

## Battlefield Acupuncture: My Story

Richard C. Niemtow, MD, PhD, MPH

**B**ATTLEFIELD ACUPUNCTURE (BFA) is now an international technique for addressing acute and chronic pain, and is still evolving in its usage. I never expected BFA would achieve such popularity. I have Terry Oleson, PhD, to thank for introducing me to Zang-Hee Cho, PhD, who, at that time, was researching acupuncture at the University of California at Irvine. He helped me elucidate the role of the cingulate gyrus. Professor Cho is the father of the positron emission tomography scanner. What an honor it was to meet him! Reviewing his functional magnetic resonance imaging data brought to my attention the importance of the cingulate gyrus and thalamus areas of the brain for pain processing. During the months prior, I had been evaluating the other points: Omega 2, *Shen Men*, and Point Zero. And *voila*, in August 2001, I determined how I would sequence all these points in the ear. Prior to my visit with Professor Cho, I had made a visit to David Alimi, MD, in France, who introduced me to the “Aiguille D’Acupuncture Semi-Permanente” needles, popularly known as ASP semipermanent needles. Unfortunately, they did not exist in the United States back in 2001.

When the awful event of 9/11 occurred, I decided to name this technique “Battlefield Acupuncture.” During that time, I was the first full-time acupuncturist in the armed forces as an Air Force physician and guest of the United States Naval Medical Center (USNMC-SD) in San Diego. BFA was forgotten quickly, as there was no interest from physicians. In fact, many of them wished that acupuncture would go away. However, this mood began to change as BFA proved itself slowly in the clinic. When I was scheduled to transfer from the USNMC-SD to Andrews Air Force Base, my colleagues at the USNMC-SD petitioned the Commanding Officer to request that I would remain at the Center. I was told this never happened before. With some regret, I moved to the East Coast not expecting to stay there for a long time. I am still at Andrews and “an airman for life.”

In the early years, BFA truly started to gain momentum. Joseph M. Helms, MD, had the foresight to take me on, and I taught BFA at his 300-hour Medical Acupuncture course. I do not think anyone expected interest to last. However, during the height of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, as wounded warriors arrived in large numbers to Walter Reed Army Hospital, BFA began to be noticed quite a bit. Western medicine was great for helping these patients but had its failures. I introduced BFA at the bedside of these heroic patients, and the demands from both patients, families, and physicians skyrocketed. Teaching BFA suddenly became a high priority.

Captivated by the success of acupuncture, Stephen M. Burns, MD, an Air Force physician on an executive medicine military path decided to become a medical acupuncturist. He gave up his executive medicine career potential in order to join me in the “one-man” acupuncture clinics that I was holding at Andrews Air Force Base, the Pentagon, Walter Reed, and Bethesda Naval Medical Center. During the Iraq and Afghanistan military actions, many military physicians and special force medics were instructed in BFA. Around 2009, the Air Force Surgeon, Lieutenant General Bruce Green decided to send Air Force physicians to the 300-hour Helms course in 2009 and 2010. It was well into 2012 that the Army, Navy, and Air Force began sending physicians to the Helms Medical Institute’s semiannual civilian programs.

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The most important event for BFA happened with the awarding of \$5.4 million to teach BFA to the health care providers of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This was a joint incentive fund initiated by myself and John Baxter, MD, that spanned ~2.5 years. The best part of this project was treating patients for acute and chronic pain. In my opinion, it was the start of impacting the opioid crisis and pushing acupuncture's interest throughout the Armed Forces and VA. On February 23, 2018, at the Air Warfare Symposium in Rosen Shingle Creek, Orlando, FL, the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force, General David Goldfein announced that BFA should be taken to the point of injury on the battlefield and also throughout the Air Force.

From 2001 to 2018, it had taken almost 17 years to push BFA against much resistance to finally have a four-star Air Force General recognize its value, and announce that this innovation should become part of Air Force medicine. It was like a dream come true. He also announced that I was treating him for Bell's Palsy with acupuncture, the best treatment available. This is a tribute to all of us, as acupuncture is more alive than ever.

Seventeen years seems like a long time in terms of an individual's career, but it is actually a very short time in the history of acupuncture. What happens next with acupuncture and what we accomplish depends on you. I repeat the recipe of success: read the *Medical Acupuncture* journal, attend the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture symposiums, meet your colleagues, practice and practice, and follow your hunches to produce new and innovative treatments. Do not be afraid; you will have your story, too.

—Richard C. Niemtow, MD, PhD, MPH