

Iraq War Veteran Spreads Knowledge of Martial Arts

A Life member of a VFW Post in Texas taught the skill to fellow vets while deployed

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Re-introducing a Vietnam War veteran to martial arts set the course of one future veteran's life and spurred his desire to help others.

Clay Worley, who discovered the ancient art form in his youth, served in the Army from 1997-98 with the 1st Infantry Division and 1st Armored Division in Bosnia and from 2003-04 with the 82nd Airborne Division and 1st Cavalry Division in Iraq. The interaction with the Vietnam vet gave Worley a new perspective and motivation.

“To be on the floor with this Vietnam vet, as he was telling me a little bit about his story — and those guys tend to be kind of close hold in terms of their experience — they don't go around boasting about it, I just thought to myself, ‘I don't know what he faced, but I am awed that I'm even teaching him anything because he ought to be teaching me,’” recalled Worley, a Life member of VFW Post 8587 in Georgetown, Texas.

Worley, an 80 percent disabled combat veteran, started his own martial arts business, Dekimasu Karate Studio, at 18 years old. It has since grown into an alliance with five schools. He also owns a business consulting company called Fit Fighters Club of Central Texas. He taught martial arts to Marine Corps reservists during field exercises in the early 1990s.

While deployed to Bosnia and Iraq, Worley taught martial arts and said his sessions attracted people from all ranks and job fields — cooks and refuelers to pilots and paratroopers.

“We're all bammin' and jammin' and nobody's being formal with each other,” Worley said. “Nobody was being disrespectful, but the social barriers and the occupational barriers just went away.”

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111

Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002

Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

In the mid-1990s, after earning his commission as a lieutenant, Worley instructed “platoon-level” classes during physical fitness training. From 2001-03, while a member of the Texas National Guard, he instituted hand-to-hand combat training.

The sport, he said, is his passion and he wants to make sure it is “always affordable and accessible” to those interested in pursuing it.

“I want to share the knowledge,” Worley said. “I don’t want anybody to think that they got to crawl up some mountain in far east Asia and only after 30 years can they scratch the surface on what it’s all about.”

In addition to his work while on active duty, Worley has spent more than 10 years hosting fundraising seminars for veterans and their families, and teaching veterans individually and in group settings.

A ‘Unique Approach’

Working with veterans takes a “unique approach” that includes collaboration, patience and encouragement, according to Worley.

“You have to watch, listen and help each veteran find their own personal victory,” he said. “You can’t push and pull and drag a bunch of veterans across the floor when they’re coming from different age levels, skill levels and fitness levels. You can’t take the one-size fits all approach. It just doesn’t work.”

He also conducts a “needs evaluation” with vets to determine their goals.

“Especially in that first lesson, I’m watching and I’m listening,” Worley said. “I’m not talking nearly as much. I’m giving them something to do according to their interest level.”

Worley currently has 200 clients worldwide, and one instructor in his alliance runs a veterans program in Washington state.

Kathrin Sumpter, who is not a veteran, has worked with vets since 2007. She has been involved in martial arts for 28 years, and met Worley in 2008.

Sumpter incorporates Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) into her approach. EMDR is a form of psychotherapy that uses eye movements to help manage symptoms of diagnoses such as PTSD.

She said martial arts movements require “left-brain, right-brain switching,” such as performing five punches with one arm, then switching to the other. That “volley,” she said, creates an isolation of the movements.

“I’ve seen the effects of this dynamic exercise,” Sumpter said. “[In these] very controlled, combative techniques, you can channel the combat into a logical ... with purpose exercise, but it’s combative.”

Delivering a ‘Good Experience’

Worley said he has seen veterans leave sessions feeling better about themselves.

“You get smiles. You get looks of relief,” Worley said. “And you know without them having to say, ‘Thank you,’ that you delivered a good experience for them.”

Sumpter said she tailors her programs based on the individual needs of her participants.

One Vietnam War veteran, she said, came to class “in the throes of a panic attack.” She helped him through the sessions by using a partner drill called the Hubud, which involves “three-count, hand-to-hand tactical and tactile” movements using elbows and forearms.

“I saw this guy go from bouncing off the walls, his shoulders dropped, the tightness in his voice left him right before my eyes,” Sumpter said, adding that he became a “grounded person.”

Vietnam War veteran and fellow martial artist Steven Jimerfield began his martial arts training in 1966, prior to his deployment. He served with the Coast Guard from 1967-68 on the USCGC Gresham and 1968-69 and 1970 on the USCGC Taney as a boatswain’s mate 1st class.

While never officially diagnosed, Jimerfield said fellow vets have told him he shows signs of PTSD. He said he has felt guilt over not seeing “the action a lot of guys did” in Vietnam, but also believes symptoms stem from his experiences in his law enforcement career.

Jimerfield worked in Coast Guard Intelligence as a criminal investigator and later for the Alaska Department of Public Safety. He retired after 30 years with the Alaska State Troopers, the last seven spent overseeing one-on-one control tactics training.

As the years go by, he said, he has noticed symptoms more frequently.

“When I was coming out of my last knee surgery, I had a flashback,” Jimerfield said. “When I was coming out of anesthesia, I had a nurse who has worked with veterans, and she held my hand and she talked to me and told me I was home. I was OK. I was safe. It was really touching.”

Jimerfield, who has been practicing martial arts for 50 years, said when he teaches classes and helps others, he is “pushing” his PTSD symptoms in a different direction.

“I believe that takes your focus off and away, so we bury a lot of that, I think,” Jimerfield said. “I have put [up] a barrier, and I just don’t think about it, so it’s not there.”

As a one-on-one tactics control instructor, Jimerfield said, he does not have a lot of veterans attending his class. However, his personal interest in martial arts has helped him connect with fellow Vietnam-era comrades.

“I have a friend who’s a professor at Idaho State who’s a Vietnam veteran,” Jimerfield said. “We met through the martial arts and, amazingly, we served around the same time. He was an F-14 pilot at the siege of Khe Sanh as a forward observer.”

The two discovered that they are the same age and were in country at the same time.

“It’s kind of funny because we fold our money exactly the same,” Jimerfield said. “All of our little habits are the same. We just became great friends in training.”

Sumpter said the work Worley has done for his fellow veterans like Jimerfield is inspiring. She reaches out to him when her students face PTSD symptoms. Worley can “speak a language” she cannot, Sumpter said.

“I’ve gotten a lot of good advice from Clay,” she said. “You’ve got to know where these guys are at, where they’re coming from. So I’ve been able to change my approach and maybe reach people that I couldn’t reach before.”

Worley has met fellow veterans like Jimerfield and connected with people like Sumter to further the mission from a “bug that was planted” in his teen years.

“That planted a seed in my mind and my spirit that grew into this gigantic tree,” Worley said. “And I’ve never lost it.”

This article is featured in the January 2020 issue of [VFW magazine](#).