

AUTHOR'S CAUTION TO VETERANS, THEIR FAMILIES, AND THEIR FRIENDS

To any veteran of any war coming to this book, please pace yourself and take care of yourself while reading, even if this means stopping and putting the book down. Some of the experiences described here by your fellow veterans may trigger reactions in you that can disrupt your life. Take it slow; don't try to plow straight through. If stuff does get stirred up, find other veterans you trust and talk about it. Vet centers around the country are a good place to do this. You don't have to go through this alone—no veteran should have to!

To families and friends of combat veterans, if this book helps increase your understanding of what the person you love has lived with since his or her war, I am very pleased. But I do want to caution you that no book should give you the illusion that you "know what it was like." There is no substitute for listening to the particular experience of the person that you love—if he or she is able and ready to tell you about it, and if you are ready and able to hear and endure the emotions it will stir up in you. Two excellent books written primarily for wives of Vietnam veterans, but also valuable to others who share their lives with veterans, are *Recovering from the War* by Patience Mason (Viking, 1990) and *Vietnam Wives* by Aphrodite Matsakis (Woodbine House, 1988).

I don't know what the best general advice is about encouraging the veteran you love to tell his or her story. Some would say that the best advice is "Don't try this at home!" However, if you offer to listen to these experiences, you also need to pace yourself and take care of yourself. If the veteran you love thinks you are going to be injured by what he or she has to say, there will be silence. Most vet centers offer support groups for families of veterans of all wars, not only the Vietnam War. You shouldn't have to go through this alone either!

Jonathan Shay

INTRODUCTION

I am the psychiatrist for a group of American combat veterans of the Vietnam War who have severe, chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A number of years ago I was struck by the similarity of their war experiences to Homer's account of Achilles in the *Iliad*. This observation led to an article in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, "Learning about Combat Stress from Homer's *Iliad*," which led to this book. The thrust of this work is that the epic gives center stage to bitter experiences that actually do arise in war; further, it makes the claim that Homer has seen things that we in psychiatry and psychology have more or less missed. Homer's *Iliad* was composed about twenty-seven centuries ago; it is about soldiers in war. In particular, Homer emphasizes two common events of heavy, continuous combat: betrayal of "what's right" by a commander, and the onset of the berserk state.

To my astonishment, I was told that knowledge would also flow in the opposite direction—that scholars and critics of the *Iliad* would be better able to interpret the great epic if they listened to combat soldiers. This book came into being largely because of the encouragement of one of the world's leading *Iliad* scholars, Harvard's professor of classical Greek literature Gregory Nagy. The perspective of the combat soldier has never been applied in any systematic way to understanding the *Iliad*. It is a privilege to say *anything* new about a work of art so great that it survived the crash of the Greek civilization that created it and of later civilizations that passed it on.

However, my principal concern is to put before the public an understanding of the specific nature of catastrophic war experiences that not only cause lifelong disabling psychiatric symptoms but can ruin good character. I have a specific aim in doing this: to promote a public attitude of caring about the conditions that create such psychological injuries, an attitude that will support measures to prevent as much psychological injury as possible. It is my