMA played a huge role in my recovery. If I had a rough day at school, work... therapy, I could go to the gym and get on the bags until my knuckles were raw."

Vance was lucky. He got over his demons, and he

resolved to help others do the same, so he began volunteering at the Mission Valley Veterans Administration Hospital in San Diego where many of his comrades slid into inconsolable depression. An avid Muay Thai fighter, Vance worked out a deal with his gym to conduct free classes for veterans to pull them out of their funk.

"For about three months, it was the same five guys every week showing up on Fridays at Undisputed North Park," Vance says. Now we have about 15 to 20 regulars. The manager basically gave the guys free memberships to train everyday if they wanted, so many of them train all week now."

It's a natural fit. Men don't join the Armed Forces to be paper pushers. They join to be warriors, especially in times of war like this. They don't want to be coddled, and most of them quickly grow bored with touchy-feely group therapy sessions. Veterans need a physical challenge and a place where they feel they are a part of something. Some of them have needs even more basic than that.

"Four of my students were homeless with drug problems until they made it into the program," says Vance. "They were very introverted, isolated, and angry. They would walk in without talking to anyone and go right to practicing."

During deployments, soldiers get accustomed to an elevated state of mind that they feel is normal, so veterans will search for that same feeling when they return. Driving fast, risky behavior, and fighting are a few ways they seek to replace that high. MMA training provides a safe place to replicate the elevated state of mind of the combat soldier, but with positive results. It also provides the same camaraderie and brotherhood of a line unit, so veterans can help each other cope.

"Among my group of fighters, we all know somebody that works at the VA or records department," says Vance. "I have a friend at Veterans Village San Diego, and we keep each other in the loop for outreach. Having that network is very helpful for the guys who are filing claims and getting into the system."

The results are self-evident. Vance's students are becoming more outgoing, and they even joke around after class with the regular students. The one-time addicts are clean, stronger, and more focused on their futures.

But as successful as MMA is in combating PTSD, it's only one component of a holistic approach to ending the tormented memories and sleepless nights that too frequently follow our soldiers home after combat. No one is ever fully healed, but Vance's program helps veterans on the path to managing their anxieties and recognizing the signs of depression and anger. That's taking care of your own. 🥋



Todd Vance with students.