

# PTSD Recovery: Intrusive Thoughts



Ken Jones, PhD



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Intrusive thoughts are the high energy stress bubbles that blow up in the faces of combat survivors. They slam us into the multidimensional horror and anguish of our inescapable memories. Some flashbacks happen without a trigger. I've learned that, when I pay attention to my flashback, something has happened around me that triggered it. The basic flashback triggers are sensory. This means that our senses feel, taste, smell, see or hear something we associate with combat and triggers the intrusive thought.

Here's one that took me a couple of years to figure out. We have a high-quality public radio station in Anchorage. This station plays classical music most of the day. I listened to the station during the workday. Sometimes, while working on a project, suddenly I'm standing at attention. I hear the names of our most recent KIAs being read. I smell red dust, feel sweat running down my face, my fists tighten and my teeth clench. My rage rises, wanting more than anything to get some payback. I'm there, at a 25th Infantry battalion base camp along Highway 1 in central I Corps.

"...his unswerving commitment to his duty and his unselfish sacrifice are a credit to himself, his unit and the United States Army."

The words came forth with no conscious effort. How many times have I heard the words? How many wives and parents and children heard the words? The starched neatly folded American flag presented to them formally. The three volleys of seven shots fired and echoing in the distance. The loss, the hurt, the desperation, the disbelief set to music and a long bugler plays Taps. And the feeling described so well in a song from long ago settles on me, "[Is that all there is?](#)" Even now, the feelings come without the words to express them.

Just as quickly, I would be back in my office, soaked in sweat, heart pounding – overrun by unspeakable sadness.

It took about eight months for me to make the connection that the trigger for that flashback was a piece of soft background classical music. That piece had also been used in [the movie \*Platoon\*](#). Making this connection was the key to learning how to moderate the unexpected eruption of memories and feelings.

From then on, when that piece of music plays, I use those moments to remember and honor my brothers. It's the same me in the same place with the same trigger for a flashback as before. The difference now is that *I choose* to connect my reaction to this specific music and make a different choice about how to respond. I learned this technique from my brother, Ned Neathery, during a combat debriefing group session.

Instead of being overcome by the rage and guilt and anguish that kept me separated from my people, now I picture each of them in my mind and heart so I can say what I really feel: "I love you, brothers." What Ned and I and the other warriors in our combat debriefing group learned was that there is always more love than pain.

Feeling that we are not in control of our reactions means that something or someone else is responsible for how we feel and our behavior. Not true. Of all people, who knows better than a warrior that we are responsible for our actions, our behaviors and our choices? This part of recovery is difficult and often it's not fast. Naming our anguish, our rage and our fears we learn the relationship between ourselves and our most intimate losses. With that understanding and acceptance, we begin our journey home.

*Ken Jones is a Vietnam combat veteran (11th Cavalry 67-68), a speaker, an advocate and a writer. For help or information, visit [centerstonemilitaryservices.org](http://centerstonemilitaryservices.org).*