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Out of the P.O.W. Camp But Still Imprisoned

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PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, is in the news a lot lately. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, in the United States alone approximately 5.2 million veterans experience symptoms of PTSD.

Many people believe that PTSD first appeared in veterans of the Vietnam War. But the phenomenon is as old as war itself. The condition has gone by a variety of names over the years, including "battle fatigue," "shell shock," "soldier's heart," "nostalgia" and "operational exhaustion." It entered the public consciousness as "PTSD" in 1980, when it was added to DSM-III (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association) as a separate identifiable condition under that name.

We do not know the full numbers on how many soldiers who have served in recent wars are suffering from PTSD. But if we've learned anything from the past, it is that history tends to repeat itself. The good news is that there are a lot of ways to help veterans deal with PTSD now. I was lucky enough to learn one way many years ago as a teenage veteran of World War II.

When World War II began with the Nazi German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, I was a 10-year-old Boy Scout living in Warsaw. When I was 12-years-old, my Scoutmaster recruited me into the clandestine Underground Army, where I acted as a courier while we were trained on weapons and military tactics. At 13, I accompanied my commander on a secret mission into the Warsaw Ghetto to liaise with Jewish resistance leaders.

At 15, I fought in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising -- two months of the most vicious street fighting, where every block, every square, every building was heavily contested. We were short of weapons, ammunition and food, while the Germans threw everything they had at us -- ground troops with the most advanced weaponry, rockets, artillery, aerial bombardment, robot tanks, flamethrowers, explosives.

Sick, malnourished, separated from my family, I was herded into a cattle car as a 15-year-old P.O.W. and transported to a German camp, where conditions were dismal. I managed to escape that camp on the back of an American Red Cross truck. Frankly, it's a miracle I survived the war.

But survival is not enough. I was out of the P.O.W. camp, but I wasn't free of the experiences. I was changed. I had nightmares. I was young. I was resilient. I was a fighter. But that did not make it possible for me to go back to being a normal schoolboy.

I was 16-years-old that summer of 1945. I did not know what was happening to me, nor how to deal with it. But I saw an army doctor who encouraged me to write down my memories. He said forcing myself to remember would allow me to put the war behind me and start a new life. I had never written much before, having left school during the war when I was 11, but I jumped at the chance to try anything to move on.

Some who experienced wartime horrors similar to mine chose to lock away those memories. They turned their backs on the past, didn't tell their new friends or family what they had gone through, and distracted themselves with other activities. Each of us who experiences terrible things in war gets over it in a different way.

I saw the doctor who suggested I write about my experiences only one time. I was the one who had to do the work. I was the one who had to try to get better. I spent that whole summer immersed in the memories. It took me three months to finish the diary. I wasn't thinking about how the stories would unfold, just that it was very important that I unload them in some way.

Things didn't get better right away. I still had nightmares for several years. Adjusting to a life outside of being a soldier was difficult. I had lost so many friends, and I missed my family (who I did not see again until I was 30).

Recovery can be a slow process. There are also some things that are just too big to forget. There are some things you won't want to forget. And there are some things you simply can't forget. But writing helped me. With age, with wisdom, with distance, and with safety, I have made a sort of peace with the past -- although I still find it hard to accept, or even to comprehend, the inhumanity of that period.

Millions of soldiers have fought, and many have died, but those who are still struggling to live should know they are not alone, and help is possible.

My diary, *The Color of Courage: A Boy at War: The World War II Diary of Julian Kulski*, will be published by Aquila Polonica on November 11, Veterans Day, with the hope that others will connect with this shared experience. With more than 150 photos, maps and illustrations, *The Color of Courage* also includes a unique element: 11 Digital Extras, short videos of original historic film and audio material that accompany the book.



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**The Color of Courage: A
Boy at War: The World
War II Diary of Julian
Kulski**
by Julian E. Kulski

