

# The Desert Storm Experience

## Managing stress in combat

How does one adequately describe something very few of us have experienced, such as the stress of combat? My vote goes to the story told to me by a Navy pilot who has experienced the stress of combat as a young pilot in Vietnam and as a seasoned reservist in Operation Desert Storm. As he related his experience covering 20 plus years, a recurring story emerged of intense, prolonged stress grounded in high anticipation and anxiety, punctuated by relatively short periods of extreme terror.

What follows was described as an average in any branch of the military, in law enforcement, and as teachers in many of our public schools! The mechanism our brain uses to handle stress is common to all of us.

### **The pilot's story:**

As the day begins, you feel like you have already run two to three miles, and you have only just left your bunk. Breathing is difficult and tiresome, so you sit around and sigh a lot. Your nerves are so shot that you become hypersensitive to the point that every little noise is frightening. In the briefing room, you look around to see who is not present and think of who might not be there tomorrow, you fight to keep from losing your breakfast. After a while, food loses its taste and become a low priority. Extreme weight loss is common. If you are lucky, you learn to live on snacks and coffee — lots of coffee.

As you walk out to your aircraft you try to convince yourself that everything is okay. However, you already have the shakes before your preflight is complete. The shakes, nausea, and anxiety are masked only by concentration on the mission ahead. Concentration on details is required because you know if you miss something during preflight or on some checklist. It could cause you not to come

---

---

by **Albert H. Bieser, MS**

---

---

back. The stress continues to build and you are still on the ground.

You are now enroute to your target. There is no talking; only occasional forced laughter. Although you are in an airconditioned aircraft, you have already sweated through your flight suit. As you approach the target, you fight the ever increasing adrenaline and the mounting anticipation. Over the target, the ability to concentrate becomes increasingly more difficult. In your headset you hear the enemy's target acquisition radar sweeping the sky looking for you. You now anticipate the shear terror of hearing the solid tone indicating missile lock. There is an extreme natural impulse to jerk the plane around and "Get the hell out of there!" But, you carry on to the target.

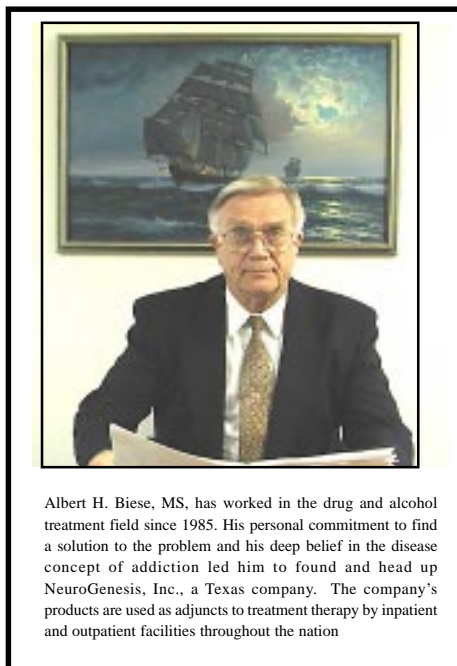
Due to the mounting stress, gaps are produced in your memory. Your recall is filled with blank moments, many of which are never filled. Adrenaline has filled your body to the point that you must

put the plane on autopilot because you are shaking so badly, and your reaction time has slowed dramatically. When you get back, you have a hell of time getting out of the aircraft, and many times you need assistance. You feel like your arms and legs weigh a ton and you move very slowly, but your thought processes are going a hundred miles a second. In a blur, many things stream through your mind: "God, I'm glad to be back...I'm sorry about those who did not come back. I'm really going to miss Buddy. I wonder if the next time I won't come back?"

A pilot doesn't get out of his aircraft, debrief, sit down in the ready room, kick back, and think, "Well, I did my job for today." It's not an eight-to-five job.

I can remember flying a mission in Vietnam and feeling so exhausted after it that I did not know how I was going to get up for my second and third missions of the day. By the time I had flown my last mission, I was so physically exhausted that all I wanted to do was fall into my bunk and sleep. But none of us could. You are so wired on adrenaline that it feels like your eyes are wired open. So you sit up and "talk" to your buddies. Extreme exhaustion makes communication in normal tones impossible. It was common to find your self screaming and shouting at the person sitting next to you because you were sure that was the only way he was going to hear and understand you, even though the compartment was otherwise quiet!

In Vietnam, we never did eliminate or control the adrenaline, anxiety, or anticipation. We masked it long enough with alcohol or other drugs, especially Seconal, to allow us to pass out for a few hours. We never did really sleep. We "came to" several times a night experiencing feelings of dread and anticipation of our next mission, and at



Albert H. Bieser, MS, has worked in the drug and alcohol treatment field since 1985. His personal commitment to find a solution to the problem and his deep belief in the disease concept of addiction led him to found and head up NeuroGenesis, Inc., a Texas company. The company's products are used as adjuncts to treatment therapy by inpatient and outpatient facilities throughout the nation

## Desert Storm

---

least once a week we awoke to the feeling. "Today my number is up." These thoughts were also lessened by more alcohol or drugs, and we could rest quietly, though knowing that in a couple of hours these whole cycle would repeat itself. These feelings were also experienced by the other squadrons in Desert Storm.

This type of stress does not last for a week or two. In Vietnam, 50 to 60 line days were common. We flew seven days a week, completing two to three missions a day. The military keeps count of how many pilots and aircrews are lost to missiles and anti-aircraft artillery, but there is no count of those to the deadly combination of physical and mental exhaustion produced by combat stress.

Our squadron took the dietary supplement beCALM'd during Operation Desert Storm. beCALM'd is an amino acid, vitamin, and mineral formulation produced by NeuroGenesis, Inc. We asked for it because a member of our squadron is a science teacher in civilian life, and he told us it can provide the nutrition needed to restore neurotransmitters that are heavily depleted while the body functions to inhibit the harmful effects of stress. Half of our squadron was experiencing combat for the first time, and the rest are Vietnam veteran. We ranged in from early 20's to the mid 40s and we were all in excellent physical condition. Due to current naval regulation, all naval personal undergo periodic urinary test for drugs. None of our squadron members showed any evidence of drug use before, during, or after the study, the use (and availability) of alcohol was extremely limited.

After a week or so, we began to compare notes with other similar

squadrons, and found in general, that:

\* We had the ability to concentrate better before, during and after the mission, relax quickly after mission, sleep more soundly, and not awake in anticipation of next mission; and concentrate more going into the target (Both veterans and rookies reported they did not feel the intense anxiety and anticipation reported by other squadrons.)

\* Veterans who had earlier experienced adrenaline shakes indicated the shakes were less severe and shorter in duration (3-5 minutes).

\* We were able to debrief more quickly and completely because details normally lost to the adrenaline rush could now be recalled.

\* While other squadron members, who were not taking beCALM'd, became consumed with stress and began to eat, sleep, and live it; we would put the chocks under the wheels, shut down the aircraft, walk away, relax, fall asleep quickly, and have a little bit of peace.

\* During the later part of war, and after the entire squadron had been under high stress for several months, one aircraft received severe anti-aircraft artillery damage to one engine and main wing spar. The crew reported they remained under control and focused. They were able to put the fire out, run all necessary checklist, return to base, debrief clearly, relax, and fall sleep. The skipper of this crew later reported that, based on his experience in Vietnam, he is certain he could not have been able to stay focused enough to have got the plane home if he had not had beCALM'd.

\* During another mission, the crew of a severely damaged aircraft had to develop in-flight, real-time procedures to cover an emergency not covered in the manuals. This creativity was so significant that they were asked to recall

the procedure, formalize it, and add it to existing manuals. Yet it is well documented that creativity while under stress is rare.

\* The squadron had greatly improved overall effectiveness and efficiency, and we did not have to abuse alcohol and other drugs to relieve the effect of stress. The antithesis of this was demonstrated by two cases in World War II.

1. None of the veterans, Russians or Germans, who fought during the siege of Stalingrad, lived to age 50. Few lived to 45, and most died soon after their 40th birthday. All of these individuals had suffered extreme stress 24 hours a day for more than six months.

2. A study was done by Stewart Woli that reported on the effect of stress by comparing the life expectancy of American men who had been in Japanese prison camps to that of Japanese men in American camps during World War II. The Japanese camps were extremely confining, had poor food in small quantities, and very little medical availability. The American camps by comparison, provided food and medical assistance comparable to that received by the American population at large. Many U.S. camps even allowed considerable freedom of motion for these prisoners.

In general, three times as many men died in the Japanese camps as did in the American camps. Six years after their release, twice the expected number of those imprisoned in the Japanese camps died from heart disease, more than twice from cancer, and more than four times as many from gastrointestinal tract problems. Twice the number died from suicide, three times the expected number died as the result of accidents and nine times the expected number died of pulmonary tuberculosis.