

THOUGHTS ON VETERANS' MEMORIES

By Dawson Brown

Formerly ESWN Brown, USN, 1973-1977

The great philosopher Bertrand Russell theorized that memories are created from a compilation of sensory experience. His major premise was that everything one senses is filed away into categories in one's memory banks, and makes sense only in the context of past experiences. "Stock memories" of people, places, and events help shape our current perceptions and form the basis for future memories. Our old memories help us process our current reality, so that our memories make sense to us. As children experience the world around them, they store imprecise memories of their experiences. Thus, the memories of early youth are not easily retrieved. Sometimes such memories are only present in small bits and pieces because cohesive memories can only be formed after one has had enough similar experiences to allow for the creation of an intact memory category. As one grows older and has more life experience, the memories are more readily processed and categorized. This process is complicated by the fact that our five senses, while amazing, are not perfect. Memories can be distorted because of the imperfect perceptions we gain through the senses, and the emotions experienced while our memories are being formed. Memories of military experiences are the same as all memories in this respect. However, because the military experience is unique and exposes servicemen and women to harsh, extreme, sometimes unnatural conditions which are different from anything they have experienced or ever imagined experiencing, the memories can be even more confused and disjointed. Sometimes they are difficult to process rationally, and produce troubling emotions. Reconciling and coming to grips with memories from military life is therefore a challenge for many Veterans, and can impact their adjustment to civilian life.

It is truly miraculous how the human brain and nervous system convert the stimuli received by the senses into bioelectric protein composites. Science can explain how three and one-half billion brain neurons can convert bioelectric brain impulses from our senses into protein memory chains. What science cannot explain fully is the retrieval mechanism that allows us to re-experience our memories. Science cannot tell us why it is that a certain smell can immediately trigger the memory of one's grandmother. It is not fully understood how a smell not only brings back a distinct memory of her home-made bread – its smell, taste, and warmth – but it also elicits memories of your grandmother standing before you again – her face, her smiles, her hugs. All of these memories flood back as a result of a smell, which triggers the re-firing of a specific protein chain.

In college, I intentionally selected certain music to play in the background while I read my assignments. When later studying the material, I would play back the same music to help trigger the memory of details contained in the reading. Science cannot entirely explain why this happens – why a particular piece of music can carry a person back to a special time or a special person or a location where one first heard the song, or why the song could trigger the memory of details from a book once read while listening to it. But it is clear that present sensory experiences can trigger a past memory, complete with an automatic emotional reaction and physical response. This explains why the sound of a car backfiring might cause a combat veteran to hit the deck and find cover, or why the sight of a trash can along the side of a residential street prompts an Iraqi War veteran, driving his mother to church, to unconsciously, spontaneously (and irrationally) swerve his Jeep toward the center of the road away from the trash can – his memory of IED explosions still fresh.

Our memory patterns are shaped by memories of other similar past experiences and are stored like prints from a worn photocopy machine which is low on ink. The original print is not very clear, and each attempt at recall leads to an even fuzzier print. Our memories may seem clear as day to us – but they often are not completely accurate reflections of our experiences. The fact that eye-witness recollections are notoriously faulty and conflicting is evidence of this. Or, for example, one might believe he accurately remembers a past Thanksgiving dinner with family, and can even clearly picture in his mind’s eye those who were present. However, when he looks at pictures from the celebration, he actually remembers some people who were not present and has forgotten people who were present. The Thanksgiving memory was not consistent with the reality because that memory had been shaped, confused, and distorted by actual or desired memories of other family gatherings. I experienced another example of this I returned to my elementary school, middle school, and high school, and noticed, much to my surprise, how tiny the classrooms seemed – how much smaller the hallways, stairs, and common areas seemed. The bathrooms, cafeteria, and even the playground, it seemed, had gotten smaller! Logic tells me that no one had shrunk the things I remembered. Reason tells me that the fault lies in my distorted memory, which was formed based on perceptions I had as a child.

How much information one takes note of, commits to memory, or forgets is shaped by one’s previous memories and by one’s state of mind. One’s memories are consciously or subconsciously molded by the feelings and emotions connected to the experiences or by the current state of mind of the individual recalling the experiences. This is so because the software of the “photocopier” in the mind causes the brain to make alterations when a memory is retrieved. A happy individual’s memories might actually be distorted to coincide with the current

happy state of mind. Similarly, an unhappy individual's memories might be distorted by their current state of unhappiness.

Some of what and how we remember is subconscious and cannot be controlled. However, how we process and come to grips with our memories is, at least in part, a matter of conscious choice. Individuals who have a healthy self-image and positive attitude find ways to make sense of and learn from their memories of past experiences – even bad ones. A person who has gone through life with a “glass half-empty” tends to see the negatives in every situation and tends to commit those negatives to memory. Conversely, a person who views life with a “glass half-full” tends to focus on the positive and commit those positives to memory. We all know of situations where two people have very different memories after experiencing the very same conditions or event. For example, two people attend the same party - one remembers the laughter, the friendly conversation, the warmth of the fire; the other remembers bad music, the disorganized kitchen, and the fact that the hostess (heaven forbid) ran out of dip. Similarly, people look back on their childhoods differently. Those who have not moved past their negative memories tend to wallow in their situation; they whine “if only my mom and dad had done thus and such, my life would be better. It was how I was raised that causes me to behave the way I do.” They are frozen and stunted by their memories. Those with positive, healthy outlooks who have gained mature insights and have come to grips with their memories of both good and bad experiences, have resigned themselves to an understanding that their parents did the best that they could. It is they, not their parents who are responsible for their lot in life.

One's outlook can affect how one deals with good and bad memories. However, dealing with memories of military life in a healthy way can be especially challenging. As service members are first introduced to military life, they are not unlike young children in the way they

process and record the memories of their experiences. Because experiences of military service are so different from anything previously experienced or imagined, no framework of similar past memories exists to help the brain process the experiences when the memories are formed. There are usually no past composite “pictures” from which to process these memories. The senses do not always accurately record their perceptions and are influenced by the emotions experienced during the perceptions. The brain has difficulty processing and categorizing these experiences into memories that make sense.

Civilian life does not provide the necessary “memory categories” or a relevant context for the many unique emotionally-charged or adrenalin-laced experiences of military life. During times of extremely high stress – such as while under fire for the first time or storming into terrorist strongholds – military personnel cope with the fear and do as they are trained, while their “memory makers” go into high gear taking it all in. Their memories may be sharp and vivid pictures of very strange, almost surreal events, accompanied by unsettled, sometimes irrational or incongruent emotions – a mix of deep sorrow and dark humor. Memories of the first days of boot camp, the first challenges of rate training school, the first tour of duty in a foreign country, and the first flights into a war zone or the horrors of combat are often distorted and disjointed, as are the emotions associated with those experiences. Logically inconsistent memories can trigger almost absurd emotional reactions. After experiencing this unique and often frightening or traumatic reality, it is no wonder that veterans remain unsettled and sometimes have difficulty readjusting when they return to the relative calmness of civilian life.

Plato was right when he said that we only “see” faint shadows on the wall of our own cave. Military personnel do not have the luxury of remaining comfortably in the safe, dark “cave” of civilian life. They are literally “thrown” from the cave into a harsh, never before

experienced “sunlight,” and they cannot possibly return to the “cave” unchanged. They will never again be able to view the world as they once had. Yet veterans, while cursed with memories of the worst of times, are also are blessed with special memories of the best of times. Because the military truly is a family, held together by the unique and extreme challenges and fears, their common experiences force them to face, the same negative stresses that can traumatically affect those in the military can also help forge bonds between veterans and those in active service – who have shared something special and to which only they can entirely relate.

It is my contention that, after leaving active service, it is possible to actively and objectively dip into the mixed bag of good and bad memories (and the mixed-bag of distorted emotions that accompany them) – perhaps to make sense of it all, or to at least find a balance. It is my hope to look back on my service years with the benefit of hindsight, and color my stories with a bit of humor (where possible to find it). Readers who are not veterans may gain some insight into the military experience. Veterans who read my stories may identify, be moved, and perhaps make better sense of their own mixed bag of memories.

Further readings I recommend.....

Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time by Michael Schermer, Ph. D. (2007)

Paranormality: Why We See What Isn't There by Richard Wiseman, Ph. D. (2011)

The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell, edited by R.E. Egner and L.E. Denonn, London (1961)

