Scar Tissue
The Moral Wounds of War

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“Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner.”

- Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West (1985)

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

- Excerpted from Ephesians 6:10-18, “The Armor of God” (NIV)
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THE WEAK SOLDIER

When I was eighteen, I enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserve. I walked into a recruiting office a month after I earned my high school diploma with a final GPA of 4.32 and no motivation to start college in the fall. I did not care about politics. I wanted a challenge. When I scored a point away from perfect on the ASVAB\(^1\), my recruiter picked out two MOSs\(^2\) for me: psychological operations (PSYOP)\(^3\) and military intelligence (MI). I settled on PSYOP. The recruiter said they deployed more often than MI and deployed with Marines. It sounded more like the military I imagined.

I took the oath of enlistment in November of 2010 and—so help me God\(^4\)—started working out. I shipped to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for Basic Combat Training (BCT) four months later with all the healthy confidence of a good, green, morally indifferent recruit. The drill sergeants of A Co. 1-13 asked us—screamed at us—about our motivation. They wanted to know we were invested and why. I never had an answer for them; my reasons for enlisting were unknowable and uninteresting to me. I could not see why it mattered. I signed my name on the contract. I said the oath. I got up early and got good at running and learned how to shoot rifles and throw hand grenades and call cadences. My unit's training NCO\(^5\) had a three-year plan for me because of my test scores and my fitness level. I did not need to know why I was doing this. I was good at it. I was invested. I was in it.

I would still not know how to define why I joined when I found myself being grabbed by my ankles, ninety percent of my body out of a window. This moment would come a month shy of my personal military birthday, after eight months of training. It was another unnamable phenomenon of my life, a suicide attempt I failed to properly execute. So I continued the mission. I rubbed some dirt in it. I embraced the suck.

I started college two months after I came home. Two semesters in, I took a class on

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1 The ASVAB is the *Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery*, a test that measures everything from reading comprehension skills to electrical know-how. It is used to place service members into occupational specialties and to determine leadership ability.

2 Military Occupational Specialty

3 Renamed "military information-support operations" in 2010

4 Title 10, US Code; Act of 5 May 1960, amendment effective 5 October 1962

5 Non-commissioned officer
violence, war and peace that required a current events presentation. The standard the professor set was based on a curve; I sat at the top of that curve and I planned to blow off the assignment. A week before the presentation was due I read an article about a Veteran named Jesse Huff, who enlisted in the Army as an infantryman in 2003. Another unknowable thing happened: I decided to do my assignment. I decided to write about veteran suicide. The paper began:

It is 05:45 am in Dayton, Ohio. The date is April 16, 2010—a Friday. The sun will not be up for another two hours. All is quiet. Twenty-seven year old Jesse Huff walks up the steps of the local Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center. He is dressed in his Army Combat Uniform—ACUs—and carries a backpack and an assault rifle. He puts the rifle to his head and pulls the trigger. This is how Jesses Huff dies. Reports will note that after he falls, Jesse Huff’s blood covers the stairs (Circello, 2010).

Even in my normally impersonal writing I took Huff’s death—then a couple years past—very personally. There was the one time I tried to jump out of a window in uniform, but that was my action alone. It was my fault for being a weak soldier who should not have been convinced to lie about ever having suicidal thoughts by a recruiter with a gentle southern accent. He simply stated that it was the “smart” thing to do; I had not been forced into it. It was not until I stood before my class trying to pretend I had prepared an extemporaneous speech and not simply printed my paper that I began to realize why Huff’s suicide held meaning for me. I abandoned my paper at the lectern and tried to tell the class why I’d chosen to discuss suicide in military personnel in a class largely devoted to close readings of Arendt and Kohlberg.

I told my class about BCT. I told them that the way information travels in training is fragmented. A 0500 company formation becomes four 0445 platoon formations, which in turn become sixteen 0430 squad formations that become sixty-four team formations at 0415. An order from a first sergeant slowly mutates until it is an altogether different order delivered from a specialist to a private. The effect is generally positive: everyone is early and over-prepared. In communication between recruits, however, the augmentation translated into unsubstantiated gossip.

We referred to the network of eighteen-year-olds who disseminated interpersonal information to the company as the Private News Network (PNN). I assumed that title was the
sort of joke that gets recycled through each training class along with a couple attempted dropouts and sick/injured Soldiers that have to repeat parts of the course. The PNN had a single mission: to break the monotony of road marches and rifle ranges and exercises done to cadences about murdering civilians overseas. The PNN often served to inform the recruits of rule breaking—two privates spotted flirting. Details to follow. A drill sergeant (DS) tried to fight a recruit during a FX\textsuperscript{6}. DS may have literally ripped off his ACU jacket and asked the recruit if he wanted to, “GO MOTHERFUCKER?” More at lights-out. A recruit from Charlie company offed himself in the stairwell. A DS let a couple kids of CQ\textsuperscript{7} order pizza one night. These are all equally valid human-interest pieces for the Private News Network.

Reports filtered in from other companies in the battalion in letters with incorrect return addresses—privates were not allowed to communicate with recruits outside of their company except when following direct orders. The PNN reported that there were five attempted runaways on the first day of Charlie Company’s cycle. At least one recruit urinated on himself due to fear. We were not surprised by or interested in the kid from Charlie who killed himself. More news followed: he hanged himself. Later: he left his rifle by his bedpost. Little details of what may-or-may-not have happened filtered in like this, pieces of nothing. PNN broadcasts were never considered reliable until an NCO confirmed, and they were rarely available for comment. When a Drill Sergeant confirmed the pizza rumor, there was a collective anger in the platoon bay. We were far less interested in the kid who killed himself. Hadn’t we all signed our names in some small way knowing that we might be signing an early death certificate? More importantly, didn’t we all really miss good food?

I kept a journal in Basic. In it, I do not mention the day our first sergeant asked us to take a knee and told us we had probably already heard of the solider in Charlie Company who had killed himself. He told us that the recently deceased Soldier was a “weak link.” The First Sergeant paused when he said this. The pause triggered a communal grunt, a lazy and guttural, “Hooah,” that meant he was being properly received. He continued. “The soldier was a fucking weak link and he did us all a favor when he killed himself. If he hadn’t eliminated himself, we would’ve had to waste time and money weeding him out ourselves.”

The First Sergeant paused again. We said, “Hooah,” again. He gave us orders to stand and march to chow so we stood and marched to chow. The kid who killed himself was never

\textsuperscript{6}Field exercise
\textsuperscript{7}Command of Quarters
I did not and still do not know my motivation for enlisting in the U.S. Army Reserve. It did not and does not matter. This is what I know: I am more than half way through my enlistment. I will likely reach the end of my contract without a deployment. I have never killed. I do not have PTSD nor do I believe I have sustained any significant lasting damage from my service. I am considered UA by the United States military because I have refused to drill with my unit since returning home from training. I could not name my reasons for my refusal for a long time. Now I can.

This is what I know: I cheered for the suicide of a United States Soldier—of a young man. I cheered for the death of a young man who slept in the same building as me and was the same age as me. The PNN report in full stated that the unnamed Soldier was nineteen. He joined to pay for his mother’s medical bills; she had cancer. Then something happened. That thing led to his death. Maybe it was the thing that caused five runaways on the first day of Charlie Company’s cycle. Regardless, the recruit got out of his bed sometime between 2300 and 0300. He slipped out of bed, opened his locker, and got fully dressed in his combat uniform.

I used to imagine him getting dressed in the same order as me: underwear, olive green socks, desert beige t-shirt, ACU pants. Tan summer boots laced tightly with pants tucked into them and bloused. Khaki colored t-shirt tucked in to ACU pants and beige rigger belt weaved through the loops, starting on the left side. I would imagine him softly patting his left cargo pocket for his patrol cap. I imagined him putting on his jacket and zipping it before reflexively straightening the collar, dog tags tinkling in time with his movements. This part is just mine; the PNN was not interested in the intricate details of how he might have sensed some ritual to the way he was dressing on his way to death.

After he got dressed, the PNN reports that the recruit left his rifle on his bedpost. He walked to the backdoor of his bay, where an alarm failed to go off. The PNN is unsure if he disabled the alarm or if there were never really alarms at all. There was no intel on what happened with the Soldiers on fireguard that night. The standing operating procedure required

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UA, or “unauthorized absence” status refers to the reservist equivalent of going AWOL; both violate United Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) Article 86.
two headcounts per hour every night. Maybe someone fell asleep on shift. Maybe the recruit left a convincing lump of gear in his bed. Maybe no one ever did headcounts. Whatever happened, the recruit slipped through the back door and the alarm did not go off. He took off his belt—I imagined he took off his belt, just as likely he never put it on—and fashioned a noose. He slipped his head into whatever space he’d managed to fashion in a pitch black stairwell and he jumped.

A week later our first sergeant told us it was good the kid was dead and I cheered for his death. Something happened to me when I did that; something shifted imperceptibly within me. I never learned the Soldier’s name, nor could I find a single news report about his death after I came home. I do not know whether he suffered from military related stress or if he had a recruiter who encouraged dishonesty about mental health. I did not remember that his death had occurred until I stood shaking in front of a college classroom.

Huff’s death and that of the young recruit shared the same week—each a year apart—as my presentation. Perhaps it was the timing, but connecting Jesse Huff to the recruit from Charlie Company around the anniversary of both deaths alerted me to the shift I had not felt two years before. The same guttural part of me that yelled “Hooah!” to celebrate a suicide had held an equally deep need to return to who I felt I was before that moment. By acting as a witness to a life I never intended to remember, I finally began to articulate the unrealized and unspoken truths of my ethical responsibilities as a soldier. I was no longer green and I was no longer morally indifferent.
Introduction

Army Veteran Jesse Huff and the recruit from Charlie Company share a space in a larger narrative. They are among the often-unnoticed number of military veterans and personnel who are taking their own lives at an unprecedented rate. Soldiers are now more likely to die by their own hands than at those of an enemy; there were a record 349 service member suicides and 295 combat deaths in 2012 (Trotter, 2013). This figure, provided by the Department of Defense, includes only active-duty troops. The Department of Defense noted that this figure indicates that the U.S. military has a lower rate of suicide than the civilian population, ignoring the likely under-reported number of veterans who commit suicide daily—twenty-two—and the number of reserve service-members who commit suicide on a daily basis, which had not at that time been researched in any substantial way. A report released by the U.S. Army stated that there were fifty-seven Reservist suicides in 2013 (Chappell, 2013).

Three years after withdrawal from Iraq and in the midst of an ongoing drawdown from Afghanistan, the suicide rate among active-duty personnel is once again climbing (Hale, 2014). As of July 14, 2014, the year has seen 161 confirmed or suspected military suicides, an increase of seven from the same time frame during 2013 (Associated Press, 2014). Likewise disturbing is the number of military personnel who commit suicide pre-deployment; NPR’s Pentagon correspondent Tom Bowman reported that more than a third of the soldiers who have killed themselves have done so without ever being deployed (Chappell, 2013). In an article written for Public Radio International, Sarah Childress (2012) confirms: “About 53 percent of those who died by suicide in the military in 2011... had no history of deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan according to the Defense Department. And nearly 85 percent of military members who took their lives had no direct combat history, meaning they may have been deployed but not seen action.”

The familiar narrative of the combat veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) unable to make peace with the ghosts of war undermines these statistics. Blaming soldier suicide only on deployment and time spent away from family is shortsighted; we must approach military suicide more holistically. In 2011, Army Vice Chief of Staff General Peter Chiarelli admitted his own failure to understand the increased rates of suicide in his soldiers, remarking, “If you think you know the one thing that causes people to commit suicide, please let us know,
because we don’t know what it is” (Hoffman, 2011).

The work of mental health professionals and religious leaders has begun to answer Gen. Chiarelli. In 1994, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay published *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. The book introduced the concept of “moral injury,” which Shay (2014) has since succinctly defined as the “a betrayal of what is morally correct; (2) by someone who holds legitimate authority; and (3) in a high-stakes situation” (p. 182). Shay lent specificity to the second factor in his definition; he viewed moral injury as stemming from leadership malpractice. Since Shay coined the term “moral injury,” other definitions have been introduced into the dialectic of soldier suffering. Clinical psychologist Brett Litz identifies the self as a “legitimate authority,” meaning that individuals who participate in actions they view as ethically dubious can sustain moral injury as a result of their own action or inaction (Litz et. Al, 2009).

While Shay and Litz both note a distinction between moral injury and PTSD, the line is often unclear and underexplored in both academic and popular texts. In Judith Herman’s seminal *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), first published two years before Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam*, post-traumatic stress disorder is explored through the lens of two groups (treated as distinct by Herman’s work): women and veterans. Officially classified as a category of suffering in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III), Herman writes that the APA first recognized PTSD in response to returning Vietnam veterans who were unable to successfully reintegrate into civilian society and the moral legitimacy of their anti-war movement. The first edition of the diagnosis defined traumatic events as those that fell outside of normal human experience. Herman writes that in the context of modern mortality rates in warfare, military trauma cannot be constituted as uncommon. Although less than 0.5 percent of U.S. citizens currently serve in the military, thirteen percent are Veterans; their collective and individual journeys should not be treated as remote and uncommon possibilities (Eikenberry & Kennedy, 2013; Newport, 2012). Herman (1992) writes that it is not their rarity that makes traumatic events extraordinary. Instead, it is that they “overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (p. 33). This reaction can in turn affect the processing of difficult experiences, resulting in a fragmentation of memory as a form of self-protection. Traumatic events can become severed from the self; the instinct for self-defense can prevent the encoding of traumatic memory so that the traumatized individual can persevere. Meanwhile, the symptoms of unintegrated trauma
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can develop a life of their own. This protective mechanism forms a central part of PTSD, the symptoms of which fall into three broad categories: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction (Herman, 1992).

Soldiers in combat are exposed to numerous opportunities for perceived ethical and moral failure and are often witnesses to horrors that can create rifts between the known world and a new and immoral reality. The distance between the two contains space for both PTSD and moral injury. Although there is some interaction and co-morbidity between PTSD and moral injury, the two are separate entities. The clean, clinical, symptomatology-laced language of PTSD is lacking in soldiers’ reports of moral injury. In Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury in War, the difference is elucidated through the belief of Army Veteran and non-commissioned officer Camilo Ernesto Mejia: “PTSD is a breach of trust with the world. Moral injury, however, is the violation of a moral agreement he had with his own internal world, his moral identity” (Brock & Lettini, 2012).

Shay wrote in 1994 that Veterans could “recover from horror, fear, and grief once they return to civilian life, so long as ‘what’s right’ has not also been violated.” PTSD is often rendered as an “invisible wound” of war, but it has physiological impact on the body (Brock & Lettini, 2012). It produces hormones that implicate the amygdala and hippocampus in the continual act of shielding the self from its own suffering. Symptoms of PTSD, therefore, include ghosts of inaccessible memories—a startle reflex (hyperarousal), flashbacks (intrusion), and memory loss (constriction). Collectively, these represent the sufferer’s lack of sense of safety, the impact of the memory on biological processes, and the numbing created by the traumatic experience (Herman, 1992). Moral injury, which can exist co-morbidly but unnoticed beneath the more pressing concern of safety in a now unsafe world, includes more emotionally based reactions: sorrow, shame, and a sense of alienation (Wood, 2014).

Army Major Douglas A. Pryer writes that moral injury is certainly a cause of the military’s heightened suicide rate, but it is not the simple single answer Vice Chief of Staff Chiarelli seeks. It is a single factor in an issue fraught with oft-unspoken moral dimensions. Military suicide has been variously linked to moral injury, PTSD, traumatic brain injury, increase in training tempo, and risk factors beyond the military’s control (Pryer, 2014). In an article written by NPR’s Jamie Tarabay (2010), she cites transitions as a catalyst for experiencing trauma—a brief acknowledgement of the difficulty of navigating the pre- and post-deployment world as well as combat itself. Often, the true root of suffering is obscured by a military that is
unwilling to fully acknowledge the existence of moral injury. Herman writes that the objective of all military mental health care is to return the soldier to full functioning. In execution, this protocol means returning the ostensibly renewed soldier to combat. Because the military treats the aftermath of combat stress as a medicalized phenomenon, soldiers who have no obvious symptoms of PTSD but have sustained moral injury can be subjected to repeated incidences of trauma with no support. Because moral injury is not socially validated by the structure of the military, those who are morally injured cannot be socially validated within the system.

In writing about PTSD, Herman (1992) discusses importance of social validation in healing work. In the absence of an accepting society that actively helps foster recovery, soldiers sometimes willfully remember their own trauma as though it is a personal duty. The restriction of free and honest speech in the military—sometimes due to regulations but more often due to an unspoken expectation of hyper-masculine stoicism—prevents that kind of social recognition among soldiers and along the chain of command. The willful remembrance of war by ethically conscious veterans is enacted with less awareness through intrusive flashbacks in PTSD. For Army Colonel Theodore Westhusing, death was an act of remembrance. Col. Westhusing deployed to Iraq after a career of teaching military ethics. The war he found was not a war he was willing to fight. He took issue with corruption and contractors who cared about money rather than the mission. In Soul Repair, Brock and Lettini (2012) trace the steps between his deployment and his death. After learning of contractors killing innocent civilians without facing punishment, Westhusing wrote a note that decried a mission that “leads to corruption, human rights abuse, and liars.” He continued, stating that he felt, “sullied... death before dishonor anymore” (p. 41-42) He was found dead in a pool of his own blood on June 5, 2005, a single gunshot wound and his note serving as his only lasting testimony.

In The Untold War: Inside the Hearts, Minds, and Souls of Our Veterans, Dr. Nancy Sherman (2011) also relays the story of Westhusing’s death, although much more personally. She knew the Army colonel, and believes it is clear that for the man she refers to almost exclusively as “Ted” that “the suicide was triggered by a corruption of ideals” (p. 242). When reports of a young man committing suicide on the steps of the VA medical center in Dayton, Ohio reached his family, the Huff family would wonder aloud to reporters if he chose to shoot himself with an military style rifle and in uniform and at that particular location because he wanted to convey a message as well (Circello, 2010). For Westhusing and Huff, it is those who survive who have to bear continued witness.
For the many veterans and military personnel who are currently experiencing moral injury, the burden is too often shouldered alone. In the absence of accessible forms of healing both from PTSD and moral injury, many soldiers engage in risk-taking behaviors and self-harm as coping mechanisms. Others act from a constant reactionary state, harming potentially healing relationships with existing support systems. PTSD itself seems to stand as a barrier against healing from moral injury; when a Veteran’s sense of safety is compromised, they cannot begin healing work and proper mourning and remembrance.

With the rising awareness of moral injury as an increasingly socially validated reality, more channels are giving voice to Veterans who would otherwise go unnoticed in their suffering. Until our military renegotiates its understanding of trauma, however, there is a limit to wide scale treatment of moral injury and thus a limit to widespread moral repair. Until we give rise to new understandings of trauma and morality, our society cannot collectively facilitate the healing of our invisibly injured. Herman (1992) writes that trauma is contagious. She believes we collectively shy away from the pain of others and even dismiss it as invalid because we will otherwise be forced to consider our location amongst the discourse of safety and good in the world.

In writing about Huff and the Soldier from Charlie Company, I am locating my own position between perpetrator and witness, between my dual roles as a soldier and civilian, and between moral responsibility to my fellow soldiers and to the country I have sworn to protect. I will not live in ignorance of my own unknowable and unspoken moments. Judith Herman (1992) defines “violations of the social contract that are too terrible to utter aloud” (such as killing in an unjust war or in my own small case simply cheering the death of another human being) as “unspeakable” (p. 1). It is this barrier between experience and language that prevents healing in PTSD and thus often prevents morally healing work from taking place. We cannot allow the truths of war to go unspoken, nor should we feel comfortable acting complicity with a kyriarchy that refuses to acknowledge a morally damaging element to warfare.

Soldiers for whom the weight of war is too much have few options once enlisted, regardless of location on a domestic base or in a combat zone. For soldiers who are unwilling to serve after a difficult or traumatic experience shakes their belief in the morality of war (or their war), the process for leaving combat or the military overall is intentionally difficult; retention is the military’s goal and individual soldiers are not to disrupt that mission. Soldiers who have a moral objection to all wars may apply for conscientious objector (CO) status,
although there is no guarantee that any application will be approved. This CO application process requires soldiers to emphatically state their wholesale objection to war and includes discussion with commanders and chaplains. The process requires a specific moment occur for the soldier applying for CO status. The soldier must experience a “crystallization of conscience”—that is, a particular moment wherein the moral beliefs of the soldier clearly overcome the soldier’s sense of duty to the military. By exploring the warrior’s journey at three critical junctures—train-up, deployment, and reintegration—this paper will illuminate the ways in which warriors reach and communicate new understandings of their own morality while or after serving in the United States military.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the scars that war leaves on the human psyche. Although I believe healing is almost always possible, I also hold the belief that healing is never complete. Like a physical scar, if the invisible wound that remains after moral injury is not acknowledged and treated, the soul will grow tense and taut. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to willingly enter into the suffering of our soldiers so that their souls may bear scars that do not cause paralysis. The purpose of this paper is to explore the military’s morally dubious use of language that too often prevent make recovery of the soul an all-too distant theoretical concept. The purpose of this paper is to find new ways of understanding and subverting that language so that healing can become accessible for all of our warriors. Judith Herman, Nancy Sherman, and Rita Nakashimi Brock and Gabriella Lettini all variously refer to veterans and military experiences as “haunted” or “haunting.” The ghosts of wars past cannot necessarily be removed from the consciousness either of afflicted individuals or their society, but I argue that we can peace with them by calling them by name.

This paper will largely focus on individual soldiers who have begun to leave their wars behind. It will also more broadly implicate the context in which our soldiers exist, for without social stigmas that silence Veterans except to answer inquiries of, “Did you kill anyone?”, I believe our soldiers would spend far less time dealing with the sibling problems of shame and guilt. We as soldiers must be responsible and active agents in our healing process, but we as civilians must acknowledge our own place in that process. When a soldier is healthy and functioning, they should be expected to protect, serve, and defend the people of the United States. When they are unhealthy, it must fall to the people of the United States to take up arms against that which ails the soldier.

As for my ghosts: I still wear my dog tags. They serve as a physical reminder that there
is work to be done whether I am acting as a civilian or as a solider. At night if I shift the
wrong way, I wake up choking myself on them. Occasionally I wonder if they, too, sometimes
felt like a noose to the recruit from Charlie Company. When I am asked why I joined I say that
it does not matter. I am invested. I am in it.
The Training Warrior

“Don’t let (don’t let) the green grass fool you (your left)

Don’t let (don’t let) it change your mind

The grass is (your left) always greener

On the other side (don’t let)

On the other side”

- A marching cadence adapted from Wilson Pickett’s “Don’t Let The Green Grass Fool You”

The United States military has been voluntary since the end of the draft in 1974. “Voluntary” may be a misnomer, however; there is a rhythm to whom recruiters seek out and where they find recruits. In what is referred to as an “economic draft” or a “poverty draft,” military recruiters with quotas to fulfill find easy targets in socio-economically disadvantaged youth of color. Recruiters often post up in middle and high schools in a practice that the ACLU stated in 2008 violates the United Nations Operational Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict (Brock & Lettini, 2012). For many recruits, money is part or all of the equation; funds from the G.I. Bill and enlistment bonuses can and do pay for veteran and reservist educations. For others, patriotism or a sense of duty prevail as the motivation for enlistment. The Marine Corps. offered Tyler Boudreau (2008) the loyalty and excitement he deeply desired. The Army offered Logan Mehl-Laituri (2012) a way for him to honor the financial sacrifice his parents made for his education as well as an opportunity to serve God and country. For Craig Mullaney (2009), attending West Point and receiving a commission from the Army was a strict matter of patriotism.

After enlistment in the United States Armed Forces, most recruits begin training up to a year after signing their contract under the Delayed Entry Program (DEP). There are exceptions; soldiers who enlist in reserve components of any military branch may be required to in-process with their units before attending their Initial Active Duty Training (IADT). After the waning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, accession goals are down; recruits are spending more time in DEP and under the command of their recruiters than they have in over a decade. In an article for Marine Times, journalist Gina Harkins reports that Marine recruiter Staff Sergeant Matthew
Rogers has been taking advantage of the extra time with new recruits, developing individuated trainings to prepare DEPped in civilians to become militarized warriors. Rogers reports that his recruiting station has seen entry-level discharges drop by eleven percent on average over the past five years. The extra time at home and in DEP has enabled more Marines to succeed once they actually ship to training (Harkins, 2013).

Staff Sgt. Rogers acknowledges the possibility that circumstances may change during the DEP period. The GI Rights Hotline (2014), designed to help reluctant recruits advocate for themselves, states emphatically that recruits cannot be forced to follow through if they decide they do not want to be in the military at any point during their time in DEP. The website firmly instructs recruits to refuse to be harassed, coerced, or otherwise mistreated by recruiters who have quotas to fill. Marine recruiter Staff Sgt. Rogers notes that the DEP process can provide plenty of time for recruits to reconsider or reaffirm their commitment but that, “It allows the most committed of the pool to persevere” (Harkins, 2013). For the average recruit, resources like those provided by the GI Rights Hotline are never utilized because they are never necessary. Instead, thousands of new soldiers ship to training units in Fort Jackson, Parris Island⁹, Lackland Air Force Base, The Great Lakes Naval Training Center, and the United States Coast Guard Training Center. In each of these locations, recruits undergo transformative trainings designed to prepare them for war.

The drop in IADT discharges as exemplified by Marine Staff Sergeant Rogers reflects the working theory of psychiatrist Jonathan Shay. Dr. Shay believes our military could reduce the frequency of moral injury by making three changes to our current training practices:

1. Sending troops in and out of battle together
2. Providing more resources and training to troop leaders
3. Making training longer, cumulative, and more realistic

By keeping recruits in DEP longer—even as an unintentional side effect of controlling the influx of soldiers at bases and posts with limited capacity—the Marine Corps. is lengthening the duration of training and providing, at the very least, more realistic training for Boot Camp.

On the other side of the DEP process, months of training indoctrinate recruits into the military. New recruits arriving at Fort Jackson, an Army post in central South Carolina and the Basic Combat Training location for fifty percent of all Soldiers, are given a bottle of hand

⁹ Both the Army and Marines have multiple IADT training centers.
sanitizer, an Army resource card, a copy of the Army Blue Book, and a suicide prevention card. Before undergoing any stressful exercises or receiving the customary recruit buzz cut, soldiers are asked to acknowledge and read the card, which provides a brief list of resources and suicide prevention tips (Tarabay, 2010). The card can be a jarring part of the transition into training; some soldiers take an extra moment to put it aside and move on to the Blue Book.

The Blue Book is a TRADOC pamphlet designed to serve as a resource for new Soldiers who will be required to learn what it means to be a Soldier and how to rightfully conduct oneself as a professional. Along with helpful diagrams regarding appropriate and inappropriate haircuts, the Blue Book elaborates on the correct mindset and intentionality for a Soldier to hold:

“The Army is an honorable Profession founded on a bedrock of Trust—trust between Soldiers; trust between Soldiers and leaders; trust between Soldiers and Army Civilians; trust between Soldiers, their Families, and the Army; and trust between the Army and the American people.

To sustain this Trust, the Army Profession is committed to an ethos of Honorable Service built on core, moral beliefs that are expressed in our Army Values; our Soldier, and noncommissioned officers (NCO) creeds; and the Warrior Ethos. These beliefs guide our decisions and actions as we perform our duties and continuously develop in Character, Competence, and Commitment” (23-24).

Although Soldiers are encouraged to utilize written TRADOC materials, there is no guarantee that any particular Soldier will ever read the Blue Book. It is to some degree unnecessary; the military imparts its moral values on its soldiers implicitly through training. The written military moral code that values loyalty, trust and selfless service is “issued to each recruit along with a weapon” (Wood, 2014). Recruits are trained to be inherently complicit with the objectives of the military, which include a directive to kill but also to conduct war justly; Brock and Lettini (2012) note that military personnel often understand just war precepts and intentionally war conventions better than “members of religious and philosophical traditions that espouse them” (xvii).

Regardless of the language the military uses surrounding ethical and moral judgments, training environments are designed to enable recruits to serve, defend, and protect the U.S. Constitution—and in that protection comes killing. For the Marine Corps. administration, the tension that killing creates should not be termed “moral injury” but “inner conflict”, which
comparatively lends itself equally to ethical debate and an ambivalent discussion about where to go out for dinner (McCloskey, 2011). To Marine Corps. Lieutenant Colonel James Bain, the term “moral injury” implies an inherent immorality to killing. According to Navy Chaplain Mark Smith, “Marines don’t like to say, ‘I’m being injured by the very thing I’m being trained to do” (Bebinger, 2013). What Smith sees in Marines reluctant to acknowledge the legitimacy to the term “moral injury” is precisely what VA psychologist Brett Litz wants to evoke from them; “moral injury” is intentionally specific because “inner conflict” does not make enough space for ethical qualms that fall outside the purview of other combat stressors (Litz et. Al, 2009).

Litz and Shay both believe in establishing safe spaces for warriors to discuss their moral responsibility as soldiers. For many soldiers, there is no apparent need for that space until after a deployment or multiple deployments, when the warrior is removed from the closed environment of the military. When Marine Corps. Veteran Tyler Boudreau returned from a deployment to Iraq and sought treatment for post-traumatic stress, he was told he was “normal,” and that everything he was experiencing was unremarkable. For Boudreau, a diagnosis of PTSD was insubstantial compared to the depth and diversity of his feelings. He was torn between his moral agency as an individual who felt responsible for violence and his moral agency as a Marine who had a duty to his Marines. The rift was spurred in part by the embrace-the-suck mentality that refused to acknowledge his pain as anything other than a casual hazard of the job. Boudreau (2008) resigned his commission and left the Marine Corps.

Shay believes that when spaces are hostile or invalidated toward those who do have moral qualms about their service, soldiers are less likely to speak up about their own experiences. Judith Herman likewise acknowledges the need for social validation of traumatic experiences. Boudreau (2008) exemplifies the internalized burden placed on the soldier when this validation does not exist:

“There’s the angry voice, and there’s the broken hearted one. There is the tender me and the savage. And of course, there is the Marine. There will always be the Marine, standing tall inside me, speaking smartly about values and patriotism. Then there’s the rest of me, the part of me that was left over when I left the Corps. He has no name, no identity, or credentials, or skills. He has no title or rank. He has no cause. He is just me in the wake of battle” (p.10).

For Boudreau, the Marine Corps. promised loyalty and the opportunity to be a “hard motherfucker” (p. 11). His path to the Corps. is not unfamiliar; after a childhood spent in a
tough part of Boston he wandered into a recruiting office, said he wanted to be a Marine, and—perhaps the only unusual part of his recruitment—actually read the entire enlistment contract. He wanted to become a grunt. He would become a grunt. The Marine Corps., a “force of readiness”, would deploy Boudreau and his unit to Iraq with limited preparedness. Boudreau notes in his autobiography that Marines “always go, ready or not. And we go on time” (p. 17).

Being a part of a “force of readiness” that is not actually ready to go to war is likewise familiar for military personnel. There is no way to truly prepare for war. In the wake of the awareness that no soldier is every absolutely ready for combat, the military attempts to instill its values—a commitment to the mission, a commitment to a recruit’s fellow soldiers and chain of command, and a commitment to battle-readiness. Both Shay and the Blue Book acknowledge the importance of trust in the functioning of a Soldier and their Army. Trust is the objective of many exercises and training during a recruit’s time in IADT. Wearing a gas mask in a chamber filled with CS gas inspired trust in the Soldier’s equipment. Team-building obstacle courses inspire trust in the Soldier’s unit.

The effectiveness and use of some elements of training can create distance between what recruits believe is right and what they are being asked to do. For Joshua Casteel, who signed up for the DEP program in 1997 at seventeen and attended BCT the following summer, he could not make peace with his training in the context of his Christian values. Yelling, “Kill! Kill! Kill, without mercy, Sergeant” felt incongruent with his belief system (p. 83). Despite a distaste for his training in Basic, ROTC, and at West Point, he would later deploy to Iraq in 2004 because it was his duty as a soldier and he had previously sworn to do so (Brock & Lettini, 2012). Boudreau (2008) discusses this tendency of soldiers to commit fully regardless of moral qualms: “So you make a commitment—and you live by it... Can you have second thoughts? Are you allowed? [Good] fighters don’t waste a lot of time thinking shit over. They just fight until they can’t fight anymore. That’s what we call morale” (p. 29). Morale building is precisely the aim of Initial Active Duty Training.

THE WAY OUT

“I went to the market where all the hajis shop;
Pulled out my machete, and I began to chop...
Went down to the schoolyard where all the children play;
Pulled out my AK and I began to spray...
Airborne (hi ho, lock and load, pull the trigger, shoot the son of a bitch)...
Rangers lead the way (die! Die! Why won’t you die!)."

- A variation of the “Airborne Ranger” cadence

United States military training seeks to engage recruits in the discourse of soldiering, and doing so often requires parroting—call and response in formation and in field exercises. Cadences are used to boost morale and to keep time when marching or running. During exercise (PT), soldiers are instructed to yell, “KILL!” while executing movements as benign as squats and lunges. Both crass cadences and violent shouts serve a very specific purpose for recruits: desensitization. Desensitization is crucial to training; IADT is designed to inoculate the soldier against stress so that when the soldier is under duress in combat, they do not break (Sherman, 2010). Dehumanization is utilized in much the same way, and to variously negative effect. In the case of atrocities during the Vietnam War, Veteran Tim O’Brien writes that, “To understand what happens to the GI among mine fields of My Lai, you must know something about what happens in America. You must understand Fort Lewis, Washington. You must understand a thing called basic training” (as cited in Grossman, 1996, p. 190). Understanding the experience of dehumanization and desensitization in and after warfare, therefore, requires an understanding of how the military instills the devaluing of the enemy and of the self into the values it imparts during training.

To create a realistic training environment, the military trains recruits on live-fire lanes. The military trains recruits to shoot at targets that look human. The military trains recruits to react to medical emergencies in the field using state-of-the-art make-up, fake blood, and prosthetics. The military gives recruits the opportunity to fire grenade launchers and machine guns and see the impact these weapons make on old tanks and human-like targets. All of this desensitizes the soldier to the violence and immediate aftermath of war. The cadences, the yelling, and the desensitization all serve a greater purpose: preparing soldiers to kill. Killing is explicitly viewed as a “tragic necessity,” something to be avoided where possible and executed as expediently as possible (Sherman, 2011). There is a gulf
between that which is stated and that which remains unspoken, however. For Tyler Boudreau, the implicit Marine belief in war as a positive force and explicit belief in war as a tragic necessity created unbearable cognitive dissonance. For military personnel still in training, it is simply an indisputable fact. Dehumanization works as an aid to alleviate the moral qualms of killing. Recruits learn to joke amongst themselves about killing “Hajis” as Tim O’Brien’s comrades spoke of killing “gooks.” The power of naming—identifying oneself as a Soldier or an Airman—works both ways. Identifying the enemy as “other” by using racial slurs eliminates some of the compunction created by thought of taking a human life. “Hajis” are not human; they are inhuman enemies who would do harm to us.

Boudreau believes preemptive hatred of the other hinders the ability to make levelheaded decisions on the battlefield. He holds the simultaneous belief that without dehumanizing the other, soldiers would be unable to engage in killing when it is necessary. Iraq and Afghanistan saw a change in the face of the battlefield; enemies were everywhere and nowhere, as were the front lines. The invisibility of the other created distrust in everyone who could possibly enact violence against U.S. military personnel. This in turn meant that for Boudreau, the liberation movement U.S. forces in Iraq were supposed to support was constantly hampered by a single question: Which ones are we liberating? At Boot Camp, Boudreau learned to treat killing with nonchalance. His division commander in Iraq, General Mattis, was once quoted as saying, “It’s fun to shoot some people... it’s a hoot.” The public reacted with indignation, but the Marine Corps. did not. They recognized that there is a process to accepting the imperative to kill. The public’s reaction to General Mattis’s comment was an indictment of his nonchalance and that of the Marine Corps. The public failed to react to the fact that General Mattis’s views are implicit in basic military training and thus recognized to some degree by all warriors.

Boudreau (2008) writes that soldiers desensitize themselves because they must. The objective is the mission and the mission cannot always be completed in soldiers are unwilling to kill. Desensitization is a form of survival in war. Only in the quiet aftermath of war, Boudreau writes, is it discovered that, “One’s humanity can be quite difficult to recover once it’s been lost” (p. 83). For veterans like Boudreau or Mehl-Laituri, it was only after deployment that they recognized their morality as incompatible with service. When
dehumanization or desensitization or any other element of military training is unbearable to the recruit, there is little recourse for leaving the training environment. To echo my own drill sergeants, “The fastest way out is to graduate.”

There are intentionally few opportunities for recruits to resist their training. Recruits who do not comply with lawful orders to continue or return to their cycle are punished, and even soldiers who are legitimately physically injured often suffer the wrath of less than understanding officers. Kim Ruocco, director of suicide outreach at Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), relayed the story of one recruit who sustained a knee injury during his initial active duty naval training. His unit deployed without him and he, left on post in the States, continued to go to roll call in the morning. After a while, they stopped calling his name, ignoring his humanity so wholly that his existence was invalidated. He, in turn, stopped going to roll call because he felt devalued and as though he would never heal. When his peers told him he was going to get in trouble for skipping roll call, he committed suicide before any formal UCMJ action could be taken against him (Childress, 2013). For soldiers like him, the stigma of seeking mental health care can be compounded by a cultural belief that soldiers who have been deployed should rarely (if ever) need help. Despite the lip service offered by a military with suicide prevention cards and suicide prevention month, soldiers who have not combat experience are allowed even less space for emotional and mental needs. Five weeks into training, an Army recruit named Ryan Cooper, nineteen, noted that he, “Doesn’t believe in suicide... You know what you’re getting into if you sign this contract” (Tarabay, 2010). Cooper’s words reflected the ethos of the military just over a month into his training. To some degree, this makes him a good soldier, receptive to his environment and its implicit lessons.

Recruits who do speak up during emotionally or psychologically trying times in training are often treated as though they are rebelling against the military, even though in doing so they are following military suicide prevention protocol. Until an article written by Elspeth Reeve was brought to the attention of General Peter Chiarelli in 2009, at-risk recruits at Fort Benning were made to wear orange safety vests as a condition of being on suicide watch, ostensibly so that they would be more visible and thus kept safe. In an environment that values and orders homogeneity in appearance, wearing anything other
than digital camouflage patterned ACUs can be additional source of stress for already-troubled soldiers. In addition to the now-discontinued safety vest practice, soldiers on suicide watch are also variously not allowed access to their belt or shoelaces and required to speak to a chaplain. Each of these has an explicit purpose: to establish the continued safety of the recruit. The result of these practices for many recruits, however, is shame. There is a stigma attached to the waddle required by baggy ACU pants and unlaced shoes. There is a stigma attached to utilizing the few resources available to at-risk recruits. There is a sense, among the other recruits, that no one wants to be in the position of the at-risk soldier. Drill sergeants at Fort Benning lambasted the soldiers in the orange vests, treating them as outcomes to be avoided. When Elspeth Reeve lived on an Army base in Germany, she encountered a veteran experiencing post-combat stress who refused to reach out to his support system with his distress. He cited his memories of recruits in orange vests and the secondhand shame he felt for them as his reasoning.

The tactics of U.S. military training do a disservice to the individuals who have volunteered to serve, defend, and protect their country. Recruits cannot be expected to know how to serve ethically when required to yell, “Kill!” and sing cadences about slaughtering innocents. Recruits cannot be expected to appropriately respond to suicidal ideation when they are being told not to sound like the “weak” Soldiers. Initial Active Duty Training turns civilians to soldiers to the detriment of recruits’ morality.
The Combat Warrior

“How can anybody kill and function normally afterward? Or see someone get killed and function normally afterward? It’s not the human response.”

- Sergeant Phillip Mays, Jr., The Good Soldiers by David Finkel (2009, p. 129)

When a unit receives deployment orders, the mobilization process begins. For an active duty soldier, preparation for deployment mimics their every day life: trainings and briefings are scheduled and completed. The trainings, however, gain a new focus—the newly defined theatre of operations. Briefings are designed to enable soldiers to square away the financial, legal, and administrative details of their lives before they leave their home installation. Soldiers in the U.S. Armed Forces receive trainings on the Geneva Conventions’ international legal standards for warfare and Rules of Engagement specific to their area of combat, but receive very little designated emotional or moral guidance during the pre-deployment process (Iraq Veterans Against the War, 2008). In Reborn on the Fourth of July, Logan Mehl-Laituri (2012) writes that, “You would’ve thought there would be some sort of framework given us through which we could understand what we were to do, but the ‘kill ’em all and let God sort ’em out’ mentality had won the day.” His unit knew the official reason for their deployment to Iraq in 2004, but understanding Saddam Hussein and weapons of mass destruction as a threat did nothing for his understanding of “how [he] would deal with the death [he] would encounter” (p. 40).

The military has workbooks that ask soldiers where they want to be buried and what music they want played in the event of their funeral, providing space for short answers (Finkel, 2009). This paperwork does not ask how soldiers face the idea of death—be it their own, that of their fellow warriors, or that of the enemy. Logan Mehl-Laituri (2008) chose to develop his own procedure for dealing with the idea of death in combat. He wrote what he refers to as “preemptive suicide” letters to his loved ones, to be opened if he died during his deployment. The letters were Mehl-Laituri’s attempt to make peace with the possibility that he might never see his friends and family again (p. 40). By writing as though he had already died, Mehl-Laituri began to internalize the idea that he could be killed during deployment. The “preemptive suicide” letters were also Mehl-Laituri’s way of acknowledging his willing role in the war effort he was to join; it was his choice to join the military and thus his actions that led to the
possibility of his death in action. Mehl-Laituri gave his death letters to his father to send in the event of his death. Logan Mehl-Laituri’s theory was that he would be helping his family and friends by offering them a final goodbye. The decision gave him closure; he believed that in fulfilling this self-prescribed duty to his loved ones, he could commit fully to his duties during deployment.

One night late in their deployment, Laituri’s company responded to a distress call. A convoy on its way to the forward operating base (FOB) where Mehl-Laituri was stationed had gotten into an accident; a Humvee had rolled over and landed in an embankment above a reservoir. Mehl-Laituri left the FOB in a group of twenty. They were the first to arrive at the scene. A Humvee designed to seat eight had held twelve soldiers when the accident occurred—three in the cab and nine in the flat bed back. Upon Mehl-Laituri’s arrival, soldiers were already surrounding the vehicle in an effort to free the three soldiers trapped inside the vehicle and a medevac vehicle was already on sight. They needed swimmers to search for survivors in the reservoir. Mehl-Laituri volunteered. He took off his body armor and boots and made sure someone would be there to help him over the four-foot concrete barrier separating the road from the water. He gauged the temperature of the air—mid-fifties—and plunged in.

He misjudged how cold the water would be. He was terrified not at the thought of dying in the frigid water but of having to retrieve a slowly freezing, lifeless body from the reservoir’s depths. He prayed that he would find nothing—no one—in the water. His prayer was answered and he was lifted out of the water and over the barrier minutes later, thankfully alone. After he returned to his boots and his gear, he looked for other ways to help. He was soaking wet, cold, and in “crisis mode, trying to fix things, everything” (p. 49). After circling the overturned vehicle several times, he realized that a pair of boots he thought belonged to a rescuer actually belonged to a trapped soldier. He had his next mission. Mehl-Laituri approached the soldier and tapped his legs to no avail. He felt for a pulse under the soldier’s pant leg. The soldier’s skin was clammy, but it provided Mehl-Laituri with the sign of life he needed to proceed. He found a medic to help the trapped warrior. The medic shrugged and told Mehl-Laituri, “He’s too far gone. We need to focus on the men we can save” (p. 49).

Mehl-Laituri’s heart dropped. Causalities that are likely to become fatalities are treated with the intention of minimizing pain and suffering prior to death. Mehl-Laituri could not leave

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10 Medical evacuation
the soldier. He tried to dig around the warrior’s body, to loosen him from his place in the vehicle. Mehl-Laituri checked the soldier’s pulse constantly. He stayed with the soldier. Occasionally another soldier would join the two for a moment; no one stayed. Eventually a convoy arrived from a nearby FOB, carrying Special Forces medics and a crane to dislodge the disabled Humvee. When the crane lifted the soldier’s body along with the upturned Humvee, a medic finally began to treat the soldier. A thumbs-up from the medic was a positive sign; the soldier was still alive. The soldier’s face was grey and his injuries were grave, but Mehl-Laituri left the scene with hope. The soldier would be medevaced to medical care and relative safety. On the ride back to the FOB news came through about the soldier. He died in transit.

The death of the trapped soldier haunted Laituri in the following weeks. A screening of Pearl Harbor in the mess tent disgusted him; enjoying fake gore and fake violence seemed callous in the face of true violence. At night, the blackout conditions on the FOB reminded Mehl-Laituri of the blackness and silence that surrounded the trapped soldier before his death. He wondered idly if the soldier was aware of what was happening beyond his body’s slow drift toward death. He wondered if the trapped soldier was aware of him—of the sounds of him digging around the trapped soldier’s boots. The circumstances of the soldier’s death undermined what Mehl-Laituri believed about combat. Combat deaths are supposed to be glorious, worthy of epic films and memorial statues. The trapped soldier was not cut down in the midst of a firefight, however; he was in an overcrowded Humvee with an overtired driver who accidentally missed a turn in the road. For Mehl-Laituri, it was “excruciatingly meaningless” (p. 51). American culture taught Laituri that combat was supposed to be honorable; it was supposed to be a noble pursuit toward noble ends. Mehl-Laituri saw no nobility in dying in a Humvee accident. Despite the logical reasoning behind military combat medicine, he could not accept a structure that forced medics to declare their own soldiers “too far gone.”

A couple months prior, Laituri’s unit was required to meet with a mental health specialist. An NCO in his unit, Sergeant Matthew Keli‘i said, “I think we put on masks. We play a part we know is expected of us... something we need to do in order to survive and get through it in one piece” (p. 42). Keli‘i articulated an unspoken truth that resonated with Laituri. Keli‘i gave voice to what Mehl-Laituri views as a coping mechanism for the equally unmentioned lack of moral framework for soldiers in Iraq. Mehl-Laituri went outside of the wire with soldiers who seemed more emotional while playing Call of Duty than when in actual combat, as though they were putting their “regular character
Scar Tissue

He describes this kind of play-acting as means to an end; thinking of combat as unreal allowed Mehl-Laituri and his fellow soldiers to unmoor themselves from the reality of war and the moral implications of participating in warfare.

Mehl-Laituri’s mask eventually started to show signs of wear. Eleven months into his deployment, he was on duty at an overflowing hospital morgue. By that time, he had already seen “a good number of bodies pile up” (p. 52). He had to photograph the dying and the dead in order to identify them later in case the heat disfigured the corpses. The dead and dying bodies represented a different culture and different customs than his own. They did not share his language and they did not share his skin tone. Mehl-Laituri did not cry as he photographed countless foreign faces because they meant nothing to him. His experience in the hospital catalyzed something for Mehl-Laituri. After admitting that he was playing a role; after witnessing the rescue team’s indifference to the trapped and dying soldier and after witnessing so many dead bodies, Mehl-Laituri began to realize he was a product of a “systematically unjust and sinful world” (p. 52). Everything Logan Mehl-Laituri knew fell under scrutiny. He could not reconcile his lack of empathy for the people of Afghanistan with the belief that he was a good man. He could not reconcile his Christian ethics with his military ethics. He could not understand his own newly apparent indifference to the collateral damage—the human cost—of war. Eleven months into his deployment, Logan Mehl-Laituri began to recognize the impact of the death he had encountered. He had been desensitized.

HOSTILE INTENT

“It was the first time in an hour anyone had a clue where the enemy was. I saw two Afghans calmly building a wall despite the war erupting around them. Nothing made sense.”

- Timothy Kudo, “On War and Redemption” (2011)

Tyler Boudreau (2009) understands the desensitization Mehl-Laituri describes as a survival mechanism. During his deployment, Boudreau was tasked with counterinsurgency operations. These were designed to win the “hearts and minds” of the Iraqi people, and called for the minimization of force; the manual stated that killing a few insurgents was not worth gaining tenfold that number of new insurgents seeking vengeance. The manual and their missions, however, conflicted. One of their missions was named “Operation Trash Lutifyah.” The operation consisted of standard attacks, patrols, and raids, but the name set the tone for the
mission. Even as official doctrine gravitated toward non-violent efforts, missions still tended toward violence. The idea of “winning hearts and minds” had little impact on the Marines. Boudreau (2009) writes in Packing Inferno that “the message wasn’t heard by Marines who saw their friends lying twisted, pulled apart, on the ground, burned, bleeding, and silent. It’s hard to hear over that silence... Their minds were on the fight, on killing, on making it to the end of the patrol, to the end of the operation, to the end of the day, or the week, or the month, to the end of the deployment. Their minds were on survival” (p. 176).

Boudreau’s mind was on survival too. He was a watch officer. He compiled the details of firefight and combat and assembled them into coherent narratives. For the purposes of the Marines, this meant making the war clinical and antiseptic on paper, implicating neither the chain of command nor himself in the process. In doing so, Boudreau writes that he discovered the biggest of war stories and that he helped to bury that story. He writes that he never lied; he omitted morally ambiguous details that obscured the truth the military wanted him to espouse. The language he used was important to the task—Marine operations were “offensive” rather than “defensive” because a defensive mission indicated that the Marines were not winning the war. To tell the other truths he found while compiling reports in his office went against his desire for survival; facing the moral implications of war during combat and in writing would have made him a target for his chain of command. Boudreau chose to remain complicit with a system that required him to subjugate his own moral principles. He did so to survive.

Language is an equally useful tool in combat. Soldiers do not ask to “fire upon” the enemy; they ask to “engage.” This creates a verbal and mental disconnect from the act of killing. During Boudreau’s deployment, a Marine sniper spotted an Iraqi man walking along a particularly dangerous road called “route Jackson.” It was the middle of the night and the man carried a shovel and thus represented a potential threat. The sniper asked for permission to disable the threat. Boudreau writes that “the question of this man’s life—whoever he was—was decided in the night with the question, ’Can we engage him’ And my answer, ’Sure’ ” (p. 179).

It was possible that the man was farming. Irrigation equipment and electricity were so unreliable in parts of Iraq that work normally reserved for daytime hours—like tilling soil—could sometimes only be done at night. Intense daytime temperatures were also a concern for the farmers. Meanwhile, Boudreau and his Marines were worried about the constantly looming threat
of IEDs. The Marines initially talked to every person holding a shovel they saw on route Jackson. They all claimed to be farmers when the Marines asked, but some of them had to be lying. Someone was still burying IEDs along route Jackson. Boudreau and his Marines eventually tired of trying to distinguish between farmers and enemies. They stopped asking. When they shot and killed men holding shovels, they rationalized it: the man could have been an insurgent. Boudreau wrote to this effect in his reports: “One insurgent engaged and killed” (p. 180). Tyler Boudreau and his men had no way of knowing who was truly guilty and who was not, so they stopped caring. Everyone became guilty. Boudreau and his unit conducted raids and called them “cordons and searches.” They killed men with shovels and they called them insurgents. Whether they were right or wrong did not matter. One insurgent engaged and killed.

In September of 2010, Timothy Kudo (2011) was on a patrol in Afghanistan. An Afghan farmer heard a burst of machine gun fire and dropped his shovel, running away from the sound and toward safety. Kudo and his Marines saw nothing, but a few of them fired regardless. An hour later, someone saw movement in a nearby building. Meanwhile, two locals built a wall while the war waged on beyond them. Kudo and his Marines moved to clear the building. At the same time, two men were spotted driving toward the Marines on a motorcycle. Nobody could verify whether the men had weapons or hostile intent. The Marines responded, throwing smoke grenades and yelling, waving so that the two men might stop. Timothy Kudo weighed the risk that the men presented to the Marines against the risk that the men were harmless. Of the incident, he writes: “The only hard fact about the rules of engagement is that you have the right to defend yourself. You decide to pull the trigger.”

The Marines fired on the motorcycle for ten seconds. The motorcycle and its riders came to a stop. The building the Marines were clearing showed no signs of combat. Kudo (2011) writes that the “fog of war lifted.” When the Marines ran to the motorcycle, one of them hoped aloud that the men they were approaching would have weapons on them. They had only sticks. What the Marines observed as a muzzle flash had merely been light reflecting off chrome on the motorcycle. One of the men was almost certainly a teenager. The two were close to their home when they happened upon the Marines. Their family saw them die and approached the Marines and the motorcycle to collect the bodies. The Marines could still hear them wailing when they returned to their mission. “The insanity of war,” Kudo writes, “means that incidents like this are acceptable. By the standards of those who fight wars we actually did the right thing. The catastrophe is that these incidents occur on an industrial scale.”
For Timothy Kudo, the fog of war meant that two young men died because of poor timing and light reflecting off of chrome. For Tyler Boudreau, the fog of war made farmers and insurgents look the same. The fog of war, for Boudreau and Kudo, shrouded their deployments in ambiguity and death.

**THE ODDS**

“After the attack was over, soldiers gathered around the ruined Humvee to marvel—not at the destruction a mortar could cause, but at the odds. How much sky was up there? And how many landing spots were down here?”


On July 12, 2007, Army infantry unit 2-16 was three months into its deployment to Iraq. They were part of the surge. In west Al-Amin, the commander of Charlie Company stood under shade with a local man and his father. Charlie Company was clearing neighborhoods when a particularly friendly family invited the commander to chat. The three discussed the difficulties of life in Iraq and the number of soldiers involved in the initial invasion. The conversation left the commander optimistic about the mission of the war. He felt optimistic about his soldiers and the work they were performing. “This,” journalist David Finkel (2009) writes, “is the first version of the war” (p. 103). Finkel embedded with 2-16 for eight months from January of 2007 to June of 2008. He chronicled the Soldiers’ deployment in *The Good Soldiers*.

In the center of Al-Amin, Alpha Company soldiers participated in the second version of the days’ war. They were ordered to act on a tip they had received—a mosque was allegedly being used as a weapons cache. This presented logistical problems; U.S. military personnel were not supposed to enter mosques without special permission. Iraqi National Police (NPs) were supposed to accompany the soldiers, but they were late. While the soldiers waited for their Iraqi counterparts, some of them took refuge amidst line-drying clothing in a family’s courtyard. When the NPs arrived, they reacted unprofessionally to the intel. They nonchalantly entered a nearby house to gain roof access to the mosque, laughing at the idea of weapons in a house of worship. The National Police emerged from the mosque minutes later with ammunition, an AK-47, a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, and a partially assembled IED. Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Kauzlarich was with Alpha Company for the day. He was disgusted. He had to consider what kind of imam would allow a mosque to be used for warfare. His counterinsurgency manual
told him to consider his environment, but he did not know how to interpret a place of worship being used as a space for the violence of war. A few days prior, an Iraqi religious leader released a statement promising to continue harming and killing American soldiers as long as they engaged Iraqi insurgents. Kaularich, a Christian warrior, felt cognitive dissonance over the religious man’s violent rhetoric. He could not understand how a weapons cache could exist in a mosque. He could not comprehend this small part of his war.

After Kaularich returned to his Humvee, he heard the chatter of gunfire from an Apache helicopter. Two of them were flying to the east of Alpha Company’s location. So began the third version of 2-16’s war on July 12, 2007. Bravo Company had engaged the enemy in rooftop chases and had taken sniper fire for long enough to call in air support in East Al-Amin. The helicopter crews focused on two men with weapons slung on their backs. There were four men slightly behind them, and a few more on the street nearby, each with weapons of their own. One appeared to carry an AK-47; another held a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. The crews confirmed with each other what they saw and requested permission to engage. They received permission. The first twenty-second round lasted two seconds. Within moments, the nine men were down. Bravo Company moved in on the only survivor. The apache crews waited; if the wounded man picked up a weapon, they could re-engage.

Before the man could pick up a weapon, another individual ran to him. Behind two the men, a passenger van approached. The wounded man got into the van just before the apache crews received permission to fire again. The van was disabled within seconds. On the ground, Bravo Company called in the KIAs and WIAs. A soldier rescued a small child from the van. An apache crewmember commented, “It’s their fault for bringing their kids to battle” (p. 113).

One soldier, Jay March, felt positively about the wrecked and ruined bodies around them: “When I heard they were engaging, when I heard there’s thirteen KIAs, I was just so happy.” July 12, 2007 fell five days after the memorial service for his closest friend, Private First Class (PFC) Andre Craig, Jr. PFC Craig was killed in action in transit to a nearby FOB for rest and relaxation. An explosively formed penetrator (EFP) killed him, knocking out his teeth and severing his right arm in the process. March was happy because, in his words, “Craig had just died, and it felt like, you know, we got ‘em. “March and another soldier found a wounded man in the courtyard of a house. The dying man rubbed his forefingers together, the Iraqi sign for friends. March found himself making the sign back before lifting his middle finger and walking away. Unbeknownst to March and to the rest of Bravo Company, the thirteen KIAs were
not insurgents. They were independent reporters and journalists. Because they were not embedded with any military unit, the army was not aware of their presence before that day. March did not know. Bravo Company did not know. March was happy about the thirteen deaths. Bravo Company got 'em.

On July 12, 2007, the fourth version of the war took place after Kauzlarich was made aware of the journalists in Al-Amin. The journalists continued to report even after their deaths; the military had to review all of their footage and writing to make sure they were not insurgents. After a thorough review of the day’s activities, it was concluded that Bravo Company acted within the rules of engagement. The journalists were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Iraqis in the van were not clearly identified as journalists or insurgents, but it did not matter; Bravo Company had done nothing wrong. Lt. Col. Kauzlarich felt his men deserved a win, anyway.

There is no single standard operating procedure for combat. The rules of engagement govern war on paper—in Tyler Boudreau’s post-firefight reports and in investigations about journalists who could have been insurgents—but they do little to console the emotional and moral content of soldiers’ souls. While deployed, warriors tuck pieces of themselves away so that they can survive the horrors of war. They don anesthetizing masks, numbing themselves against the brutality of war. This removal of the self from combat is effective during the deployment; it enables soldiers to act as agents of death and kill when they are ordered to kill. Warriors are desensitized to combat by training and by necessity. They play the role of the professional soldier and necessarily place survival over emotional and spiritual health and development. This numbing is temporary, however, for when soldiers return home they begin to thaw and must undergo the work of recovering those pieces of themselves that could not endure their war.
THE RETURNING WARRIOR

“Being a warrior, after all, is a self-destructive profession”
- Tyler Boudreau, Packing Inferno (2008, p. 113)

At the end of a deployment, military personnel ship home to their duty station or to a demobilization station. Protocol requires newly demobilized soldiers to undergo briefings, trainings, and counseling intended to ensure their safe and successful post-deployment reintegration into civilian society. Newly-returned warriors fill out paperwork and receive anti-suicide instruction before being released. They are given medical evaluations and resources for further care, mostly relegated to the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VA). While the intent behind the process is to ensure the continued survival and safety of our Veterans, too many warriors—twenty-two a day—do not find and receive adequate post-mobilization support (Circello, 2010).

In the summer of 2003, Marine reservist Jeffrey Lucey returned home after a deployment. His unit supported the shock-and-awe campaign in Iraq. The following summer, he hanged himself with a garden hose in the basement of his parents’ home. He initially seemed okay, but the deployment changed him. During a trip to Cape Cod with his high school sweetheart, he couldn’t go to the beach. He said he had “seen too much sand” (Jones, 2013, p. 99) Jeffrey Lucey began to unravel. He started binge drinking. He had no appetite and often threw up. He lost his sense of balance. His deployment changed him. He totaled cars. He stopped showing up for family engagements. When his younger sister checked on him on Christmas Eve, he told her through his tears that he was nothing but a murderer. He had nightmares and cried out in his sleep. Although he managed to reenroll in college, he couldn’t stay in his classes—they were too loud. He slept very little (Jones, 99).

One night, he asked his father Kevin if he could sit in his lap. Kevin Lucey rocked his son as though he was still a child. Kevin and his wife Joyce Lucey had no bearing for how to care for their child (Iraq Veterans Against the War, 2008). When he was upset, Joyce Lucey felt it would hurt him more to confront him; when he was calm, it seemed best to let him be. The
Luceys reached out for help. They sought out a private therapist for their son while waiting for assistance from the VA. One weekend, the Luceys even committed their son to the VA’s care against his will when they suspected he was suicidal. After being committed, Kevin Lucey confided to the VA psychotherapists that he already had three methods in mind for taking his own life: overdose, suffocation, and hanging. He told the VA that he had already purchased a hose. They released him to his parents—his “support system”, according to his VA records—after the weekend ended. His parents were told he needed to be evaluated for PTSD but only after he stopped drinking. They were not informed of their son’s suicidal ideation. A nurse suggested the Lucey’s force their son to recognize his need for help by kicking him out of the house or having him arrested. The nurse thought Jeffrey Lucey needed to “hit bottom” to fully recognize his need for help (Brock & Lettini, 2012).

The day after Jeffrey Lucey asked to sit on his father’s lap, he removed the dog tags he wore around his neck and laid them neatly on his bed. He went to the family’s cellar. He wrapped the hose he purchased around his neck two times. He hanged himself. The dog tags belonged to two Iraqi soldiers, prisoners Lucey was ordered to kill during his deployment. The Luceys only knew of the incident because Jeff relayed it to a VA psychiatrist in front of his father. When the Luceys shared their son’s story—including the two prisoners Jeffrey Lucey wore dog tags to remember—the Marines denied their claims. The Luceys believe the Marines thought Jeff was trying to accuse them of war crimes. The Luceys also believe Jeff was only accusing—blaming—himself. The VA responded to Jeffrey Lucey’s death as well: a psychiatrist called the Lucey family to assure them that the VA had no lingering responsibility for Jeff’s life or death. Like his parents, Jeffrey Lucey tried to reach out. A month into his deployment, he wrote a letter to his girlfriend telling her he had done “immoral things.” He wrote that he would give anything to erase the previous month. He wanted desperately to have never gone to war. Post-deployment, Jeffrey Lucey told a counselor at a veteran’s center that he felt down partially because no one seemed to want to listen to him. Less than a year later, he would ask his father to hold him for the last time (Jones, 2013).

The Lucey’s story illuminates several elements of the returned warrior’s post-deployment life: the uncertainty and invisibility of the truth, the inability to process difficult and traumatic experiences, and the difficulty of navigating inefficient and ineffective government support systems. The military’s existing process for reintegrating warriors with civilian society is not enough. The VA’s existing treatment procedures are not enough, either. In “Moral Injury and
Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy”, VA psychiatrist Dr. Brett Litz (et. Al, 2009) notes that the culture of the military has a deeply ingrained code of conduct that normalizes violence and killing. This culture extends to an ethical code that enables soldiers to prepare for the horrors of war, but not the horrors of coming home. There are ethical ambiguities in wars that cannot almost distinguish civilians from combatants. There are ethical ambiguities in wars that force soldiers to make decisions before they can determine their own moral bearings. These unanticipated moral choices do not necessarily have a visible immediate impact on soldiers, but may well show up months or even years later—in Jeffrey Lucey’s case, during a post-deployment beach trip.

The system that is supposed to be protecting our warriors from the continued horrors of war is not sustainable. Regardless of intention, the current VA and military resources are failing our veterans. Litz et. Al (2009) write that, “We are doing a disservice to our service members and veterans if we fail to conceptualize and address the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations, that is, moral injury” (p. 8-9). Existing VA and military medical protocol privilege outmoded procedural requirements that treat symptoms rather than soldiers. These systems let warriors suffer and die instead of responding to their legitimate and pressing moral inquiries. By discussing what the VA and military too often ignore—the lasting impact of killing and guilt in warriors during war—we can begin to elucidate the ways in which warriors return home and, finally, to themselves.

WIRED FOR WAR

“This is an occupation that has brought war home and taken its toll on military families. It isolates us from the rest of the nation in our grief, our fear, and our suffering. It enforces a code of silence about an occupation that... makes us feel alone, and steals our voice.”

- Charley Richardson, Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan (Iraq Veterans Against the War, 2008, p. 171-172).

The military teaches recruits to kill by teaching them reflexive firing. Reflexive firing is the result of World War II combat historian S.L.A. Marshall, who reported in 1947 that roughly eighty percent of front line troops did not fire their weapons in battle. His findings resulted in new and more realistic training for the U.S. military, designed to raise the rate of fire ratio. The
military started utilizing stimulus-response training: a target appears and the recruit fires. Repeat. Retired Army Lieutenant Colonel and military psychologist Dave Grossman (1996) writes in *On Killing* that seventy-five to eighty percent of fire on the modern battlefield is due to this kind of training. Now, the firing rate is now nearly one hundred percent. While reflexive fire and other realistic trainings enable soldiers to kill, they do not teach soldiers how to process the act of killing. The military removes agency from its warriors by asking them to fire without requiring any additional information and assuming that information will never be useful for warriors—replacing “shoot first, ask later” with “shoot first, never ask.” Although the military trains soldiers to be combat ready, it does not prepare them for its aftermath. When soldiers necessarily don a mask or play a role to perform their duties, they remove themselves from the reality of their lives. Despite their attempts, however, warriors cannot fully remove themselves from their deeply held beliefs about who they are and what is right. When warriors begin to recognize the dissonance between what they used to believe and what they have done, they are forced to exist in an unlivable ambiguity.

Grossman (1996) suggests in *On Killing* that many of the soldiers who did fire their weapons during World War II exercised their “right to miss.” This willful and human resistance to killing is no longer as possible; the precision of the United States military’s massive firepower makes it unreasonable to assume that any soldier can get away with or would even think of purposefully failing to hit a target. In the absence of a working moral code and without any form of resistance to exercise, warriors remain protected by their professional roles as soldiers while they are deployed. Despite these barriers, deployed warriors are still susceptible to feelings of guilt over killing. Grossman writes that warriors who choose to kill feel bloodguilt; warriors who choose not to kill feel guilt over their fallen comrades and over their failure to uphold their duties.

When Camilo Mejía was in danger during his deployment, he entered into what he referred to as “a trance in which the only thing that mattered was survival and everything else was erased from [his] conscience” (Iraq Veterans Against the War, 2008, p. 214-215) When his squad took shelter in building to evade a crowd of protestors, he ascended to the roof. From his position, he saw a teenage boy holding a grenade nearby. Camillo knows he was ordered to shoot the young man, but he does not remember firing. Later in the day he would note that he was missing eleven bullets. He does remember seeing the teenager standing and then, a moment later, lying in a pool of blood. He remembers being appalled that his training had so
thoroughly impacted him. Despite the effectiveness of reflexive fire training, guilt in combat points to an innate sense of moral accountability for any involvement in killing. Parsing ethical arguments is an unthinkable act of resistance that is counterintuitive to survival in war zones. Warriors distance themselves from the impact of killing in order to save their own lives. Their wars do not end, however, when their deployments are over.

For some soldiers it is easier to return to war post-deployment than to return to civilian society. Journalist Sebastian Junger explored the reasons that soldiers miss deployments in Korengal, the second of three documentaries about the war in Afghanistan. He believes that, “The short answer, of course, is brotherhood, the extremely close connection to 20 or 30 other people who are all interdependent on one another. It’s an ancient human experience. I think we’re wired for it. I think it’s a product of our evolution. And when soldiers experience it, they don’t want to give it up” (Junger, 2014). In isolating the need for human connection as a primary motivation for continued military service, Junger underlines a central need of our warriors: to be heard, recognized, and understood.

There are several governmental barriers that too often prevent our warriors and veterans from successfully reintegrating into civilian society. The lives of Jesse Huff and Jeffrey Lucey are a testament to the failures of the VA system; inefficient, inadequate and impersonal care can prevent veterans from healing from PTSD before they have even fully entered the system. Moral injury is largely unacknowledged. While there are some individuals in the VA system, but is not embedded in the rhetoric or policies of the VA or the government. There is some movement within the ranks, however; the VA has allotted two million dollars to funding a clinical trial conducted by psychiatrist Brett Litz. The trial, designed to explore the usefulness of PTSD therapies in treatments for moral injury, is the first of its kind in the VA (Wood, 2014).

The support that soldiers receive before they return stateside and have the opportunity to seek treatment from the VA is incredibly limited. Camilo Mejía received two briefings on reintegration before returning stateside—one on readjustment and another on suicide prevention. To Mejía, the briefings seemed ineffective. They protected the Army and its image, but not Soldiers. He wrote in Road from Ar Ramadi that, “A twenty minute session centering on the admonition Don’t commit suicide doesn’t do much to ease the anguish of a soldier dealing with the horror, for instance, of having killed a child” (cited by Brock & Lettini, 2012, p. 60). The military does, however, have other programming intended to help soldiers understand their lingering feelings about their involvement in war.
In 2009 the Department of Defense developed the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program, a preventative tool designed to encourage resiliency within a military beginning to show signs of wear from the constant fraying of warfare. The CSF included a metric for evaluating soldiers’ spiritual fitness, ambiguously defined by the DoD as “[s]trengthening a set of beliefs, principles, or values that sustain a person beyond family, institutional, and societal sources of strength” (Brock & Lettini, 2012, p. 99). The spiritual fitness component of the CSF, despite the name, does not directly touch on the morality of war. Five years later, the official Department of Defense statement about moral injury, released by spokeswoman Joy Craburgh, noted that it is “not clinically defined” and thus has no “formal diagnosis.” She went on to say that mental health providers “often address moral injury when treating a psychiatric disorder” and that chaplains are another provided resource for wounded warriors (Wood, 2014).

As evidenced by the continued suffering of soldiers and veterans, the high military suicide rate, and the quiet allocation of funds for moral injury research, the existing PTSD therapies used by the VA are ineffective against moral injury. In an article published by Mother Jones, Nan Levinson (2012) begins to parse the term itself: “If it’s an injury, then it needs treatment, which puts it in the realm of medicine, but its overtones of sin and redemption also place it in the realm of the spiritual.” If moral injury can only enter the system through religion—in Joy Craburgh’s reminder that chaplains are available to warriors in addition to clinicians—then moral injuries will still go unhealed. Chaplains, as war correspondent David Wood (2014) notes in an article written for Huffington Post, have no more training in moral injury and repair than anyone else in the VA. For some warriors, Ann Jones (2013) notes in They Were Soliders, the very presence of chaplains within the military reifies the notion that the military is always “good” and “even a necessary adjunct to the accomplishment of Christ’s saving mission” (p. 23). It is this line of thinking that enables the military to continue its work uninterrogated, to the detriment of its warriors.

Undertrained chaplains and therapies designed to around PTSD are not sufficient to treat wounds the government is unwilling to recognize. The VA treats patients with PTSD by encouraging them to relive their traumatic and difficult experiences. The intention is to remove fear surrounding the relevant events and their various triggers. For patients suffering from moral injury rather than PTSD, forcibly relieving moments shrouded in guilt, shame, and death only worsens their pain (Levinson, 2012). Despite the increased awareness of moral injury in the military, the Department of Defense, the VA, the military nevertheless prefers the term “inner
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conflict.” David Wood sees the label “moral injury” as a potential indictment of the system: “Maybe the policy needs to be called into question, and maybe it doesn’t, but it should be on the table. The morality of any policy, particularly that involves military force, should be on the table.” There is not yet a space at the table for moral injury (Fresh Air, 2014).

“Inner conflict” deflects blame from the system and on to the individual, and so long as the individual is at fault, the military remains inculpable of any inequity. David Wood finds the VA and government’s reluctance to fully acknowledge moral injuries unsurprising: “How could the government recognize that sending people into war inevitably causes them harm?” The military’s continued silence unfortunately answers the question. The Department of Defense’s careful statement answers the question. The suffering and deaths of soldiers like Jesse Huff and Jeff Lucey answer the question. The system is not willing to fully acknowledge the implicit moral questions of war; it refuses the explicit questions. David Wood heard from Joy Craburgh only after he sought comment on moral injury from the Pentagon; no policymakers were available for comment. When even the term “moral injury” is anathema to official doctrine, effective large-scale treatments hardly seem possible. Until the military fully acknowledges moral injury and invests much more deeply in funding research and implementing treatments, those who do acknowledge moral injury within the VA and Department of Defense will have limited resources with which to help suffering warriors.

The military cannot acknowledge moral injury without ignoring its impact on soldier suicide. There are still deficits in the military’s reports on rates of PTSD and suicide. Ann Jones (2014) notes the veteran proclivity toward risk taking behaviors in They Were Soldiers: veterans are far more likely to die in traffic accidents—and particularly traffic accidents wherein they are on foot when struck—than their civilian counterparts. These deaths, rendered “accidental” by the military for statistical purposes, are part of the problem of reintegration. These accidental deaths, for Jones, conceal some suicidal ideation and intention—intentions that were taken to the grave if they existed at all. Her suspicions are not unfounded; the language the military uses even for suicide sometimes makes it sound as unintentional as a traffic accident. Jesse Huff’s death was referred to as “an unfortunate incident” by officials from the VA in Dayton where he chose to die (Circello, 2010).

Jones (2013) also notes that the military occasionally refers to military suicides as “unexpected deaths” (p. 23). These euphemisms prevent the full recognition of warrior suicides and the full remembrance of the lives that preceded them. As soldiers are desensitized in
training and in war, they are dehumanized in their deaths—unrecognizable casualties of circumstance and “unfortunate incidences” that cannot be reified within the military. In his discussion of killing, Dave Grossman writes that the “language of war helps us to deny what war is really about, and in doing so makes war more palatable” (1996, p. 92) Just as “engaging” replaces “killing” in war, “unexpected death” replaces “suicide” and “inner conflict” trumps “moral injury.”

By exploring what the Department of Defense, the VA, and the military refuse to say as well as the limited language the military does use, we can begin to break down the barriers to healing that prove insurmountable for too many of our warriors. By listening to the brave voices that have broken ranks from the military’s self-imposed silence, we can illuminate the ways in which our warriors—with or without VA and government assistance—can heal from moral injury.
Conclusion

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE

Soldiers can suffer moral injuries from their own actions and at once act as combatant and casualty, waging an internal war during or in the absence of their own combat experiences. When civilians enlist in the military, they are indoctrinated into a system of control and violence. The military systematically dehumanizes and desensitizes warriors in order to enable them to perform their duties as professional soldiers. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman (1994) writes that when traumatic events are “of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator” (p. 1). Because warriors can inflict their own moral injuries as well as sustain them by witnesses the action of others, they exist outside of Herman’s framework for trauma survivors. They are at times simultaneously witness, victim, and perpetrator. Because existing therapies for moral injury are often centered on post-traumatic stress care and theory, they are inherently limited in their ineffectiveness. Some trauma theory does nevertheless apply to many veterans’ experience of military service, even when PTSD and moral injury are not comorbid.

Theory rarely plays into warriors’ daily existence despite its implicit place in their training, deployment, and post-mobilization care. In morally ambiguous situations, survival takes precedence over ethical debate and warriors can successfully delay the impact of moral injury until they are removed from the immediate dangers of war. This process has a denaturing effect on their lives. When soldiers prioritize their lives over their emotional livelihood, they are stripped of their full agency. In returning home bodily, there is no guarantee that some part of them will not remain forever with the war. In acknowledging and understanding moral injury, however, warriors can begin to quietly rebuild their image of what is right and who they are in wake of war. Recovery cannot, however, occur in solitude. Herman (1994) writes, “can take place only within the context of relationships” (p. 133). In healing relationships, therapists and other supportive individuals can bear witness to—and offer friendship to—soldiers and veterans in moral crisis, allowing the injured to “speak the unspeakable” (p. 175). Joshua Casteel did not find healing relationships when he first returned home. He had no one with whom to share his experiences, and would later state that he never felt lonelier than when he felt no one was willing to talk to him about his deployment (Brock & Lettini, 2012). When Tyler Boudreau first
returned home, he could only tell certain war stories around certain people; some he could not talk about war with at all. Stories from boot camp and lighthearted war stories were generally okay. The ones without happy endings were generally not. War stories that evoked morality were never an option. He, too, had neither witnesses nor allies.

In conversation with a stranger at a bar, Tyler Boudreau (2008) mentioned his deployment to Iraq. The older man raised his glass to Boudreau and said he was proud of the Marines. He told Boudreau they were “doing a good job over there.” Boudreau nonchalantly replied, “Lotta innocent folks getting killed over there... Lotta innocent folks,” a concern the man literally waved away. He told Boudreau, simply: “Fuck ‘em.” Despite the harsh words, the tone in his voice was sympathetic; this was his way of showing Boudreau his loyalty to the Marines and their mission. Boudreau writes in retrospect that he and the man both failed to acknowledge the impact of waving away human lives:

“Either we allow ourselves to feel that veteran’s pain, truly as our own, and share his consternation about war, or, in an effort to support the troops, we deny the significance of his tragedies and, by definition, we deny his pain as well... When we say, fuck ‘em, we not only exclude the humanity of the dead; we exclude the humanity of the living as well” (p. 109-110).

In Sebastian Junger’s film Korengal (2014), Sergeant Brendan O’Byrne relates similar sentiments from well-intended civilians: “Everyone tells you, ‘you did an honorable thing, you did all right. You’re all right. You did what you had to do.’ I just hate that comment. ‘You did what you had to do’ ...I didn’t have to do shit. I didn’t have to go into the Army.” What Boudreau and O’Byrne recognize—and what many civilians fail to understand—is that thanking a warrior for their service is not enough. Ignoring the details of our warrior’s experiences and rendering impersonal and amoral judgment on their narratives does a disservice to soldiers and veterans and does nothing to close the distance between the self before and after war. Brendan O’Byrne is not religious, but he sensed evil in his actions in Afghanistan. In Korengal (2014), he asks, “‘You did what you had to do... is that what God’s going to say? [I] don’t think so.” Warrior narratives that highlight the moral ambiguities of war are silenced by societal convention: we are civil, and the intense brutality of war too sharply focuses our proclivity for and passive acceptance of uncivil action.

Dr. Jonathan Shay believes that healing begins with the community. For him, this means that some veterans may never speak to anyone besides other veterans about their moral
injuries. It means he is not trying to “fix” any of the warriors he meets. Instead, he, like Herman, believes in establishing friendships (Talk of the Nation, 2012). Within these friendships, veterans may begin to work toward re-establishing their sense of self through the reclamation of their stories. It is difficult, sometimes-impossible work. Herman (1994) writes that the “traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian, a philosopher, and a jurist” who must create their own narrative to make meaning out it (p. 178). The warrior is a professional soldier, but rarely a professional ethicist. In the absence of meaningful relationships, the combined roles of warrior, civilian, and philosopher can be incredibly difficult to bear. Without receiving social validation, warriors can choose—consciously or not—to remember their wars alone. Acceptable forms of public remembrance and mourning include commemorative tattoos and drinking out of grief (Levinson, 2012).

The military offers support to families of warriors who have recently returned from deployment in the form of Family Readiness Groups (FRGs). These “state of the art” workshops tell military spouses to placate their hurting and hostile partners. Acceptable forms of grieving, then, can be expanded to include almost anything a warrior does, because by the logic of Family Readiness Groups, “Only when your soldier is happy, can you truly be happy” (Jones, 2013, 118). The rote, appeasing quality of FRG meetings may actually cause further harm. Soldiers and Veterans are removed from their moral responsibilities when their friends and family excuse their unacceptable behavior, even if they do so in good faith. Veterans do need a support system, but they do not need one that supports only their physical survival and not their emotional and spiritual recovery. Brock and Lettini too write that veterans need friends. They need people who are willing to sit with them and draw out their secrets. They need relationships that will leave space for them to grow, rather than accepting them as inherently and forever flawed. It is within these boundaries of respect and honor that narratives may be constructed and reclaimed and a moral healing can begin.

NEW RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The violence of war reaches far beyond combat zones and deployment. The violence enacted in the gaps in Camilo Mejía’s memory—his eleven missing bullets—was made possible by the training that overrode his sense of what was right in those brief and brutal moments. For Camilo Mejía, reflexive fire training kept him alive to the detriment of his sense of self. For Jeffrey Lucey, ineffective post-deployment mental health care did not even keep him alive. Even...
military training positions soldiers in a morally precarious space—they must either abandon their old moral principles or wholly resist a system that does not tolerate perceived failure. These barriers prevent soldiers from engaging with their personal sense of morality as well as military ethics.

Another of the many barriers to constructing a narrative is the idea that some war experiences are more valid than others. This is evident in Tyler Boudreau’s combat reports—altered to reflect the military’s chosen truth—and in the Marine Corps.’ response to Jeffery Lucey’s self-assigned blame and subsequent suicide. There is credibility in experience. Soldiers who have never been deployed cannot speak directly to the mutated morality of combat, but this does not mean that they are inoculated against the moral questions of war. The training that enabled Mejía to fire eleven bullets at a single teenager with possible hostile intent, too, is violence. In this way, training, too, is war.

Judith Herman (1994) writes that our reluctance to engage with trauma communally is a large-scale attempt to evade the growing pains of acknowledging that our collective moral beliefs may be wrong. Perhaps this is precisely what we need—a radical reconfiguration of what it means to be moral as a civilian through the lens of what it means to be moral as a warrior. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have seen an expansion of the Rules of Engagement, the definition of “combatant”, and an increased suicide rate. Silence does not offer protection to our warriors so civilians must resist its relative comfort and safety. We must be willing to find new ways to resist our inclination to remain stoic in response to soldiers’ suffering. Veterans and civilians alike must acknowledge the trauma and moral impact of war. We must fully engage with the many and sometimes conflicting truths of war. We must be willing to ask what we send our warriors to do—and we must be willing to listen to the answers. By expanding our societal understandings of war and of its warriors and by bearing witness to the truths of our warriors, we can amplify the voices of morality too often silenced by the din of combat. We may begin, finally, to build scar tissue.

In 2011, then-Army Vice Chief of Staff Peter Chiarelli asked that someone speak up if they knew the reason for soldier suicide. This is what Tyler Boudreau does in Packing Inferno. This is what Logan Mehl-Laituri does in Reborn on the Fourth of July. This is precisely what moral healing looks like: soldiers speaking the unspeakable. Through conversation and narrative, we can enter into moral dialogue. We can both learn and unlearn who we were in pursuit of whom we seek to become. We must be willing to enter into those dialogues. We must be willing
to learn. It is our duty as warriors—it is my duty as a soldier in the United States Army—to support, defend, and protect the objectives of the United States military so that civilians may live in peace. It is our duty as a society to make sure that peace can exist for our warriors as well.
Bibliography


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