

Art

Self-Portrait of PTSD

(30" x 30", oil on canvas—see explanation on next page)

by Jerry Zabel, MSPE



Explanation of Painting, *Self-Portrait of PTSD*

My mother never got over the guilt of having (barely) survived concentration camp Stutthof while nearly all of her family had been murdered. As a child, I remember her suddenly starting to cry, locking herself in the bathroom and screaming, and my father, a survivor of Birkenau, not flinching. When I asked him what we should do, he said, “It’s nothing.”

During one of my mother’s episodes, I found out that I had a sister who had been kidnapped by the Gestapo because she had blue eyes and blond hair. That overpowering secrecy to protect me from the “moral injury” of war pushed me to join the US Army and to volunteer for service in the Vietnam War.

As an assistant drill instructor at Fort Polk, LA, I helped train infantry replacements for Vietnam. Of the soldiers whom I helped train, over 400 became casualties during the first day of the January 1968 TET Offensive.

This painting is of me during the playing of our national anthem. I was having a flashback of the faces of the young, wounded, and killed infantry men whom I had helped train for combat. In the painting, I deepened the lines under my eyes, in my forehead, and around my neck to show the physical effects of the mental burden.

When I left Vietnam under my own steam, I was shocked, surprised, and overwhelmed to be alive and boarding a plane. Once that shock wore off, I realized I had been given more than a discharge from active duty. I was given Agent Orange poisoning and survivor’s guilt for surviving while many of the men I had trained became casualties.

At first, I intuitively treated my survivor’s guilt by facing my nightmares during sleep, and I continued intuitive therapy via oil painting. The unwelcome flashbacks, the tendency to want to be alone, the startle reflex, and the lack of trust continue to this day.

I have made my peace with God and with humanity. My mother never made peace with humanity or with God. Ω

