

**The Burden of Killing in Combat-Related PTSD:  
What Is It? Why Do We Ignore It? And How Can We  
Help?**

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# I. The killing in war is much worse than I ever imagined.

a) Ed's story: "Aren't we all murderers? "

Ed's wife: "We were regular churchgoers before the war. He was a good Christian. He never could understand after the war how God could forgive him for all he had seen and done. It changed our life in that respect. He felt like a hypocrite going to church. We tried to go together for a while, but he was just too uncomfortable."

## I. The killing in war

### b) Doug's story.

“The reason I was afraid getting off the boat coming home in 1952 was I felt like I had left my poor soul in Korea! THAT'S NOT GOOD!” (Doug's emphasis)

## I. The killing in war

- c) It is acceptable to kill dangerous beasts and threatening animals but not humans. The enemy has to be a Nazi, terrorist, gook, infidel, Capitalist or godless devil. They really can't be human. They must be inhuman and monstrous.

Marine General prior to assault on Fallujah:  
“There are only thugs, mugs, terrorists and murderers in there.”

Special Forces officer in SE Asia: “I had to pretend I was killing a cobra-coiled to strike. If I didn't it was almost impossible to take that first shot.”

## I. The killing in war

- d) But humans are too smart for propaganda and racism to be effective for a whole war. Sooner or later the soldier recognizes that the other guy he is trying to kill is just that, another guy just like him. Idaho farmer: “Then I made the biggest mistake I ever made in the war.”

## II. Breaking “the Geneva Convention of the soul”

- a) **Killing civilians. Ed’s “little Italian boy”, typical urban fighting.**
- b) **Marines in Iraq (data from Hoge et al article NEJM 7/1/04). Responsible for the death of a noncombatant - 28% said “yes”.**

**Seeing ill or injured women and children whom you were unable to help - 83% said “yes”.**

**Two airmen who refused to load bombs anymore**

- **One after Desert Storm, Bosnia and Iraq**
- **The other after northern and southern no fly zones in Iraq 4 times and then for several months in the current Iraqi war.**

- c) Killing each other – so called “friendly fire” incidents.

Sailor on the Raleigh at Pearl Harbor: “The worst part of the day was not the Japanese attack but later, when three planes from our aircraft carriers flew over. I helped shoot them down, killing the pilots – mistaking them for Japanese.”

d) Killings of hate or rage and “Battlefield Justice”.

Typical medic scenario.

42<sup>nd</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division at Dachau.



III. Propaganda and racism can help start a war, but **Love** makes an extended war possible by overcoming fear of death and dismemberment and loathing of killing

a) “Several of them were to become as close as brothers to me with that special camaraderie generated in combat by the unspoken but understood commitment to risk our lives for each other...” WWII fighter pilot

### III. Propaganda and racism can help start a war, but Love makes an extended war possible

- b) “In war, loyalties shrink down past country and family to one or two men who will be with you. They become more important than anyone else in the world, more precious than father and mother, sister and brother, wife and girl...” WWII Marine

### III. Propaganda and racism can help start a war, but Love makes an extended war possible

- c) “Another and far more transcendent love came to us unbidden on the battlefields, as it does on every battlefield in every war man has ever fought. We discovered in that depressing hellish place, where death was our constant companion, that we loved each other. We killed for each other, we died for each other and we wept for each other. And in time we came to love each other as brothers.” VN infantry officer

### III. Propaganda and racism can help start a war, but Love makes an extended war possible

d) Here are the two forces (propaganda and love) for beginning and continuing war. It starts with one side, often led by a ruthless tyrant or guided by a philosophy that makes enemies less than truly human, seeing the other side as a threat that will not give them what they want through peaceful negotiation. Through the medium of racist propaganda, the demonizing begins.

“They have besmirched our holy soil. They are choking off our economic lifeblood. They are destroying our freedoms and revered way of life.”

They frighten the opposing tribe, nation, or people, who begin their own response that starts to demonize the aggressor.

### III. Propaganda and racism can help start a war, but Love makes an extended war possible

#### d) (Cont.)

Actions and reactions lead to some killing, and the propaganda and demonizing intensify. Military units are formed, and that great human power of working together in loving teams is activated. The serious fighting begins, and it is so horrible that only love, stronger than the fear of death and loathing of killing, can keep it going and take it to its conclusion. And the cost is terrible for the men and women who shoulder the burden of the fighting and the killing.

## IV. Why do we ignore the problem of killing?

- a) It does not fit into our model of PTSD. Our model is all about being a victim of deadly and life threatening actions or events. It fits for rape and crime victims, disaster survivors, those abused and tortured, and all other passive recipients of violence. But it does not fit for agents of violence and death. It fits much better for those troops “inside the wire” than for those troops “outside the wire” on patrol.

#### IV. Why do we ignore the problem of killing?

b) We don't want to treat "killers", we want to treat victims. To treat them we would have to acknowledge that we could kill also, and kill in all the usual dreadful ways of war. Major problem with counter-transference.

#### IV. Why do we ignore the problem of killing?

- c) Our usual treatments don't work without substantive modification. Serious problems with exposure therapy, CBT, EMDR, and even psychotherapy and group therapy.



#### IV. Why do we ignore the problem of killing?

- d) The veteran will often discuss everything but the killing. It is usually the most difficult of all topics to be explored. Their reluctance combined with ours makes for powerful therapeutic denial. We all feel helpless in the face of this issue.

## V. What can we do?

- a) Address our own counter-transference. Be willing to listen without reacting. Be willing to go where they are. Do not discount their feelings and try to explain away what happened. That is a type of collusion that just adds more to the guilt in the end. They killed someone and they know they did. “It’s OK, it’s just part of war” responses do not work. Have the strength to get all the details, but still not judge. Know that usually you would have done the same thing or worse.

## V. What can we do?

- b) Be ready for the grief and tears. Before they tell you about the killing, they will tell you about the heart breaking losses of those they loved more than anyone else. Do not be afraid to comfort with a hug and to shed tears with them. This is not therapy for victims of sexual abuse.

## V. What can we do?

- c) Educate them simply and directly about the conditioned responses of war. Do not confuse conditioned responses with fear. The “outside of the wire” combatant learns to dominate fear.

WWII Marine: “I got used to fear. It was like a scar or a limp that I had to learn to live with. I learned always to control what showed on my face, my hands and my voice. And I let it rage on inside. I never lost my fear, but I lost my fear of fear, because it became such a familiar thing.”

## V. What can we do?

### c) Educate them (cont.)

Most men do not break down because of fear. They break down due to exhaustion, grief, and guilt – guilt because of the killing or because they perceive themselves as having “broken the soldiers trust”.

## V. What can we do?

- d) Encourage the honest exploration of what they did and experienced in group therapy, reunions, writing, and reading autobiographical works of other vets.

## V. What can we do?

- e) Look for experiences that are antidotes to the killing and inhumanness of war. Of the Iraqi Marines noted above 19% admitted that they had “saved the life of a soldier or civilian”. Find these experiences and explore them in detail. Know them as well as you know the killings. In my experience nearly every combatant saved someone’s life directly or indirectly. They can help balance the scales – a live saved for a life taken.

## V. What can we do?

- f) Laugh. Sometimes things are so grim that all you can do is laugh. War creates some of the most bizarre humor there is. Appreciate it.
  - Roger and the Styrofoam peanut.
  - Guy: “If they screw up this surgery I could be handicapped!”



## V. What can we do?

### f) Laugh (cont.).

“You know Doc, we have talked many times about how important it is to forgive our enemies. Last Sunday our minister was preaching just on that topic. He pointed out how forgiving them can eventually turn them into friends. He asked the congregation if there was anyone who had no enemies. Way in the back one of the oldest members of our congregation finally raised her hand. Our minister asked her to come forward. When she was up front next to him he said, ‘Sister Margaret, would you please share with us all how it is that you no longer have enemies.’”

She turned and looked at us and then growled “I outlived all them bastards!”

## V. What can we do?

- g) Use the medications you need to treat their sleeplessness, irritability, hyper-arousal and depression.
- h) But the greatest healing forces for these soldiers are only accessible outside of therapy.

## VI. Having the courage to face the truth and take corrective action

a) Alcohol and drugs are just “running and numbing” and they kill you in the end. They just postpone the inevitable.

Luther, a WWII tank commander: “I know I killed children as we fought the Germans in France from village to town. I saw their little bodies mangled by my shells. I turned to drink as a way of forgetting.”

## VI. Having the courage to face the truth and take corrective action

- b) Wayne, Vietnam LRRP specialist: “I think anyone who chooses therapy is choosing life over death, but unless one is desperate and can admit that, there may not be incentive or strength to try finding those little patches of light. After 11 years in the system, I look back on those first 5 years and think now that my greatest comfort during that time was learning that I was not alone.”

## VI. Having the courage to face the truth and take corrective action

b) Wayne, Vietnam LRRP specialist (cont.):

“The fellowship of vets from WWII, Korea and Vietnam helped me find the strength to continue. This allowed me eventually to find a therapist [one of our social workers] who enabled me to connect the dots in my life and rediscover my feelings – to feel human again and find more patches of sun. The life without feeling was a lot less painful, but it was really no life at all. I am beginning to feel empathy and pain – and sometimes joy. But these are closer to being human than to feel nothing at all.”

## VII. Mercy, reparative acts and forgiveness

- a) Larry, retired Special Forces officer: “You have to give up even justified bitterness and hate to fully heal the emotional and spiritual wounds of war.”
- b) Viktor Frankl speaking of his fellow Auschwitz survivors: “Only slowly could these men be guided back to the commonplace truth that no one has the right to do wrong, not even if wrong has been done to them.”
- c) “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.” Jesus Christ

## VII. Mercy, reparative acts and forgiveness

- d) **After their wars, the combat vets I see who are coping best lead lives of service. Many work as firefighters, policemen, teachers, EMTs and in other medical services. Some are devoted AA sponsors – helping others find the strength through AA fellowship to change their lives. They are involved in their religions as lay ministers and in making their communities better places through their own acts of goodness. These acts of service and love leave little room for hate. Mercy enters in. Where mercy enters in, understanding and forgiveness soon follow. If vets can forgive their enemy, then they can start believing that they may be forgiven also.**



## VIII. Spiritual connection and recovery

a) Gary, Vietnam combat medic:

“Sometimes I am too angry or upset to meditate successfully. Then I need to either talk it through with a good friend or just isolate until I get control of my emotions enough to make good use of the meditation. Then through meditation I can achieve the peace that helps me the most.”

## VIII. Spiritual connection and recovery

### **b) Larry, a retired Special Forces officer:**

“I ended my time in Vietnam angry and bitter. I saw so many good young people killed and wounded unnecessarily and foolishly. I blamed the enemy, but even more so I blamed our own military command and politicians for glory hunting and the stupid policies that got so many young men killed. What I found, though, was that holding on to that bitterness and hate keeps the wounds of war open. You have to give up even justified bitterness and hate to fully heal the emotional and spiritual wounds of war. God can help you do this, but you have to help yourself too. You have to keep working on this in therapy. The memories never disappear. The anger can be reactivated by current events. You have to keep praying and getting help to stay on track. I cannot do it on my own. I need continued therapy as well as prayer to keep from slipping back into anger.”

## VIII. Spiritual connection and recovery

### c) **Norm, a WWII Marine:**

“For 27 years after my marriage I watched the good effect my wife’s religion had on her and my children. After my son returned from a two-year mission, I finally joined their church and stopped drinking. I have learned what prayer can do for you. It has helped me a lot of times. I pray for my wife, my family, myself and many more things. I feel God answering my prayers. Prayer eases my mind and calms me. When you start reading the Bible regularly, it takes your mind away from hate and bitterness and puts your mind where it should be. The scriptures and the church have changed my heart. I’ve even come around to not hating the Japanese.”

## VIII. Spiritual connection and recovery

### d) **Guy, Vietnam Marine:**

“My partnership with God kept me alive. When I awoke from the coma induced by my wounds and surgeries, the first person I saw in Da Nang was a nurse from my hometown. I felt God brought her there to give me the courage to live. I promised her I would see her there at home in a year at church, and I would be walking. God helped me keep that promise. I prayed constantly. I would ask for the strength to overcome the hurdle in front of me at that time. I would feel peace and strength from God. Each time I got over the hurdle, it gave me greater faith to get over the next. I learned that God answers the prayers of anyone who says ‘I can’t do this without you. I need help.’ All they needed was to have the courage to keep trying and asking and receiving the help God would send in the form of His children.”

	#1	Times top 3	Times top 5
1) Be busy (jobs, work).	5	11	16
2) Service to others.	2	7	13
3) Spiritual—prayer, miracles, meditation.	1	13	18
4) Loving spouse and family.	6	10	13
5) Relationships with comrades and friends.	0	9	11
6) Focusing on positive experiences from the war.	0	0	0
7) Forgiveness of self and others.	3	6	10
8) Humor.	1	1	5
9) Medications for sleep, anxiety, and depression.	3	4	7
10) Avoid sensationalism of the news media.	0	2	4
11) Pets.	0	1	8

## VIII. Spiritual connection and recovery

- e) The big three (slide of eleven helps)
  - 1) Staying busy doing good
  - 2) Spiritual activity
  - 3) Healthy, loving relationships

## VIII. Spiritual connection and recovery

### f) Jed's story

## VIII. Spiritual connection and recovery

**g) I argued earlier that one of the ironies of war is that love makes war possible.** Without love for their comrades, most men could not continue to wage war. Combatants without the love that binds them to their fellows more readily succumb to cowardice or a sensible desire for safety, and they flee the battlefield. Combatants with deep love and loyalty to one another find the strength to overcome their fear of death and prevail as a team on the battlefield. This deep love also creates some of the greatest pain from war – the profound heartbreak of having beloved comrades killed.



## VIII. Spiritual connection and recovery

**g) (Cont.)** But to continue loving is also the cure for war's emotional and spiritual trauma. The most successful post-war combatants surround themselves in a network of love. The reciprocal love of spouse, family, friends and comrades sustains the heart and soul as it heals. Productive work and service are acts of love. Men's private spiritual devotions and prayers help them feel connected to and blessed by a Divine love. Acting on love and being truthful, merciful and forgiving after their wars generate hope in the combatants' hearts that reconciliation and peace are possible.