

# Basic Training For Life After Combat

Sponsored by The Merritt Center



## Alarming Statistics

Today, returning Iraq and Afghanistan war vets are treated with more respect than their Vietnam predecessors; they are welcomed home as patriotic heroes

But this adulation cannot hide some alarming statistics:

- More than 25% of returning combat vets are diagnosed with PTSD or other problems; adding undiagnosed returnees could raise that number to over 50%
- 22 returned vets commit suicide *every day*, for a total of more than 8,000 suicides each year



Soldiers returning from combat today – both men and women – have many more resources available to help with these problems than did those from the Vietnam and Gulf War eras. Yet without proper direction, what chance do they have?

## Returning Veterans are at Risk

Returning vets often suffer some form of mental dysfunction:

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Military Sexual Trauma
- Traumatic Brain Injury and other issues

Aside from the anguish these conditions cause, they also make it difficult, often impossible, for returnees to reenter the stable lives they knew before combat.

## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD describes a collection of difficulties some people have when dealing with the stresses of daily life after they have had a traumatic experience. Many who have experienced trauma (including combat veterans) have common reactions after the trauma. *These reactions occur naturally and have nothing to do with personal strengths or weaknesses.* The reactions can include, but are not limited to: a heightened startle response, nightmares, obsessive thoughts, compulsive actions, isolation, and sleep difficulties.

## Military Sexual Trauma (MST)

Military Sexual Trauma occurs when any form of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, or unwanted sexual activities take place. Many of the symptoms of PTSD are experienced by those with MST.

## Other Common Problems

**Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)** — TBI can result when an external force causes damage to the brain. TBI can be *focal*, to only one specific area of the brain, or it can be *diffuse*, involving more than one area of the brain.

TBI can be the result of a closed head injury or from a penetrating head trauma. When the head violently hits an object the resulting traumatic brain injury is usually a closed head injury. Simple whiplash can cause a closed head injury. When an object such as a bullet pierces the skull and damages the brain, it is classified as a penetrating head injury.

**Physical Trauma** — This is (1) a physical injury or wound caused by external force or violence; (2) an emotional or psychological shock producing disordered feelings or behavior; or (3) a painful emotional experience that causes anxiety and other stress reactions.

**Flashbacks** — These are extremely vivid images that cause one to feel an event from the past is happening again. Flashbacks are serious signals of distress. Professional help is necessary to resolve them, but there are effective, non-drug treatments that can decrease the intensity and fre-

quency of flashbacks.

Traumatic events like these often are put in the “back of our mind” when they occur, because the body focuses entirely on immediate physical safety. They stay in the body/mind awaiting release. Events similar to the trauma-producing situation can “trigger” flashbacks and other stress reactions.

If veterans who suffer from any of these afflictions aren’t diagnosed soon after they return from combat, their problems can become compounded. They may develop dysfunctional behavior at home. Or they could have difficulty re-acclimating to the work they did before combat. Many turn to substance abuse for relief.

And if they are married – or in a committed relationship – with children, as most are, they cannot help but put their families at risk as they try, usually without much success, to reintegrate into their former lives.

## **Where to Turn?**

Traditional methods for treating PTSD and other maladies tend to be medical in nature: prescribe something to dampen the symptoms without identifying or treating the root cause of those symptoms

## **An Alternative Approach**

But there is an alternative approach, a way out of this endless nightmare, a methodology that:

- Helps returning vets deal with factors that prevent them from reclaiming a normal life.
- Teaches exercises to help vets regain control of their lives.
- Supplements the educational aspect by helping the vets learn how to relax again.

The Merritt Center offers a program that provides all of this and more.

## **The Merritt Center**

The Merritt Center, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization founded in 1987 by Betty Merritt, is dedicated to individual and group renewal and empowerment. Retreat programs are held in a charming, rustic lodge tucked away in the rural community of Payson, Arizona (about an hour and a half by car from Phoenix). Among its most attractive features are a rugged forest climate, healthy meals, hiking, hammocks, hot tubs, and clean mountain air.

## ***The Merritt Center Vet Program***

Since 2006 the Merritt Center has offered a special educational retreat program for returning combat veterans. With the assistance of mentors, who are veterans themselves, and a variety of energy/body workers and mental health practitioners, vet participants discover ways to reorder their personal priorities and rid themselves of the toxins of mind, body, emotions, and spirit.

## ***The Vet Program Mission***

The mission of the Vet Program is to share information with returning veterans, to help them in their return to civilian life. Most of the process of coming home deals with managing everyday life. Sometimes it's difficult to understand what's normal in military-to-civilian transitions, personal relationships, and mental/emotional responses.

Part of the Merritt Center's mission is to provide program participants with help in identifying issues they face that need additional support and, if needed, where to get available professional services.

## **How the Vet Program Works**

Separate programs are held for men, for women, and for vets and their families — spouse and children. Participants can choose to attend four



weekends over six months, or one seven-day program.

The Merritt Center Vet Program is completely free to attenders and mentors, including room, board, the program itself, and the assistance of body workers and other professionals who donate their time and services to the program.

## **The Setting**

The program is held at the Merritt Center in Payson, Arizona. The Center is located on a 13-acre tract of hill-country forest land. The environment is quiet, roomy, relaxing, and — most importantly — imparts a sense of safety and security to par-



participants. The layout provides space for both communal gatherings and solitary time.

## **Program Goals**

The goals of the vet program are to help participants:

- Recognize and release triggers of trauma
- Release the negative experiences of combat
- Use new skills to reduce stress, nightmares, flashbacks, and hostile behavior
- Reteach the mind to expect and trust safety
- Create a new “band” of brothers and sisters, who will share the lessons learned and provide an ongoing support group as vets return to their civilian lives

The program also offers these value-added benefits:

- Reconnecting with other vets
- Learning that they are not alone in their combat experience
- Vet mentors who have experienced combat
- The renewed support of family, friends, and community

## **Program Content**

In general, the four-weekend and seven-day programs cover the following important steps:

- Teaching the skills needed to achieve the goals described above

- Sharing personal experiences and stories
- Collecting symbols of “walking the talk”
- Identifying a dream of a new life and the blocks that prevent that dream from coming true, then releasing the blocks of mind, body, and spirit
- Celebrating the new life dream
- Inviting family and friends to acknowledge the vets’ progress

The family program includes all this, plus special topics and activities for spouses and children.

Numerous tools and techniques are used in the program to help participants gain re-entry into the world they knew before combat.

**Talking Circle** — Veterans take turns describing as much or as little of their experience as they wish. Eventually all come to realize that they share essentially the same experiences and the same or similar problems.

**Cycle of Life** — Attenders learn about the stages of the life cycle that occur at different key points in one’s life, and are taught to apply this overriding structure to their own situations.

**Stress-Release and Other Exercises** — These help vets reduce trigger frequency and intensity. They include shaking, trauma-release exercises (TRE), tapping (also known as TFT), meditation, and journaling.

**One-on-One Consultations** — In addition to the communal meetings and activities, Betty and the vet mentors make themselves available for private consultations with vet attenders.

**Body/Energy Work** — Time is set aside each weekend — or at designated times during the seven-day program — for vets to take advantage of the body and energy work provided by volunteer facilitators. Vets sign up for as many as three or four sessions in such disciplines as:

- Massage
- Kiatsu
- Healing touch
- Yoga, including yoga nidra
- Reiki

**Ceremony** — The role of ceremony is vital to the program’s success, so vets participate in numerous such events that help them create a new normal life. Among the most important are:

- Creating a walking stick and a talking stick for their own and others’ use,
- On Sunday hikes to a nearby Native Ameri-

can ruin, participants have the chance to attest to what they are grateful for, what they wish to add to their lives, and what they want to eliminate from their lives,

- Campfires, where veterans have the chance to continue the bonding process that began when they first met.
- Music, including listening to violin music that reflects the mood of the group, and participatory drumming.

**Graduation** — The final ceremony in the program is a formal graduation, to which vet families and friends are invited. At the graduation, among other validations, vets are made even more aware of the growing support group of people who “have their back.”

### ***Does the Vet Program Work?***

Probably the best indicator of the Merritt Center Vet Program’s success is the fact that so many participants return to the program as mentors. Program graduates have used such expressions as “life-saving” and “miracle” to describe the turnaround in their lives that the program has helped them create.

Success stories range from a man who checked his house’s “perimeter” — doors, windows, locks — every night for thirty years and was unable to hold a job. After graduating from the program his domestic vigilance ended and he has had meaningful employment ever since. Another vet could not commit to a relationship because of the fear generated by PTSD. Since the program, this vet has had the same partner for over five years.

**Testimonials** — Many graduates offer testimonials to the change the program has brought about in their lives. Here is what some of these vets had to say:

*“The healing at the Merritt Center was better than years of medication. This is a place of acceptance, understanding, and caring. It is a safe place to release the toxins that imprison you.”*

*“I came to the Merritt Center ready to end it all. But I was given the knowledge to move forward. My life has been forever changed.”*

*“Betty, I know you were put in my path for a reason. You have given me the support, courage, tools, strength, and healing I needed to see the beauty in life again! “*

*“The Merritt Center Vet Program has been a life-saver, a place of hope, and a foundation for strong recovery. I recommend the program to all veterans of foreign wars.”*

## **Betty Merritt**

Betty Merritt is the creator and director of The Merritt Center. She has been President of the Merritt Center Board of Directors since 1993. Betty has spoken regularly to state and national organizations, and has created numerous workshops and programs dealing with renewal and empowerment.

Betty created a free program for returning veterans, and held the first vet program in 2006. She is the creator of Kiatsu, a body-work technique. Betty is a certified Healing Touch practitioner and teacher. She is the author of *Driving Lessons*, a book of life lessons.

## **Contact Us**

To learn more about the Merritt Center Vet Program, call or write Betty or visit the Merritt Center web page. From the web page, take a look at the public service announcement about the vet program, and review the online workbook that provides in-depth information about the program.

## **The Merritt Center**

Betty Merritt  
PO Box 2087, Payson AZ 85547  
(928) 474-4268  
mcenteraz@gmail.com  
<http://www.merrittcenter.org/>