

1-2 To Feel the Kill

Walking cautiously at full alert, moving along the broken sidewalk of a narrow street that could be any town in Iraq, you feel alive and in control; your heart racing, breathing accelerated, combat adrenaline pumping through every vein in your body... battle is imminent.

No civilians in sight, no children playing; only dead silence except for the imperceptible sound of your breathing, your boots gently touching the ground. You advance smoothly and deadly, watching for any signs of movement; a door cracking open, a tattered window curtain pushed aside by the enemy exposing the muzzle of a weapon aimed at your fire team.

Without warning! An AK-47 opens up!

In an instant, your ears are ringing from the deafening sounds of the firefight. An RPG explodes the door behind you... your brother falls wounded. Straining for any target, you're in a state of controlled rage, yelling,

“Medic Up! Doc! Medic Up!”

A three-round burst to the doorway up ahead, your enemy drops lifeless to the sidewalk. Bolting from the same doorway, a woman dressed in black reaches for her husband's AK. Rounds explode through her body. She too becomes the victim of war.

Then unexpectedly, another form moves from the shadows into the field of fire! It's the small form of a child dressed in white, no more than ten years old! She too lunges for the rifle!

You yell, “No! No! Stop!” She doesn't respond.

As the muzzle of her father's AK-47 quickly moves

upward toward you and your wounded team, you're left with no other choice: The "CRACK!" of two rounds from your M-4 ring out! The child collapses next to her parents, still and lifeless, bleeding from her head and chest.

The battle has ended.

Doors are swinging open, people are screaming, running into the street, dropping to their knees, tears running down their faces at the sight of the bleeding dead, screaming, wailing over what has just taken place.

You look on. Your own team wounded, with one dead... there you stand. Exhilarated by the adrenaline, yet shocked over your own loss, over the killing you've done.

Body shaking, emotions racing through your head, you're fighting to gain control, to make any sense out of the last fifteen months... desperately, you cling to the thought,

"I'll be home in less than forty eight hours. It'll all be better then, and I can leave all this shit behind!"

Now let's look at this true-life story. It came from a three-tour Iraq Veteran, twenty three years old. I've heard many like it. And it's not unusual, not "breaking news" for the media to sensationalize. It's just war... cold, unmerciful killing, without hesitation, without compassion.

Actually, this young Soldier came home only eighteen hours from the time of that firefight. He continued the story.

"As the plane touched down at the Denver Airport," he said, "all I could think about was I made it home!" "I can't wait to see my wife and daughter."

He went on, "But you know Sarge, when I saw 'em

standin' there waving those flags, tears began to run down my face, not because I was glad to see 'em, but because they looked exactly like the mother and daughter I'd just killed!"

He said he could barely walk up to hold his own child. And when he did, she asked, "Daddy, why are you shaking?" He felt so ashamed, so confused and angry at himself.

His wife could feel the numbness when he kissed her, his reluctance to embrace her as his body trembled.

"She looked at me as though all this was my fault," he said.

Last I heard, they are no longer married, and he's out on a medical discharge, struggling in counseling.

One more casualty of war.

What could this young Soldier possibly say to his wife? How could she possibly understand his feelings, his emotions? She'd just spent another fifteen months on her own, raising their child; and like him, she had reached her limit of endurance.

The war not only destroyed this Soldier, it destroyed his family. He lost himself and the ones he loved. He could never return to his former life. Never. His hope for the future became a plummeting spiral downward.

When talking to the Troops about killing, I often use a quote I heard when lookin' into all that Eastern Philosophy and such. It goes like this:

"When you crush beneath your foot the meanest worm, you shake the THRONE of God and cause the Sword of Right to tremble in its Sheath."

Imagine that: The meanest worm. How much greater

is it to kill one of our own species? Behaviorists say that it goes against the Laws of Nature, the Evolutionary Mandate for the survival of a species to kill itself off on a large scale.

And yet Warriors do just that without hesitation, and most often without compassion in battle. I've done it. And so has every other Combat Veteran from every other war in history.

When you kill another human being, whether in anger, controlled rage, hatred or vengeance, it leaves you with a strange feeling inside. At least it did for me. When the killing was over and the adrenaline wore off, I was left with the very uncomfortable "feeling" that something was wrong with what had just happened.

Oh sure, you can deny it, you can say, "It ain't nothin'." But in the shadows of darkness, when the phantoms come, you're not real sure. The act of killing touches something deep inside of us, it touches the core of our being, making us feel ill at ease. That is, if we're not too far gone already.

When you pull that trigger, feel the rifle recoil, and watch a human being drop dead by your hand, something absolutely final has just occurred. And you can't change it. There's nothing to discuss or to be intellectual about, there's no "reset" button to push. It's done. Period! To this day, I vividly remember the absolute stillness of my first kill... the eyes, the lifeless expression, and knowing that I was the cause of it.

You can rationalize the justification for killing. You can tell yourself, "I had no choice! I've been licensed to kill by my government. I acted honorably in battle." And yet, there's that little something inside of you; that still, small voice that *whispers*, "What have you just done?"

I've heard a few shrinker reasons for feelin' like this;

like I said, goin' against that Race Survival Instinct and that Evolutionary Mandate stuff. Doesn't really matter what the hell you call it; fact is, you just did it, it don't feel real good, and it ain't goin' away, either.

That little feeling, that damn whisper, has stayed in my head since my tour in the Land of the Little People. Don't expect it'll ever go away. But then, that's what we Warriors just have to learn to deal with.

When our Troops throw a grenade into a building to clear it, how the Hell do they know it's full of women and children? They don't! Yet they've just killed 'em. No getting to start over and try that again. It's a done deal, and you've gotta live with that for the rest of your life. Those images are locked into your brain-housing-group till you take your last breath.

Now let's get real here. Of course you get pissed off at times and want to kill everyone, it's impossible not to. That's when the Beast is in full control and you're not. That's when you cut off ears to send Mom back home a nice necklace, or when a convoy driver tries to run down kids, or the soccer team needs a human head to use for the game. It's a way of numbing yourself to the brutalities of battle and loss. It's a way of letting out the rage, of payback for the brutal deaths of your beloved friends, of all the emotions that eat at you like a cancer.

Most folks will say that all this sounds pretty gross. "Oh! What Monsters! That can't be true! Our Troops would never do that!" Wrong! This sort of thing happens in every single war. It's the brutality of battle, the survival of the fittest, and who gets to come back alive.

Our youth, little Susie and Bobby, those sweet little kids who once mined for nose gold in church on Sunday, have now been trained and conditioned to kill. That's right.

We've given them a profession; we've made them Warriors. And what do Warriors do to win battles? They kill other Warriors; they kill who ever becomes the enemy.

Our Troops are now serving this nation without question. They're putting their lives on the line every single day for the freedom that so many others take for granted. They're not little kids anymore. They're full-blown Warriors, and they deserve our respect as such. But damn it, understand what they've become, understand what we've made them into, and what they absolutely must do to win wars. They must Kill.

So what's the limit for killing? Do we kill "just a little?" How do we kill our enemy compassionately, fully embracing the "Goodness" within those we're wipin' off the face to the earth? In battle, we don't often have the luxury or the chance to kill selectively. And besides, when everybody's the enemy, dehumanized to the level of insects or less, what's the difference?

You see, here's one of the problems: We're forged into highly skilled, extremely efficient killing machines, so-called monsters to win battles in war. We do it. And the more we do it, the more we like it. Eventually, some of us may even grow to love it. Then we come back to society, craving the needle of combat adrenaline, of purpose, of Honor, of die-for-each-other Friendship. But idiots tell us, "Oh, you have to forget all that now... get on with your life... get over it." Wrong again!

War becomes the only life we know, the only life with any real meaning. We have, in a sense, become "institutionalized" into military life, into a battlefield subculture. And you say, "Forget it"? We're gonna talk about that a bit later on, about why Warriors shouldn't forget it, even if we could. (Which we can't anyway) It's

sorta like pullin' a nice big ass shark out of the water and sayin', "OK... now breathe." But let's continue.

Killing an adult enemy is one thing, even an adult woman enemy. But enemy or not, killing kids is worse by far. In my own Green Grunt way of thinkin' about this, it has to do with their degree of innocence, with their youth itself. You know, "Kids aren't stupid, they're just little"? They have a chance of growin' up and not bein' like their radical, hateful, asshole parents.

My oath as a Warrior was to protect the innocent. And as a patriotic American, I felt that a ten-year-old kid fell into that category. It didn't matter if she was dressed in black pajamas, and it doesn't matter now what she's wearin'. Sometimes us Warriors are put into a moral dilemma that we just can't get out of. I'll give you a brief example of what I mean.

Due to bad intelligence (or the lack there of), at eighteen years old, I killed thirteen children in an ambush that I triggered. Along with being green to combat, this was so damn emotionally devastating because I killed who I was supposed to be protecting! It was truly a moral conflict, the guilt of which I still feel to this day.

And no, it doesn't matter how the hell you justify it in your mind, and it doesn't matter how shrinkers try to explain it away... to make the memories more tolerable. Fact is, it's locked into your brain, and you are the one dealing with it.

Unfortunately, my feelings changed a lot by the end of my tour. I was not only numb to the killing and the loss of true friends; I was especially insensitive to the suffering of the innocent. I'd lost my connection to humanity; that is, I had no feelings of compassion for any member of the human race, except for my fellow Warriors. This, I regret

to say, happens in every war. I've heard many accounts of this same kind of dehumanization happening today with our Troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

And herein lies another major problem with the sustained Combat Trauma of multiple tours. Given enough killing, enough loss of friends, enough being witness to what most so-called civilized people would call atrocities (evil cruelty), you become emotionally numb. That means numb to doing the killing, numb to watching the killing, and numb to the results of the killing. In other words, Numb to Death itself.

When this kind of traumatic exposure continues, especially over multiple deployments, you eventually lose touch with your own humanity. And it's a foregone conclusion that anyone you consider to be the enemy; the slant, the gook, or the Hajji has lost their humanness as well. This happened to me toward the end of my one tour of thirteen months. And it's happening now, big time, with multiple tours. I'll give you an example.

Here's a story I heard from two Soldiers last spring, both back from their forth, fifteen month combat tour in Iraq.

These two men were assigned "Rabid Dog Killing Duty." As ordered, they climbed aboard their Humvee and went out on patrol. The Soldiers came across two apparently rabid dogs foaming at the mouth, and they shot them both.

The Soldiers climbed off their Humvee, buried the dogs, and said a little prayer over for the bodies... then continued their patrol.

Later that day, they came under fire and killed two of the enemy, which they referred to as "Hajji scum." The Soldiers pumped a few extra rounds into the dead bodies

and left them both lying in the sun to bloat and rot in one hundred twenty degree heat.

Some would say this was done for example, which in fact is no big deal in war. But lookin' into the eyes of these Solders as they told this story, I could see their expressions of compassion for the dogs change to rage and satisfaction over killing humans. But that's just it, you see; the Hajjis weren't human, they weren't even at the same level as maggots, crawling on the shit of the dogs they had also killed.

“Terrible!” you say. Not at all... and once again, it's just war.

And what the hell do people think war is? It's not some bullshit social center picnic or some ridiculous Hollywood movie. It's the out-and-out slaughter of the enemy and often innocent (or not so innocent) civilians... many who only want the damn fighting to stop so they can have their lives back. Some assholes call the civilian dead, “Collateral Damage,” just like they call us Warriors who will never be able to adapt to society again, “Social Casualties.” You believe that shit?

Killing civilians takes place on a large scale in every war. If my sources are even close, it was about eleven civilians killed to one Soldier in Vietnam. In Iraq, as I've been told, that number dropped to four-to-five civilians to one Soldier. Gee-whiz, don't that just make you feel so much better? Wonder how the families of those four-to-five civilians feel?

But the numbers have always been something like this throughout our history. Civilians are truly the victims in war, becoming refugees and having everything in their lives destroyed during these conflicts. It happened in WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. And it's sure as hell happening

now.

Why and how does this happen, you ask?

Well, it's true that ground troops account for some of these high numbers; but from what I've seen, it's the artillery and the airstrikes that do most of it. Back in the Nam, when we were getting the third degree from the media about civilian kills, bombing runs to Hanoi were killing thousands of civilians. So go figure? Civilians always get the worst of it.

The point of this topic is real simple: Even if you don't kill civilians and only kill the enemy (and it feels great when you do), the act triggers a change and certainly feelings of detachment in you. If you kill children, then the feelings of having really "screwed the pooch" (made a mistake) also kick in.

"Whoa! It feels great when you do?? As in Kill??" you ask.

That's a Roger! Yes in-deedy-bob... it feels real good to kill the enemy, and I'll see if I can explain that for ya a bit.

This is absolutely no bullshit: It's a rush to kill a human being. I know full well, by admitting this, I'm cuttin' right into the core of human moral conviction, good-against-evil and the like. But it's damn true, like it or not. It's a rush to kill an enemy and a disgrace to kill someone you feel is innocent, but there are some feelings that overlap both.

First off, you don't hear that Whisper till the killing is over, because you can't hear shit in a firefight. That's because you're deaf, pumped to the max with combat adrenaline, and the Beast is in full control!

But to actually kill a human being who (in your mind)

is your enemy is an absolute rush of emotions; and as sick as it sounds to some, it is extremely satisfying. Ask any combat Vet; and “if” they’re willing to answer, they’ll all say the same thing.

Fact is, I was just talkin’ to a good buddy of mine, and during our conversation (which is usually raggin’ on the stupidity of some civilian), he pops up with “You know what I mean Sarge, it’s just been too damn long since I’ve killed someone. Wish I had some legal excuse for a Good Shoot to feel that combat adrenaline again... I really miss the rush.”

What do I mean by “rush”?

Real simple, real Primal... you win. You’re the victor, the conquering hero, the champion of war. You get to walk off the field of battle, the field of honor, to feast on the spoils. And it’s been the same way for the thousands of years before Starbucks, computers, bullshit television, and fancy cars... same-e-same.

Your first kill is a Right of Passage, and I mean you have earned the “Right” to enter the Warrior World. You’ve earned your place among the Warrior Clan, status within the Warrior’s Code of Honor, and the Warrior Trust Bond between you and every other Warrior is strengthened.

Your first loss of a Friend is your baptism of blood. And this right of passage seals your fate for the rest of your life. There’s no returning to who you were before this transition, this emotional gauntlet. And at this moment, you will never, ever fit into the civilian world again. We’re gonna talk about that later.

You’ve been proven in battle; so from that point, all the bullshit stops. No more testing your manhood or womanhood. You’ve Passed the Test. And because of this,

not only has your life changed forever, you have now been accepted into the Brotherhood/Sisterhood of Warriors and our lonely tradition of Silence.

That is, you may speak of war, only to those who have experienced war. In your heart, you truly only respect those who have faced death and who have survived battle. All others are tolerated at best.

Now you see just how dangerous it is for returning Afghanistan and Iraq Warriors to be ignored, to be left to make it on their own, without counseling and without a support base. All that needs to happen is *You become the enemy.*

Doesn't matter what country you're in or what the *new* enemy looks like. There is only one thing to do toward resolving the problem: You kill the opposition. We can only pray that a little compassion is lodged in their brain-housing-group somewhere, and some act of kindness toward our young Troops will bring it to the surface before the Beast takes charge. But this depends on how much killing they've done, how numb they are, and how cold and emotionless they've become.

And yet, in all truthfulness, the more killing you do, the more numb you become, the easier it is to kill again... even kids. That is, eventually you get over the innocence factor, and they all become the enemy. One soldier told me with *hatred in his eyes*, "If I kill 'em when they're little, I won't have to kill 'em when they grow up. Besides, they can still blow up an IED or pull an AK trigger at 8 eight years old. Future Hajji terrorists."

Are you beginning to understand how this all works?
Are you beginning to grasp the problem we all face?

The more Combat Trauma you experience, the deeper

you slide into your very own Primal Self. And truly, for your own survival, your Beast becomes more and more in control... it has to be in War, if you don't wanna come home in a body bag. But your Beast is just as happy killing in the civilian world as it is on the battlefield. No shit!

Ya see, it's kind of a Catch-22. You need your Primal Side to get through war, but it can also destroy you when you're attempting to adapt to life off the battlefield. You absolutely must learn to control the Beast once it's out of its cage, because although it may protect you and be your Guardian for the rest of your life, it will kill you in a heartbeat.

Seems a strange relationship, doesn't it? Understanding your Beast and controlling it is your only chance for even a half-assed productive and semi-peaceful life. There's just no way around this one. You deal with it or you die, and maybe others die with you.

You've got a real problem if your Beast stays in control when you return stateside, because anyone who pisses you off becomes the enemy. American or not, what do you do with the enemy? That's right, you kill the enemy for many reasons, all of which make perfectly good sense in the mind of a Warrior. That is, a mind that has seen far too much combat, way too much killing, and felt too much loss.

More than one soldier has said to me that, "I really want to keep killing." That means they've done so much killing that not only have they gotten hooked on the adrenaline rush of it (like I did), but to kill the enemy is the only thing that has real meaning to them. In other words, all bad feelings and Whispers aside, the only real satisfaction some Warriors have in life is being in battle and making the kill.

Are you beginning to see the potential danger we're facing?

Understand that we have very effectively conditioned our young Troops to be highly trained “killers”. When they react in the Survival Mode, they respond as such. They're just doing what they do on the battlefield. It's second nature to them. Trouble is, that given the right trigger, they don't realize the battlefield ain't downtown San Francisco. We'll discuss this state of mind more as we move along through the first section.

And since many Americans don't realize how much actual combat our Troops are experiencing, I thought I'd just throw this little tidbit in. You're sure as hell not gonna hear all this stuff on the ambulance-chasing nightly news (which by the way, I haven't watched in over two years)... makes me wanna shoot my TV. But then I couldn't watch those nice, soothing war movies.

Well anyway, as I understand it, the average ground-pounder Soldier or Marine in WWII (called the “last good war” by those who didn't fight in it) saw about one hundred forty actual days of combat for the whole war. Best estimates on Korea are about one hundred eighty days of combat for the war. In Vietnam we saw about two hundred forty days of combat per tour... most of us did one tour, some did two, and very rarely some from my era did three.

I've talked to Troops from Afghanistan and Iraq who have seen more than three thousand days of combat! That's twenty one times more combat than in WWII, and twelve times more than what I experienced! And hell, I've got a 100% rating for Combat Trauma (PTSD). Imagine, twelve times more killing; loss of Friends; exposure to atrocities; participation in atrocities; guilt; survivor guilt;

adrenaline addiction; and developing a Warrior Trust Bond that goes so deeply into their Creed of Honor, that life itself (their lives) becomes unimportant.

Just last week I learned of an Army Medic who was blown up in an IED, three months into his ninth tour! Can any of you Old Knuckle Draggers imagine nine tours in Vietnam? But this Soldier went back for one reason only. He loved his fellow Warriors more than he did his own life. We'll talk about this Trust Bond later on.

But once again my shocked-in-disbelief friends, this is War.

Psychiatrist friends tell me that this much exposure to combat is on a scale we have never seen before. We don't know what the limits of human endurance are. We don't know what kinds of reactions this much combat will produce. And when I say "we," I mean the military, politicians, shrinkers... nobody!

As I've heard it said in several different ways, "We're in uncharted territory." Well No Shit Sherlock! Doesn't take an egghead shrinker to figure that one out!

We're gonna talk about Squad Leader and Line Officer stress-levels in Section One, Topic #8, *The Dragon has Awakened*. But I will say this: The killings that took place on November 3rd, 2009, at Ft. Hood, Texas, are potentially the tip of the iceberg of what's soon to come. That is, if we don't start right now in helping our Troops deal with the severe trauma they've got locked up in their heads, then it's all gonna come out violently in the streets.

I was at a conference near Washington, DC, the day before the shootings took place. And as usual, I warned every one of the Brass and cake-eaters I could find that "We are facing a National Security Threat" of major proportions. The next day, I received a lot of phone calls

and emails. Some said, “It was like you were foretelling the future.” I told them, “Hell no, I’m no psycho-babble-brain-dead psychic. I’m not predicting the future, I’m explaining the present!”

If anyone truly wants to understand the intense traumas that are eating our Troops alive, all they need do is put on some body armor, load their weapons, and stay a year in the Korengal Valley (the Valley of Death) in Afghanistan. I guaran-damn-tee you, it’ll all clear up real quick-like. You don’t ever intellectually understand war, you’ve gotta *feel* every bit of it. Then you own it, then you know it.

War changes every single person who lives through it and every Warrior who fights in it. Every one of us comes home only to find we just don’t fit in here anymore. Most of us are lost. And far too many are forgotten.

So what are we as Americans gonna do about it?

“I wish I could understand more,” you say. Well, be careful what you wish for, because it’s a comin’. You just gotta keep on readin’.

Alright now, draw some ammo, a couple of grenades, and your night-vision gear. We’re leavin’ base camp at zero-dark-thirty hours. This next topic may even earn you a Purple Heart!

Saddle Up! Lock and Load!
Watch that tree line!