

INTRODUCTION

I had just come back [from Vietnam], and my first wife's parents gave a dinner for me and my parents and her brothers and their wives. And after dinner we were all sitting in the living room and her father said, "So, tell us what it was like." And I started to tell them, and I told them. And do you know within five minutes the room was empty. They was all gone, except my wife. After that I didn't tell anybody I had been in Vietnam.

However, the fact that these veterans can speak at all of their experience is a major sign of healing. Unhealed war trauma can leave men as speechless as victims of prolonged political torture.

I have made no concessions to the stereotype of the veteran as uneducated Joe Six-pack. The men who have taught me have great intelligence, although some have had negligible formal schooling. I have learned that many veterans who dropped out of high school are now voracious readers who will be offended by talking down to them in any way. Some, who are among the most eloquent and terrifyingly intelligent, will not read this book, because they cannot read. Their wish has been that I write the best book I am able to write, not a Dick-and-Jane text that they might eventually be able to struggle through. The explanatory square brackets in quotations from the *Iliad* text (e.g., "windy Ilion [Troy]") are added for all readers who are not classicists, just as definitions of military terms (e.g., "RPG [rocket-propelled grenade]") are given for all those who are not Vietnam vets.

When I quote a veteran's words, I have done my best to preserve his voice—his sound and rhythms. Direct quotations are my own transcript of recorded interviews each generously given to help with this project, or are taken from my notes or from a veteran's written narrative. Transcripts have been lightly edited to remove "uh" and "you know" where these did not seem important to the tone. I have personally transcribed the tapes to preserve the exact words, not only as a mark of respect but also because of the poetry that flows through them.

By now there is a large body of Vietnam soldiers' memoirs, oral history, and testimony. The veterans' narratives in this book are an addition to this corpus. No disrespect for other veterans' published experiences is implied by the fact that I have used only unpublished material from men I know personally.

Nothing in this book is entirely new to mental health disciplines, in the sense that it has not been previously published in

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professional journals such as the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. However, some of it is quite recent and by no means universally accepted in the field, such as the importance of the berserk state or of betrayal of "what's right" in the etiology of a chronic post-traumatic stress disorder after combat. I hope this book will educate and motivate mental health professionals who are just starting to work with combat veterans or are considering doing so. Those who are already in the field may be influenced by Homer's attention to the moral dimension of combat trauma, to the berserk state, to respect for the enemy, and to communalization of grief.

To all readers I say: Learn the psychological damage that war does, and work to prevent war. There is no contradiction between hating war and honoring the soldier. Learn *how* war damages the mind and spirit, and work to change those things in military institutions and culture that needlessly create or worsen these injuries. We don't have to go on repeating the same mistakes. Just as the flak jacket has prevented many physical injuries, we can prevent many psychological injuries.

I welcome feedback from readers
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