

## INTRODUCTION

give a full explanation of combat post-traumatic stress disorder in chapter 10, but here is a summary of the key symptoms of PTSD and of the personality changes that mark its severe forms. All may be understood as the persistence of past traumatic experience in the present physiology, psychology, and social relatedness of the survivor. The symptoms can range in severity from mild to devastating, and not everyone will have all of the symptoms at the same time:

- Loss of authority over mental function—particularly memory and trustworthy perception
- Persistent mobilization of the body and the mind for lethal danger, with the potential for explosive violence
- Persistence and activation of combat survival skills in civilian life
- Chronic health problems stemming from chronic mobilization of the body for danger
- Persistent expectation of betrayal and exploitation; destruction of the capacity for social trust
- Persistent preoccupation with both the enemy and the veteran's own military/governmental authorities
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Suicidality, despair, isolation, and meaninglessness

Such unhealed PTSD can devastate life and incapacitate its victims from participation in the domestic, economic, and political life of the nation. The painful paradox is that fighting for one's country can render one unfit to be its citizen.

I shall present the *Iliad* as the tragedy of Achilles. I will not glorify Vietnam combat veterans by linking them to a prestigious "classic" nor attempt to justify study of the *Iliad* by making it sexy, exciting, modern, or "relevant." I respect the work of classical scholars and could not have done my work without them. Homer's poem does not mean whatever I want it to mean. However, having honored the boundaries of meaning that scholars have pointed out, I can confidently tell you that my reading of the *Iliad* as an account of men in war is not a "meditation" that is only tenuously rooted in the text. The first five chapters track Homer's story of Achilles very closely: Agamémnon, Achilles' commander, betrays "what's right" by wrongfully seizing his prize of honor; indignant rage shrinks Achilles' social and moral horizon until he cares about no one but a small group of combat-

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proven comrades; his closest friend in that circle, his second-in-command and foster brother, Pátroklos, dies in battle; profound grief and suicidal longing take hold of Achilles; he feels that he is already dead; he is tortured by guilt and the conviction that he should have died rather than his friend; he renounces all desire to return home alive; he goes berserk and commits atrocities against the living and the dead. This is the story of Achilles in the *Iliad*, not some metaphoric translation of it.

This was also the story of many combat veterans, both from Vietnam and from other long wars. The reader will find some of the veterans' narratives disturbing. I have brought them together with the *Iliad* not to tame, appropriate, or co-opt them but to promote a deeper understanding of both, increasing the reader's capacity to be disturbed by the *Iliad* rather than softening the blow of the veterans' stories.

Names, specific units, and locations in Vietnam have been omitted or disguised to protect the privacy of my patients. I intend to go on working with these men—some of whom will read this book—so I have asked every veteran to review and approve his words and stories that I have used here, even though this is not legally required.

The clarity and eloquence with which the veterans tell their stories prove the truth of what Paul Fussell has written about the First World War:

One of the cruxes of war . . . is the collision between events and the language available—or thought appropriate—to describe them . . . Logically, there is no reason why the English language could not perfectly well render the actuality of . . . warfare: it is rich in terms like *blood, terror, agony, madness, shit, cruelty, murder, sell-out* and *hoax*, as well as phrases like *legs blown off, intestines gushing out over his hands, screaming all night, bleeding to death from the rectum*, and the like. . . . The problem was less one of "language" than of gentility and optimism. . . . The real reason [that soldiers fall silent] is that soldiers have discovered that no one is very interested in the bad news they have to report. What listener wants to be torn and shaken when he doesn't have to be? We have made *unspeakable* mean *indescribable*; it really means *nasty*.

One Vietnam combat veteran describes this social process of silencing the survivor: