

Garreth Murrell

The use of NLP
(Neuro Linguistic Programming) with
War veterans suffering from Post-
Traumatic Stress disorder

Churchill Report 2012

The reason I applied to the trust for a travelling scholarship is directly connected to the charity I set up and now run called Veterans at Ease.

I set the charity the up at the back end of 2010 some 18 months after I got through my Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I had unknowingly, been suffering from PTSD for 14 years! It was of course all related to my military service between the years of 1985 to 1995, where I served in numerous war zones around the world such as Northern Ireland and Bosnia (Being in the Recce platoon of the Cheshire Regiment I was one of the first British soldiers to enter Bosnia under the command of the United Nations).

After nearly 18 months of going through the NHS system and declining pharmaceutical treatment and receiving Cognitive Behavioural therapy, which actually made me have suicidal thoughts; I eventually and successfully got through my own Post-Traumatic stress Disorder in June 2008 through the use of Neuro Linguistic Programming. It was amazing to say the least and my trauma was removed in less than 6 hours in one complete session. However due to the cost of the therapy I realised that because of the way PTSD manifests itself within an individual; veterans who are suffering with PTSD will not have a spare £2,500.00 to spend on a one day therapy session and even if they did they would more likely spend that money on their family. So the idea of the charity was born and I was determined to see that the treatment was given for free.

Since setting up the charity and qualifying as a NLP Practitioner in February 2012 we have successfully helped 43 Veterans deal with their trauma and lead useful lives again. 7 of those were family members and 9 of the veterans were long time unemployed (ie. 5 years or over) and by the time we had helped them they all had full time jobs.

One of the aims of the charity is help the veterans we help become fully involved in their communities and as such once they are in a better place we encourage them to go out and partake in an event of their choice. This helps them to get out of their ordinary environment and have some fun (which drops out of their lives with PTSD) raise awareness and some funding for us so that we can carry on helping others.

Also for the right veteran who we help get through their trauma, who wishes to help others using NLP therapy they may be offered a job to come on board after successful completion of the NLP practitioners course.

What is NLP?

NLP is basically a modelling tool which was developed in the USA in the early 70's and it just so happened that the first discipline that was modelled was some of the best therapists in the country at the time. It was from here that NLP then started using some of the best techniques in therapy from a number of the therapies available. Since then NLP has developed into what is now called a brief intervention therapy and is often used in conjunction with another therapy.

It has also been described in one way as "NLP looks at the way in which we think and process our thoughts (Neuro), the language patterns we use (Linguistic) and our behaviours (Programming) and how these interact to have a positive (or negative) effect on us as individuals.

It is a collection of a wide range of methods and models which create an understanding of thought process and behaviour. Understanding these techniques can bring about a positive change in you and others”.

... And there are many, many more definitions out there!

My Journey

My trip started on the 67th anniversary of D-Day flying from Newcastle airport to Heathrow then onto New York (NY).

I had already booked my Amtrak ticket before leaving and was glad I had done so as things turned out.

My intended itinerary started in NY where I would meet with Dr Rick Gray to discuss the current use of NLP with war veterans I would then take the train up to Ottawa in Canada to meet with the world's first woman Jet Fighter Pilot who suffered with PTSD and like me got through it successfully with the use of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) after trying various other therapies which only re-traumatised. The journey took me south and then west, where I would meet with some family friends in Nevada and as it happens Ben is a professor of theology and ethics at Nevada state University; I was also to spend my Birthday with them. From there I had arranged to meet with Professor Peter Goadsby who is a headache and brain specialist who deals with among other patients, people with Trauma Brain Injury (TBI). The next part of my trip was to travel north to Portland Then east to Glacier Park and then continue back to NY before flying home. Well, that was the plan...

Firstly I have to say that wherever I went I met the friendliest and warm hearted people one could imagine, and secondly this trip was the most amazing and personally insightful I have had the pleasure of undertaking.

Landing in New York's JFK I got a yellow taxi to Manhattan. During the drive to my hotel, the taxi driver in what I can only assume to be typical New Yorker Style told me how the world works and what is “real” about the government etc... this was a pleasant introduction and everything in New York was pretty much as he had foretold.

I spent the first 4 days in and around Times Square purchasing a US mobile phone and basic Ipad so I could make notes and stay in touch with my family in the UK.

North America at this time was having a heat wave and I had decided in the UK to purchase a pair of flip flops to wear while I was travelling. Unfortunately the pair I bought tore my feet apart and I had to buy a pair of Trainers. So I walked into the first shop I came across and was served by a lovely lady who recognised me as a British veteran due to my camouflaged rucksack. We got chatting and as things turned out Diane is an actress and film producer and is very interested in the treatment of PTSD. This was because her grandfather was none other than Sargent John Basilone who was a congressional medal of honour recipient during the Second World War whilst fighting in the Pacific

theatre. His character was portrayed in the drama series 'Pacific' which was produced by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks. Diane also has contact with them through Tom Hanks' PA and we have come up with a plan for a tri nation project (UK, Canada and USA) to increase awareness and funding for the further development of effective treatment for PTSD. We are still at the R & D stage with this and hopefully this report will be sent to Tom Hanks in the not too distant future.

My NLP contact in New York, Dr Richard Gray was unfortunately unable to meet me during these first 4 days so we agreed to meet on my return; which as it turned out was fortuitous.

The journey to Ottawa was an amazing trip by train and took the best part of two days. Firstly a 11 hour train trip to Montreal where I met an amazing family who very kindly gave me accommodation in their houses in Montreal and then took me to Ottawa where I had the privilege to spend 4 days with them and we have since become firm friends. I even played golf with their son who took me to one of over 200 golf courses in the Ottawa Valley which have splendid greens.

On the arranged day I met with Major Deanna Brasseur who was the first woman jet fighter pilot, she flew mainly F18 Hornets and was also involved in setting up and training the first all-female aerobatic display team and won a number of trophies and accolades. As well as her full time job working still for the Canadian Air Force, Dee also runs her own company, Supersonix unincorporated inc. and set up and runs the 1 in a Million Project, which I encourage everyone to support. Having had the pleasure of spending several days at her house and place of work chatting about NLP, veterans, PTSD and even religion and its place in the effective treatment of PTSD I gained some amazing insights into these subjects such as the need to continue my personal training in NLP in spite of being a qualified NLP Master practitioner. Another insight is to look at the bigger picture in relation to how far reaching the therapy is, this has a huge impact not only on the beneficiary and their families but also their extended friends and work colleagues. Also I have had the opportunity, space and time to look at the bigger picture with where the charity should go in the future beyond the Big Lottery Bid we put in for a four year project. Included in the bigger picture overview is the benefits of our other therapists carrying on with higher levels of NLP training which will enhance the results we are already achieving within the charity. It will also give me and therefore the charity the ability to set up our own training organisation, whereby we can train our own therapists in house. This will have a number of significant positive impacts for the charity in as much as it will cut costs (very important in the current climate), and will ensure that the standard of training is maintained. It will also have the impact of allowing us to design our own specific courses and continuation training in NLP. This last point is something that seems to be missing in current NLP trainings.

I also thought more about 'big picture thinking' and perhaps doing further more advanced courses in NLP after I have completed my psychotherapy training. Dee is very driven with a great sense of humour often found in military people and was a welcome break from what is potentially a very serious and dour subject. I also had the pleasure of being with Dee when she picked up her new 8 week old Afghan Puppy, Sabre who is a real handful.

While in Ottawa Dee introduced me to retired Brigadier Joe Sharpe and we discussed how the Canadian military came into developing it's programmes of dealing with serving personnel who come back from war zones with the signs and symptoms of PTSD. it was a baptism of fire for the

Canadian military almost 15 years ago after some cases of the treatment of servicemen was highlighted by the media. As a result this forced the Canadian military to reassess its treatment of its personnel and now they employ a much more structured and caring view of sufferers of PTSD. This has now been modelled for the wives and families of the veterans who have suffered and now a series of “peer family support groups” have been set up around Canada to address their issues. The protocol to become a “peer support group co-ordinator” is that they have to be a wife or family member of a service man who has suffered and therefore has the knowledge and experience to help others. They hold group meetings on a regular basis and offer non-clinical support. This seems to be a very successful way of addressing these issues, as often the families of PTSD sufferers are forgotten. Linking in with the big picture above and where the charity should go in the future I am determined to set up a similar system here in the UK but with our own NLP twist thrown into the mix. We have been invited to return to attend a number of training courses to fully see what the training consists of and how it is employed in a real sense.

I also had the opportunity to visit a number of places while in Ottawa of which one was the Canadian war museum. I got in for free being a veteran and wearing my veteran badge, which was nice. There is a retired Mounty in full uniform by the entrance and he spotted my military rucksack and told me to tell the front desk I was a veteran. This rucksack became a sort of bill board and got me into lots of places mostly for free and if not for free then a good discount was given. The museum is well worth a visit with some very good and interesting displays of where Canada has sent its military over the years. This year happens to be the 200th anniversary of the war with the USA which both side claim victory to this day.

It is worth noting here for future fellows (veterans) travelling to the USA that they should purchase the UK Veterans ID card prior to travelling, as train travel and many other discounts are available to them in the USA including accommodation at the servicemen’s club in New York for \$65 dollars a night.

The next stage of my journey was mostly uneventful apart from a 6 hour train delay getting into Chicago. This did have its upside though. I met a gentleman on the connecting train called Albert, who as it turned out has become a very good friend and has helped me considerably with raising awareness of not only the charity but also the trust.

Arriving at Lincoln in Nebraska I was met by my Friends Ani and Ben Holdsworth who holds a professorship at the state university. During my 3 day stopover in their beautiful home I celebrated my 43rd Birthday and once again I gained some amazing insights into ethics (that’s Ben’s subject expertise) and the application of NLP with war veterans and indeed its ethical use with still serving soldiers.

I arrived in San Francisco on 26th June with no real plans of where to stay etc. other than to meet with professor Goadsby who is a headache and Brain specialist. I contacted Albert who I had met some 5 days ago and within half an hour he’s at the ferry terminal building and we’re off to his house in downtown San Francisco. He and his Husband Doug let me stay at their house for the entire time I was in San Francisco which was incredibly Kind. Albert as it turns out is a free-lance film producer, Doug is a Forensic Laboratory Analyst and staying at the same time was Albert’s Cousin, Miraya, who is a free-lance Journalist.

Albert very kindly arranged and set up an interview which was hosted by his Cousin and has now been published on the trusts website, Veterans at Ease's official and Facebook sites and has been shared a number of times on Facebook. The response by the public has been very gratifying. All of this was done completely for free too.

My meeting with Dr Goadsby was very interesting in that my reticence to use NLP with TBI sufferers seemed a good move. Although now I have discussed with Dr Goadsby the potential of NLP I started to, once again feel and think that NLP may be of some assistance to help alleviate the worst of the symptoms for someone with mild TBI. I have since started working very carefully with a beneficiary (with full permission) who has both PTSD and TBI. I will, if asked let the trust know of my findings in the future.

Albert and Doug took Miraya and me to a 'local' winery which, according to them was just outside SF... I am finding that Americans can be masters at understatement. The said winery was a two and a half hour drive each way! The wine was exceptional though and we were treated, once again to lots of freebies and tastings.

It was around this time that things seemed to go wrong for me. I discovered that while I was on this trip someone in the UK had managed to hack into my account and empty it! So now I was as far away as possible from home with no money and still had nearly 3 weeks left to go! My whole mental attitude changed from one of exploration to military escape and evasion and the next part of my journey is a series of dark memories involving sleeping on streets until, I somehow get back across the border to Canada and arrive at Dee's house. I lost 28lbs in weight (that must be a first for anyone visiting the USA) as I could only afford to eat one meal every three days, I had developed a huge muscle spasm in my lower back which finally was treated with some heavy duty pain killers once I arrived back in the UK and had to borrow money from wherever and whoever it was offered, to those people that were so very kind in my hour of need I cannot thank you enough.

I spent over a week at Dee's place recuperating and thinking about what has happened then head off back to New York.... Despite the financial situation I still had a mission to complete!

Meeting up with Dr Gray on pier 11 in New York under the steady gaze of the Statue of Liberty has begun the process of huge change for me personally and for the charity as it was during this meeting that we (the charity) were invited to join forces with the NLP Research & Recognition project to carry out research and collect data with regards the use of NLP in a therapeutic setting and working successfully with veterans suffering from PTSD.

The very last person I met with was Diane who I had met nearly six weeks previously. As I travelled I thought about the project Diane had in mind and thought of ways of developing it into something that Tom Hanks perhaps would find appealing. I presented my ideas to her with regards raising awareness on a global scale, one of which would be to purchase an ocean going yacht, crew it with a qualified skipper and veterans that have been helped through their PTSD with NLP from each of the three nations and sail it in the tall ships race. The boat will be decked out in everyone's logos etc and the veterans can do talks when they go into port at the end of each stage to let the public know of what PTSD is how it affects them and generally raise awareness of the injury. This would make a great documentary and can easily be linked to the three nations who landed on the beaches on D-Day. However this time, it's a different fight.

MISSION ACOMPLISHED 😊

Lessons learnt

The aim of my trip was to research the use of NLP with military veterans and their families as NLP was first developed in the early 70's in California and from what I knew had been used on and off with veterans suffering from PTSD since Vietnam. Having said that NLP is still not a main stream therapy in the USA, Canada or the UK and one aim of this

I had expected to come across a number of NLP practitioners doing very similar work to what is done in the charity Veterans at Ease where I work, In fact the opposite was true. This surprised me somewhat as it seems from the perspective in the UK that the USA and Canada are years ahead with regard to helping serving personnel and veterans.

There are indeed, plenty of NLP practitioners out there in Canada and the USA who would love to be working with veterans but they are in the same predicament as practitioners in the UK. This is because of the current lack of empirical data relating to the methods and processes of NLP interventions. Because of this trip, this is being addressed both in the USA with the NLP R & R project and by Veterans at Ease as we have agreed to work together to carry out this important research over the next 5-7 years. Thanks go out to Dr Rick Gray for helping me establish this connection.

I learnt from the Canadians about helping the families of veterans suffering from PTSD they are about 15 years ahead in this capability. This has given me ideas in modelling their approach and introducing it into how Veterans at Ease works with families, which will mean that further trips to Canada are now in the pipeline. In relation to using NLP in a therapeutic setting I know of only one person using this technology in a similar fashion to myself and that is Professor Frank Bourke who is currently heading the NLP Research & Recognition project.

Spending time with and talking to Major Deanna Brasseur was immeasurably useful, not only did Dee overcome her PTSD with the use of NLP, she also has a far reaching perspective on who and how NLP should be used. Dee thinks very big picture and this helped me put into perspective the small level of influence the Veterans at Ease currently has and how it can grow in the future that is both sustainable and manageable.

It was also while in Canada that I was introduced to Brigadier General Joe Sharpe who told me of the evolution of helping still serving military personnel. Interestingly they found (some 15 years ago) that it was mostly their better soldiers who had a higher rate of succumbing to PTSD after returning from active service. Initially the soldiers behaviours were punished in the usual military way, however after some high profile court cases and public outcry the Canadian military machine decided to look deeper into the reasons behind the returning soldier's behaviours which has led to current policy of helping in a nurturing way the soldiers, sailors and airmen. This public and open acceptance of PTSD has helped greatly in the serving soldiers to be assisted and in a lot of cases being returned to active duty if they so wish.

Having talked at length with Professor Holdsworth around ethics a question arose around the use of helping serving frontline servicemen and women with trauma related injuries with regards to the right of life.

The question posed is this: is it ethical to help remove a serving soldier's PTSD so that he can go back into battle to kill another fellow human being? The question is not as simple to answer as you might at first think. So far the answer after some considerable debate with Ben and Dr Gray is yes and No... Personally having been in combat and now I am a veteran, I am erring on the side of no, having said that I am leaving my mind open to change, pending further debate.

While in San Francisco the object of my research changed slightly and I looked into how Trauma Brain Injury (TBI) could possibly be treated successfully with NLP. Prior to this trip I have been reticent to work with veterans who have any level of this condition. Saying that, understanding how NLP helps to reprogram the neural networks in the mind I have had an intuition that NLP can, at the very least provide workable and long lasting strategies for sufferers of this incredibly debilitating injury.

My discussion with Professor Goadsby has helped me to gently walk forward with a few ideas of how to work with TBI Sufferers, and how in the future we can become the centre of excellence for the alleviation of some of the symptoms. Since my return I am working alongside a veteran with TBI to find out how to progress in this area.... Even though I am not a medical doctor the Hippocratic oath has been in the forefront of my mind which is 'do no harm'.

I personally learnt that there is a hidden strength within me that I can now draw upon when needed.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to discover new ways of thinking and seeing the world.

Next Steps

- Start our research project here in the UK and continue to share data in America and Canada
- Visit New York to continue and enhance our relationship with the NLP research & recognition and to continue the momentum for developing our links with Diane and raising awareness of PTSD and the charity on a global scale.
- Visit Canada to sit on the training course for peer support groups
- Look at developing the Peer support groups with the aim of having them operational within 4 years
- Continue my personal NLP training to the next level which will be NLP Trainer

Garreth Murrell