

The Death of Innocence

The tragedies of war are timeless. Killing is the same now in the deserts of Afghanistan and Iraq as it was in the jungles of Vietnam, or in any other war for that matter. Every warrior who has walked out onto the battlefield has shared the same feelings in common. We all controlled our fear; we all moved forward to engage the enemy, as adrenaline pumped through every fiber of our body. We killed before being killed, and when it was all over, we trembled from exhaustion, thanked God to be alive, and moved out to the next battle. This continues until you're either dead, severely wounded, or finish your tour and are sent home.

When you kill another human being for the first time, something changes inside of you. Doesn't matter what emotions are going on inside your head during the killing, such as hate, anger, fear, or revenge. These feelings only delay the results a bit, because eventually, what you just did comes back around to bite you right on the ass. I'll give you an example.

Intelligence reports had just come in from headquarters that a large shipment of arms and supplies were being sent down the river near our base camp. This meant that the Viet Cong in our area would have a fresh supply of guns and ammo to bring us a nice little house warming gift about 03:00 in the morning. Those of less than great wisdom decided the answer to this problem was to set up an ambush on "our" river and capture all the goodies. Well, being a gung-ho Marine, and well trained (for a whole week!) in guerilla tactics back in the land of fruits and nuts (California), I naturally volunteered to kill a "Commie for Christ." This was my first night ambush, and I was ready long before it got dark.

Everything takes on a veil of gray and black when the sun sets. It also gets a little spooky when you think that one of those shadows might in fact be one of the Little People waiting to blow your young ass back to America. At night you walk differently, you listen more carefully, and you stay as quiet as possible. When at last the order came to "saddle 2up!", everyone grabbed a few extra grenades, a couple extra magazines of ammo, and headed out. I had already painted my face with black grease stick, so I thought I was ahead of the program. Man, was I in for a surprise.

I started to feel a little nervous as we cleared the last check point and moved onto the trail leading to the river. The moon was out, but I thought "Shit, how the hell do you see anything out here?" Being a dumb ass, and new to the Nam, I just followed along, figurin' the point man knew the way. What seemed like hours was actually only about 20 minutes, when we finally reached the river. The corporal in charge was very organized, and told me to take the first position up stream, which meant I would trigger the ambush. Feeling pleased with myself about being in the lead position, I eagerly made my way up near the river's edge and started to wait.

As amazing as it sounds, when you're exhausted it's next to impossible to stay awake, life threatening situation or not. Even at 18 years old and in good shape, after filling sand bags for most of the day, and pulling watch the night before, I was pretty well wiped out. About two hours had passed, and I still couldn't see very far out over the river, but suddenly, I could hear the swish of a paddle coming my way. I came to full alert, and my heart was pounding so loud I thought everyone could hear it. As I was trying to control my breathing, thoughts were runnin' through my brain: "Damn, I wonder if all those other guys are asleep?" and remembering my night-firing exercises back at Camp Pendleton, "You can't miss, even in the dark!"

At last I could barely make out two boats floating past my position, about 30 feet from shore. "I had to let them move into the kill zone," I thought, slowly moving my trigger finger forward. As I picked my target, the safety "clicked" off, and I opened fire!

Instantly, the entire line opened up, and the deafening roar of an M-60 machine gun and a fire team with M-14's, every fifth round a tracer, was very impressive. In not more than 45 seconds the corporal gave the order to cease fire! All was dead still, except for the ringing in my ears. There were no signs of movement coming from the boats. Immediately, several Marines waded out into the shallow, muddy water and began pulling the bodies to shore. One by one, out they came, and bit by agonizing bit my heart was ripped out of my chest, by the irreversible finality of what I had just done. All I could say was "Oh my God NO!" "Please God NO!" "Not Children!"

Except for one wrinkled up old man, we had killed 14 children that night. And it was all I could do to keep from screaming out loud. Turned inward, that screaming still goes on. Out of anger, one Marine broke, yelling "You fucking bastard!", as he pumped five more rounds into the old man's body. I just stood there motionless for a time, staring at those little bodies, asking God to "make this not be true."

Leaning on my rifle and slowly kneeling to the bank of the river, I reached out to gently touch the cold, lifeless face of one especially beautiful little girl. And in one undeniable, horrifying moment, as my hand touched her cheek, I felt as though everything inside of me had collapsed. A numbness fell over me. Who I was had died with those children.

What changed in me after that first killing was that I could no longer feel anything close to the joys or innocence of youth. I became more quiet, more withdrawn, and in some ways less satisfied with my duties as a warrior. At that time, I couldn't get over the stillness of the human body when it was dead, and that "I" had caused it. Killing adult soldiers was one thing, but killing my first kid just about ripped my guts out.

The whole situation was very confusing, because I was a warrior, trained to kill, and doing a damn good job of it. So why was I feeling anything at all? I don't know if it was fortunate or unfortunate, but by the time I left Vietnam, I had done so much killing, that I didn't feel much of anything anymore. At least that's what I thought.

Our young combat troops now returning home know exactly what I'm saying. You've probably killed adults, and probably killed kids. You feel numb inside and don't really give a shit about very much. You've lost some of the best friends you've ever had, and you'd like to just forget about the whole damn thing for awhile, maybe for good. Well my friends, "it don't work that way."

Many times, I tried stayin' drunk for a few days at a time. You know, "just for the hell of it" I told myself. But what I was really trying to do was to find some peace, a kind of escape for a little while. Veterans back in the 60's were pretty much on their own to figure things out. We also had to maintain a very low profile, because a lot of folks looked at us as "baby killing monsters."

Here is one point I want to make right away for our new war Veterans, and to the people of this country. No one I have ever known felt good about killing! However, like it or not, it is part of any war, so you civilians need to deal with it. There is no good way to kill a human being.

And yeah, children do get caught up in the battles and the killing as well. Sometimes they're even the ones trying to kill you! So what is a Warrior suppose to do? Just say, "Oh, it's OK honey, come right over here, sit on my lap and pull the pin. We'll just have a big huggie, while you blow our asses off the face of the earth?" Don't think so.

It's real easy to judge someone when you're looking in from the outside of a situation. And I sure as hell hope that over the past thirty-plus years, Americans have learned not to judge so quickly, and this time, cut our Young Warriors some slack.

Well anyway, there's an old saying that "No matter where you go, there you are." And each time I'd sober up, no shit, there I was still lookin' at the faces of everyone I'd wasted, and being haunted by the dead brothers I'd lost. There was no getting away from the uncomfortable memories during the day and the nightmares whenever I could fall asleep. This is happening "Right Now" with many of our Young Veterans.

PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) wasn't a catchy little phrase back in the 60's. In those days the shrinkers called the effects of combat Battle Fatigue or Shell Shock. Doesn't matter what anyone calls it, the fact is, it really sucks when you've got it.

Remember I said I was gonna go easy on you for a bit? Well, here's the good news first! You Youngins don't have to duplicate what I did. That means, you don't have to wade through all the shit by yourself, because now you have a lot of support, and not just from us Old Knuckle Draggers either (but rest assured, we've still got your 6 O'clock). And, (more good news) because of all the help these days, you won't be blind-sided by emotions that you have no idea how to deal with. That really makes a big difference.

Now for the bad news. Be advised, you will be feeling the same things I did. Every Warrior has. But we're gonna' go though each one of these issues, and you'll know exactly how to deal with'em and how to be an "A. J. Squared Away" in your deep-fried brain.

So then, let's just focus on the possibility that you've killed a bunch of people, maybe even capped a bunch of kids, called in a few air strikes or artillery on houses filled with civilians, and now you feel confused, depressed, and maybe angry. And you just can't get your brain-housing group to make any sense out of all the feelings and emotions.

Well guess what? There's nothing WRONG with your feelings! That's right! You are a human being, and humans are supposed to FEEL. Don't worry, if you're still a little numb like I was, it'll all come out eventually, and you'll deal with it when it does. And once again, be advised, one day it definitely will be right in your face, up close and personal. We'll talk later about how to kick ass on that topic too.

So look, cut yourself some slack right now. Because one thing is for sure; you can't kill people and not be screwed up. You can't watch your friends get blown up in front of you and not have nightmares for a time. I've been there, seen it, felt it, and I'm still sittin' here talkin' to "you".

So don't feel like the Lone Ranger on this one, because you're not. I know a lot of Combat Vets, and every single one of them has gone down exactly the same road as you. We have all had to

make the choice, to either go on and see what life has in store for us or give up and drop out pukin', maybe even do something stupid like commit suicide. We'll talk about that later too.

No bullshit, you're gonna be in a world of hurt for a time, but there are ways to make it out of the bush a little quicker and a little easier. No need to low crawl through half your life, when with the right tactics, you can reach your objective quickly. We'll cover all that as we move along here. Just don't wimp out. Keep reading even if it hurts, and it most likely will.

Also keep in mind, that anyone who has experienced war and anyone who has faced death has had a life changing experience. I don't care if it's a near fatal car accident, a gang-banger firefight, a building engulfed in flames that collapses just as you walk out, a mutilated kid that you can't resuscitate who dies in your arms, watching the Twin Towers collapse with your loved ones inside, or pickin' up body parts after it did. You ain't gonna' be the same person when it's over.

"What do I do now?" you ask. You grit your teeth, and read on! You let this old Jar Head walk you down your own personal trail of tears, and get a grip on how to make it to the next extraction point, to a new life. It may not be the life you now have, but it can be a life that one day will bring a little peace in your days, maybe even a little joy back in planning your tomorrows.

Now, let's get on with it! And don't worry; I'm runnin' point for you on this one. I've cleared the path ahead. So jam a full magazine in your rifle! Safeties Off! We're movin' out!!

From: "The Warriors Guide to Insanity" By Sgt. PTSD Brandi, U.S.M.C. Never Retired?
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