

THE WHITE HAT SYNDROME

Many of my generation grew up with the understanding that the good guys wore “White Hats” and always prevailed in the fight. The concept portrayed is those that fought fair always won their battles. Life has taught me that the “White Hat” mentality will cost lives and victories.

From a friend and former S.F. Captain, “No quarter. Thems the rules. That’s how we lived by making them dead.”

I have been in combat, led by “White Hats,” and watched them implode. Their Hallmark Channel vision of combat did not allow them to raise the level of violence necessary to decimate the enemy. Instead, they accepted losses that could have been avoided had they brought the Patton or LeMay attitudes on killing to battle. As has been said, if you kill enough of them, they stop fighting.

Unfortunately, it takes years of war for the real killer Officers and Senior NCOs to emerge from the ranks. These real Officers and NCOs must wade through their political rivals who were promoted because they were yes men, instead of military leaders. This applies to police as well, as we tend to promote political knee pad-wearing Chiefs instead of meat-eaters who have restraint, until the time for restraint passes.

Combat

The realities of combat taught me that you can have compassion on the battlefield when appropriate, and anyone with combat time understands this. The reality is you must be prepared to ignore compassion. It becomes a decision based on if you determine if they are good or bad. As has been said, war is not pretty. In fact, it is very brutal on both sides, especially on the side of the loser.

Case Histories

Porvenir massacre (1918)

Southern cross-border raids were taking place at this time and a violent one just occurred involving American ranchers where throats were slit, others shot and supplies stolen.

Company B of the Texas Rangers went into the nearby town, separated 15 men and boys from the women and children and shot them on a nearby hill. Town residents took their dead and moved away. The town was then burned to the ground by U.S. government troops a few days later.

While articles promote sympathy for the villagers, the raids stopped. Did the Rangers get their bad guys? Most likely. Mission accomplished.

Did they take their White Hats off for a couple of days? Most likely. From my understanding, the Ranger Company was disbanded after the incident. Woke leadership has always existed.

WWII combat stories leaked out after decades and the reality of when the White Hats came off, and the actions necessary to win was applied. You can read about General Curtis LeMay's fire bombings of Japan at the strategic level in "Black Snow," by James M. Scott.

"With the Old Breed," E.B. Sledge's account of the island hopping in WWII and the brutality of ground combat was sanitized in the movie, "The Pacific." Yes, you must read to get the details. Most are too graphic for the screen.

PTSD and the White Hat

What I found common among combat vets of the past, was to talk it out on the boat ride back and never talk about it again. Now, combat vets can hang out in a bar back home the following week.

By compartmentalizing issues, they will sometimes fester to the surface through drinking, family problems and other visible signs. Suicide was the ultimate signal of a problem.

As time went on, more and more older veterans were interviewed. Some came to peace with their actions, some reconciled what they had done as being necessary. They let out the brutality of what it was like to the next generation of Americans. Amateur historians and combat vets like me were able to piece together a few simple facts. The violence of war does not change. Also, it is still handled the same way by individuals and chains of command.

Chain of Commands (COC)

COC's get the missions accomplished by empowering the lower ranks, mostly enlisted, sometimes Captain on down. Upper Chains of Command avoid the gory details most of the time and focus on promoting the glory of a few individuals to defer attention to their screw ups. They do not want to know what really happened. They would rather focus on their future careers by throwing a few awards around, giving speeches to other Officers and moving on without really knowing the facts of the battle.

I have served under Commanders that were ultra "White Hat" and heavily religious, resulting in their nervous breakdowns in the H.Q., not in combat itself, rather, in the rear with the gear so to speak. Their Hallmark world would not let them accept the reality of combat. They lived in a pompous elite world of officerdom that promoted looking after their careers, rather than that of their soldiers that got them promoted. It is what it is. Screw up, move up and make general.

This applies to the NCO ranks as well. Officers prefer to promote "lap dog" NCO's who do not rock the boat. These lap dogs will fold in combat and I know of one 1st Sergeant who curled up

fatal during combat ops, while their soldiers were fighting and dying around them. The organization kept them despite their conduct.

The higher the “White Hat” gets promoted, the more soldiers they can cause to unnecessarily be killed or wounded.

Individual Soldiers

Reading WWII accounts of Marines bayonetting all bodies in a just blown-up pillbox in the South Pacific is an example. Describing that the dead enemy did not bleed, but those still alive did when getting stuck, was telling. It is a picture for those who did the task to not unsee.

Soldiers I know who got the job done, had to take off the White Hat. They solved problems quickly and efficiently and put emotions aside to accomplish the task at hand. Some had a differently calibrated scale of “what is important” and how they emotionally handled events and what significance they applied to the event.

Soldiers came home and then attempted to put the White Hat back on. Some were not able to wear it again because they could not reconcile with what they had done and seen. I know 3 individuals from a small group, from my time in Special Ops that have committed suicide. All had multiple psych evals, screenings and passed an intensive selection process. PTSD impacts everyone.

The reality of the White Hat

In my view, once it comes off, it will never go back on. It is a grey area that combat vets dwell in. The illusion of a fair fight is gone. Win at all costs is the theme.

Combat Vets make the best of their lives and attempt to work through the issues they have on a day-to-day basis.

It has been said that the most savage fighting man on the planet is a 17-year-old soldier who is fresh for the fight. Point them and they attack.

I would argue that a middle-aged combat vet with a bit more weight and grey hair is far more deadly and savage than the younger generation. They have lived life, understand life, and do not want to go back to that place they have been before. They do not care about artificial rules and the Geneva Convention. They want to kill quickly and efficiently and get back to their boring and mundane life.

Further, they understand life and if they must leave it, their attitude is “Screw it, let us take care of business at all costs. I have had a good run should it be my time to die.”

Finally, I know why we have a generation addicted to combat (GWOT) as it allows them to focus on the next mission and not dwell on the past problems.

With that, Combat Vets need to put small, but positive important missions in their personal path in life to help forget when they had to take the White Hat off. This helps them move on with life in a positive and meaningful way..

My lessons learned:

- Read valid history of those who have gone before and what they endured.
- If you want to serve in the military for a short time, do so, but understand what you are signing up for.
- If you want to make it a career, give back by teaching the next generation before you punch out (retire).
- Be brutally honest with your soldiers and make training as realistic as possible so the jump to combat will be a minimal as possible.
- Rules of Engagement are written by a JAG Officer with no real-life experience who will not be on the same battlefield as you. Understand this and make life saving combat decisions vs. “White Hat” decisions that will get you or your people killed.
- Make peace with your combat decisions ahead of time by talking with combat vets and getting the “real deal” as to what you will encounter. This will make any PTSD less impacting. It is controlled violence vs. uncontrolled violence. Know the difference and come and to terms with it.
- If you chose to go the Officer route, realize many good officers get out as Captains. They either become disillusioned or do not want to become political as the Officer Corps requires. Just look at our current crop of General Officers and decide for yourself on how far you want to climb the political ladder. Be careful not to sell your soul for rank.
- If you go the Officer or NCO route, take care of your people before you take care of your own career. Doing this will ensure you are promoted as excellence can be your only result and it is hard to hide it.
- Combat is tough enough, living with it after long-term can be just as tough. Communicate issues with those you trust and vent. As with a long road march, put one foot in front of the other and keep moving forward.
- As for me, I don’t have a White Hat. I know the deal and keep that mindset in its place by channeling positive thoughts and actions. It will always be there, ready to dust off and put to use, should the need arise. I prefer not to dwell there, but like a pistol in the concealed carry mode. It is ready and insurance for one’s survival.
- LEOs, your world is just as violent. Take what you can use from this and apply it. Remember Uvalde and all the “White Hats” there, that would not go in and save kids.

About the Author

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