

# Martial-arts workouts help PTS sufferers fight their way out of the abyss

BY KELLY CRIGGER

Marine Lt. Lee Stuckey hates medications, but without them he's robbed of sleep by the sweats and tremors of post-traumatic stress. He is one among every eight Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who faces combat PTS. After two tours and a close encounter with an IED, he feels fortunate to have all his limbs, his eyesight and no serious loss of motor skills. But going home posed a new set of challenges. He was placed in the medical platoon at Camp Lejeune, N.C., with a group of fellow Marines also struggling with PTS.

"Marines get frustrated with the traditional treatment of talking it out," Stuckey says. "Guys would just go back to their barracks rooms and drink away their pain all night. It just wasn't a good situation."

An avid martial artist, Stuckey took it upon himself to drag the others into Camp Lejeune's Semper Fit gym. There, he introduced them to Andrea Lucie and her regimen of yoga, meditation, and martial arts.

"A Muay Thai combination is hard for a patient suffering from traumatic brain injury," Lucie says. "But it helps them focus because there are repetitive movements they have to remember, and it's a disciplined act. Marines are disciplined people, so they relate."

By combining vigorous mixed martial arts (MMA) workouts with yoga and meditation for relaxation, Lucie and Stuckey soon found that the Marines were adjusting and sleeping better.

Quite simply, Marines are more interested in physical challenges like martial arts than sitting in group therapy talking about how they feel. They'd rather hit something. MMA provides that outlet so they don't take it out on themselves or others.

"MMA humbles Marines," Stuckey says. "It shows them they don't have to be aggressive – that it's OK to admit when you're suffering."

In San Diego, former Army Sgt. Todd Vance, a veteran of more than 200 combat missions, was going through the same hell as Stuckey, but without a list of medications or a barracks full of comrades to help him.

"I was bad," Vance says. "I was rated an 8 out of 10 on the PTSD scale. I drank until I blacked out, just to sleep. I got into fights all the time, and took a job working construction so I didn't have to

talk to anyone. MMA played a huge role in my recovery. If I had a rough day, I could go to the gym and get on the bags until my knuckles were raw."

Vance also sought support at the Mission Valley VA Hospital in San Diego, where many of his fellow veterans had slid into deep depressions, and where he eventually found a meaningful job. That's also where he got an idea. An avid Muay Thai fighter, he worked out a deal with his gym to conduct free MMA classes for veterans. "For about three months, it was the same five guys every week. Now we have about 15 or 20 regulars, and the guys essentially have free memberships to train every day."

Vance's veterans had a different degree of PTS than Stuckey. At Camp Lejeune, Stuckey's Marines had the safety of their barracks. The same wasn't true on the West Coast, where homelessness and drug addiction were prevalent among Vance's students. That presented an obstacle greater than the baseline PTS itself.

At the heart of the problem is the elevated state of mind soldiers have when in combat, resembling a chemically induced high, which they come to feel is normal. When

they search for that same feeling when they return – through reckless driving, fighting, and in some cases extreme sports – MMA provides a self-contained outlet. It also provides camaraderie and brotherhood among participants, not entirely unlike a military unit.

In both cases, the results are positive. Vance's formerly strung-out students are now outgoing and upbeat. Former addicts are now clean, getting strong, and focused on grappling and kickboxing competitions. At Camp Lejeune, the Marines at Semper Fit are coping better than ever, and Lucie is pushing for an in-depth study on the effects of MMA as a treatment for PTS.

*Kelly Crigger is a former Army lieutenant colonel. He is the author of three books on mixed martial arts, and his articles have appeared at MMAJunkie.com and in Military Times and FIGHT! magazine.*



Army veteran Todd Vance has shown fellow veterans how MMA can help kick PTS.