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combat veterans take
refuge in yoga,
discovering its ability
to soothe and repair
war-torn minds and spirits.

by Neal Pollack

In 2007 Samantha Lord was stationed in Iraq with her Army National Guard unit, assigned to some of the most stressful military police work imaginable. On some days, the communications specialist, who is also a sergeant, found herself driving top Iraqi government officials in a Humvee convoy. Constantly under threat of gunfire and mortar attacks, her nerve never wavered. "You can't mess up on those missions," she says. "They're no-fail." She didn't mess up, but she did pay a price.

Her mind remained on high alert, even after she

returned home to Massachusetts. Fourth of July fireworks made her run for cover. Plagued by memories of wartime driving, she was unable to drive her own car. There were times she felt she had to have a drink before she could even leave the house. Severe insomnia plagued her, and when she did fall asleep, she had nightmares of explosions, being shot at, or of her Humvee overturning. It was difficult to shed the feeling that every action had life-or-death consequences. "Even something like burning

at ease

Yoga offered Army National Guardswoman Samantha Lord a path back to calm and confidence after a tour of duty in Iraq.

illustrations by J. Paull Melegari





dinner," she says, "it's like you failed the mission."

Her experiences in the war were darkening her civilian life back home. "I felt severely disconnected from reality," she says. "No one here understands what I went through."

Lord attended therapy sessions at the local VA, or Veterans Affairs, center, which helped a little but not enough. The nightmares and paralyzing fears persisted. In October 2009, almost a year after she had returned from Iraq, Lord started practicing yoga with the There and Back Again program in Charlestown, Massachusetts. The teacher, Sue Lynch, understood what Samantha Lord needed, because she was a veteran herself.

"Yoga is calming," Lynch says. "You develop the ability to feel safe and in control, to be aware of what's going on. If you feel an intensity of sensation in your body, you can work with it. You don't have to take it on if it's overwhelming. Those types of cues in the practice translate to life off the mat."

Through yoga, Lord began to regain her confidence. She's also able to focus better. "I'm a much more even person," she says.

For active-duty military personnel, recently returned vets, and those who came back from the Persian Gulf or Vietnam decades ago, the problems associated with posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, can be intractable and crippling. But yoga helps soldiers deal with the effects of their wartime experiences. Thanks to yoga, many report feeling less anxiety, sleeping better, and having an easier time reintegrating into civilian life. In the past few years, yoga programs for vets, once almost impossible to find, have proliferated all over the country. Many programs were started by current or former military personnel, and in some cases, they're sponsored and funded by the military itself. "The military doesn't have a choice," says Sat Bir Khalsa, assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and director of research for the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health

and the Kundalini Research Institute. The military has to be open to it, Khalsa says, "because yoga may contribute to benefits above and beyond those provided by traditional therapies." To prove some of those benefits, Khalsa is conducting a 10-week study of yoga for veterans with PTSD, which is being funded by a Defense Department grant. The study incorporates postures, breathing techniques, meditation, deep relaxation, and more.

regaining calm and control

While serving as an artilleryman in Iraq, Paul Bradley twice suffered concussions when the vehicles he was riding in turned over. After he returned to his former life as a Boston firefighter in 2006, a doctor at the VA diagnosed him as having a traumatic brain injury and PTSD.

Loud noises drove Bradley crazy. He had trouble remembering things and would fly into violent outbursts at the slightest provocation. He responded to everything the

way a child would. "There was no thought process," he says. "I'd just react." To cope, he drank and lived, as he says, "the fast lifestyle."

Symptoms like Bradley's are common for returning veterans who suffer from PTSD, says Lynn Stoller, an occupational therapist who works with Yoga Warriors, a program for veterans in Massachusetts. With their survival dependent on hyper-vigilance at all times, soldiers at war basically reset their neurological patterns.

In regular daily living, the sympathetic nervous system, responsible for the "fight or flight" instinct, releases cortisol, the stress hormone, whenever the body senses danger. In wartime, when the body senses danger virtually all of the time, the sympathetic nervous system is cranked into permanent

continued on page 99

soft landing

Returning veterans have many yoga programs to choose from.

Bliss Divine Yoga
Miami, Florida
blissdivineyoga.com

Center for Investigating Healthy
Minds, at the Waisman Center
University of Wisconsin
Madison, Wisconsin
investigatinghealthyminds.org

Exalted Warrior Foundation
Tampa, Florida
exaltedwarrior.com

Integrative Restoration Institute
San Rafael, California
irest.us

Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health
Stockbridge, Massachusetts
kripalu.org

Kula for Karma
Franklin Lakes, New Jersey
kulaforkarma.org

There and Back Again
Cambridge, Massachusetts
thereandback-again.org

Trauma Center at Justice
Resource Institute
Brookline, Massachusetts
traumacenter.org

Yoga Nidra with Robin Carnes
Silver Spring, Maryland
yoganidranow.com

Yoga Warriors
West Boylston, Massachusetts
yogawarriors.com

embodied spirit

Yoga helped Boston firefighter Paul Bradley reengage with his life after he suffered a brain injury and PTSD while serving in Iraq.



warriors at peace

continued from page 76

overdrive, and soldiers remain in that state even after they are out of danger. “When that self-regulatory mechanism gets distorted, then it’s hard to regain it sometimes,” says Bill Donoghue, a minister, yoga practitioner, and former Marine who counsels returning soldiers. “Yoga seems to be the simplest, least expensive, and most efficient vehicle for regaining that sense of calmness and control again.”

Dave Emerson is the director of Yoga Services of the Trauma Center at Justice Resource Institute in Brookline, Massachusetts. He says that yogic breathing techniques are important for people who suffer from PTSD to learn.

Simple practices, like counting the outbreath or doing alternate-nostril breathing, can make a difference. Quickly and simply, breathwork replaces the fight-or-flight response with the relaxation response, a state of physiological relaxation, where blood pressure, heart rate, digestive functioning, and hormonal levels return to normal.

Returning soldiers, says Donoghue, have already experienced the powerful way that controlled breathing can focus and redirect the mind, even if they’ve never heard of pranayama. “An integral

“I’m not as angry after I do yoga. I’m able to function more in regular life.”

part of centering on your target is controlled breathing. So Marines can relate to that concept. They just haven’t used it, except on the firing range.”

Bradley, after struggling with PTSD for several years, saw a flyer in 2008 at the VA center for a There and Back Again yoga course. After just one class, “I left more centered and relaxed,” he says. “From there, I just got hooked on it. It’s what worked on me. Since I’ve started yoga, I’ve gotten more productive. I started seeing a counselor again. I’m able to talk about my problems, whereas before, I wanted nothing to do with it. It seems

like I’m not as angry after I do yoga. I’m able to function more in regular life.”

A DEEPER PEACE

An inability to get to sleep is one of the most common problems that returning soldiers face. A hyperactive nervous system simply doesn’t allow a body to shut down for the night.

Hugo Patrocinio, a 27-year-old Miami resident, served eight years as a Marine infantryman, including two tours of duty in Iraq. He was getting ready to go back for a third time when he was diagnosed with PTSD. He could sleep only with the help of heavy prescription medication. Psychotherapy didn’t help. Then he took a yoga class. Within the first 10 minutes of the class, after some breathing exercises and instruction to let the mind drift away, he fell asleep. The teacher let him sleep the entire time. “When the class was over, I finally felt like I’d had some rest,” he says.

Yoga may help returning service members get temporary relief from insomnia, but it can also, if practiced regularly, imbue them with a deeper sense of mental calm, so they can reestablish normal sleep patterns. Patricia Lillis-Hearne, an active-duty military doctor in Maryland, spent a year in Iraq. When she came home, she found herself suffering from neurological problems similar to her patients’. “Even though I’m a doctor and I’m supposed to be older and wiser, I wound up coming back with a certain amount of baggage of my own,” she says.

She had trouble sleeping and suffered from intractable migraines that would last up to a week. Her doctors put her on two medicines to prevent them, and two other medicines to repress the symptoms. When they added a Percocet prescription for the migraines, Lillis-Hearne, who’d practiced hatha yoga on and off for years, decided she had to try something else.

One morning, while seeing her daughter off to school, she met a neighbor, Karen Soltes, at the bus stop. Soltes taught yoga, specifically, a practice called Yoga Nidra. “When I went to try the class, I went to get two blocks and a strap

warriors at peace

and I saw everyone else getting a bunch of blankets,” she says. “That’s when I knew this would be different.”

MILITARY PROTOCOL FOR YOGA?

Yoga Nidra, or yogic sleep, is one of the four states of mind described in the Yoga Sutra. It’s not sleep as we traditionally know it, but rather a state of conscious sleep used for deep relaxation and subtle spiritual exploration. Richard Miller, a clinical psychologist, yoga teacher, and president of the Integrative Restoration Institute in San Rafael, California, has developed a protocol for the military, based on the techniques of Yoga Nidra, that is in use at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in Washington, DC; the Miami and Chicago VA hospitals; and Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Miller says he designed the program to help returning soldiers find “a place of well-being that was never wounded.”

Miller’s program is a 35-minute guided meditation, initially learned lying down, and then integrated into all body positions. He incorporates breath awareness and “body sensing” but goes beyond that, asking participants to observe their emotions, thoughts, and memories from an objective distance. It introduces the yogic concept of the observing Self, something beyond body, mind, and spirit that never changes, regardless of thoughts, emotions, or experiences. This is referred to as *purusha*, though Miller deliberately left yoga and Sanskrit terminology out of his program. At the military’s suggestion, he renamed it iRest.

It can be tricky to impart this esoteric brand of yoga thought to a military population that has seen and experienced terrible things beyond ordinary imagination, says Soltes, who teaches the iRest protocol at the Washington, DC, VA Medical Center. But through this practice, she says, soldiers learn that they are more than all these things. They have these thoughts and feelings and images, but they learn to remember that there’s a part of them that’s never been touched by trauma. It’s still whole, it’s still healthy, and it’s still intact.

Yoga Nidra may sound like an odd fit for VA hospitals, but it’s finding enthusiastic quarter in a military medical establishment dealing with a huge and growing population of traumatized soldiers returning from a nearly decadelong war. Nisha Money is a preventive-medicine physician for the U.S. military, who is helping to integrate programs such as iRest (Yoga Nidra) protocols as an adjunctive therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder. She says that soldiers with PTSD respond well to the practice because it draws on internal resources during the stress of military life and postbattle trauma-related disorders.

“Much of military training involves re-assembling the internal mental structure to become a warrior,” Money says. “As a result, a typical soldier is more inclined to have a beginner’s mind. It opens up the awareness that you don’t know everything, and that you’ll have to be open to new ways of being.”

After her first class in the Yoga Nidra program, Lillis-Hearne started sleeping better. “By the second class, I knew I was at home,” she says. Very gradually, her headaches became more manageable. She dropped her medications. Much more quickly than she’d expected, she went

You have to remember that there’s a part of you that’s never been touched by trauma.

from pain and confusion to a state of feeling calm, centered, and whole. Within a few months, she was training to be a Kripalu instructor herself.

“In a million years, I never thought that I’d be teaching yoga,” Lillis-Hearne says. “But what it did for me was so incredibly profound that I really wanted to share it in any way I could, and in particular with a group of people who ordinarily would never enter a yoga studio.”

SENSITIVITY TRAINING

Anu Bhagwati is a former Marine captain and the executive director of the Service

warriors at peace

Women's Action Network, an advocacy and direct-services organization for service women and women veterans. During her second year in the Marines, she took a two-week leave to study at the Sivana-nda Ashram Yoga Ranch in Woodbourne, New York, an experience she calls "a total mind warp, because I was very much militarized at the time." Then she returned to military service and promptly dropped her yoga practice.

When she left active service, Bhagwati found herself diagnosed with PTSD and depression. At her lowest point, her mind became "a dark and depressing place," and thoughts of suicide lurked close to the surface. She decided to do yoga again, she says, "because it worked when I'd done it before. It was natural, free, and good. I tell people it saved my life." This time, she took her practice further and became a certified yoga teacher. Now she gives a thrice-weekly class to veterans at the Integral Yoga Institute in New York City. She doesn't feel the need to give her classes a hard edge.

"People who want to 'boot-camp-ify' their yoga haven't been in the military," Bhagwati says. "I heard of one group that advertised their yoga classes as 'blood, sweat, and tears.' Is that what you want to give the military community? They've got that already. Wouldn't it be OK to just learn stress-management techniques?"

Classes for vets often have a different look and feel: Students might face the door, to avoid the anxiety that comes with thinking someone might come in unseen, and they usually don't hear a lot of esoteric ideas. Washington, DC-area yoga teacher Robin Carnes, who teaches iRest at Walter Reed's program for patients with acute PTSD, says, "I never Om with my students. Why put that barrier in the way?" She also avoids the word "surrender" and doesn't call Savasana "Corpse Pose," so as not to upset her students.

Karen Soltes says the practice often brings out a side of the soldiers that has long been repressed. "Sometimes there's this very tender openness to life," she says. "They're not on some kind of spiritual journey. They just want to feel better. They come to it with innocence and no

warriors at peace

preconceived notion about what it should be. It's almost like they get out of their own way." Bill Donoghue says that the nature of military life can actually leave returning soldiers more open to a transformative experience than civilians are. "It can be a life-changing experience, sometimes for the better."

That's what happened to Paul Bradley. Since he's taken up yoga, he's experienced a spiritual connection that had been absent even before he went into the service. "Yoga brought spirituality into my life. I had no spirituality before. And after, I was just trying to get through the night and forget what I saw in the war."

AN ARMY OF YOGA TEACHERS

Yoga has had such a profound effect on vets returning to their civilian lives that many of them want to spread the word. Sue Lynch, a military lawyer, was once on the receiving end of a missile attack while serving in Saudi Arabia in 1990. When she returned home to Boston, she thought she had it together, but PTSD struck her

hard. Depression and anxiety made her daily life almost unbearable, and therapy offered little relief. "A studio opened nearby—I started practicing and said, 'Oh my god, that's it!'" She became a yoga teacher, and now, through her organization, There and Back Again, she is training returning soldiers to teach as well.

Bradley, the Boston firefighter, is going through Lynch's training because he wants to bring classes to the rough streets of Charlestown. Patrocínio is taking regular trips from Miami to go through training sessions in Boston as well. "In many ways, it helps you reconnect," he says. "There's a lot of anger and numbness, emotions and feelings because of the situations you were put into in combat. Yoga teaches you how to live the moment, how to accept the past, and even let it go. When I first started doing yoga, I didn't realize these things. But it's been very helpful." ❖

Harper Perennial will publish Neal Pollack's comic memoir, Stretch: The Unlikely Making of a Yoga Dude, in August 2010.

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