



Our Odyssey

By Ryan Weemer

There is a lot of research, inquiry, and thought that goes into the cause-and-effect of PTSD as it pertains to war. I personally have spent my time struggling with where I've been and what I've done in combat, and I know how long and difficult the road home can be. Sanity is something of our own design, and the divide between our cultural mythology and the torrid realities of a kill-or-be killed conflict wreaks havoc on our sense of it all.

It took years to even reflect on my experiences in the embattled streets of Fallujah as a Marine infantryman during the largest urban assault since Hue City, Vietnam. The images of fixing a bayonet to the end of my weapon only inform the brutal nature of my memories—the ability to “reach out and touch someone” became more personal than training could have ever prepared.



As I tried to rejoin the normal American society, I repressed any part of who I was in the sandbox. I tried to forget, but images of hell from my own hands still made them quiver uncontrollably. The physical and physiological reactions stateside took me violently back to the moments I was trying to let go of. I had a problem. A normal reaction to such abnormal situations—sure, this is what all the experts had to say, but there wasn't a single form of therapy that could ease the burdens I carried with me day-to-day. I tried the various forms of treatment for different lengths of time and in different modalities, each time finding myself at the bottom of a downward spiral and at the tip of a cliff I refused to acknowledge.

This war invaded my life and didn't stop at the door to civilian formalities either. Simply talking about my time in Iraq and my uncomfortable grasp of where it had left me landed me in a worse place than my own torture could fathom—in a Military Court Martial for murder and dereliction of duty. If transitioning home from war wasn't difficult enough, being called a murderer for my actions in war and by my own tribe nonetheless pushed me into a place that bred indifference—indifference for my situation, for the truth, for understanding, and for my own sanity. I was pulled from any form of therapy that might shine a light at the end of my tunnel and was left to find my own way out. I was fighting with my own understanding while bombarded with a world that was judging me—spitting in my face with a wad of accusations that shredded the only thing I had left after so much death and destruction—my honor.

What happens to a human being in war is one thing, after war something else, and when you feel ousted it is something entirely off the charts. I was ultimately exonerated of any wrongdoing in combat, but the damage was irreversible. I now was left not only with my inability to find my way home, but force-fed a

dose that said home didn't want to be found—the people I thought were grateful for my service had turned their backs on me—or so it felt. I know now that this is not the case. I know that everyone has an opinion and that I had more support than I even imagined going through that transformative time, but I couldn't see past that blemish of disgust having been spat in my eye either.

I gave up on the therapies and the medications aimed at managing the signs and symptoms of my “normal reaction” to it all. It didn't keep me off the floor when I found my way there once again, but it did force me to dredge up the courage needed to change my way of thinking. I was forced to look at things in a different way and only the bottom and having been judged gave me that perspective. I began to realize how misunderstood my misunderstandings could be to those who had never “been there.” I felt guilt to an extreme that looked like a verdict to the civilian world, but began to feel more like a moral injury than PTSD. This was the key for me. To hear that what I was feeling and going through was a normal reaction to abnormal stimuli wasn't helpful in the slightest. I couldn't get it until I got it. It didn't make sense until I began to think of and internalize my guilt, and the signs and symptoms of what we were calling PTSD, as more of a moral injury. [Jonathan Shay](#) coined this term “for a painfully common source of the ‘something more,’ not captured by PTSD, but supremely captured by Homer in his portrait of Achilles in the *Iliad*. Compared to pure PTSD, moral injury destroys the capacity for trust, increases suicidality, domestic violence, and criminality, and wrecks the capacity for a flourishing human life.”

I wasn't feeling guilty for some kind of wrongdoing in combat—it must have seemed as so to those who couldn't fathom feeling that way over a legitimate act of self-defense. I was feeling guilty for what is only truly felt by individuals who have taken life as a warrior has, and this divide in experience makes all the difference. As I always quote, “freedom has a flavor the protected will never know”—so holds true for the twinge of knowing deep down that our actions in war only collide with what has become the social norms of today, such that understanding our guilt is understanding that we truly value human life—despite right and wrong and wars—we hesitate in killing our own kind and it is natural to feel guilty in having done so regardless of the circumstance. This is a moral injury.

This divide and skewed belief system of our cultural mythology that knows nothing of the first-hand encounter and conditioning of kill-or-be killed is what defines the existence of a moral injury. This is not a verdict, and making it such only alienates the normal combat veteran instead of validating the truth. War is what it is...there is only truth in the reality and nothing more. There is no understanding worth making sense of; there is no way of explaining to an audience that can never fully understand; there is no need. There is only the need for a warrior to find peace with self and with that truth as reality—however harsh, however misunderstood, and however perceived. Those of us who have fought, who have bled, loved and lost in war, we are out of our element in this time and place where the experience is not of our social construct. But it is up to us to do as we do—to improvise, adapt, and overcome. It is up to us to find our own way home. If the door is not open when we get there, we must know that it is a door all the same, and its existence begs that it be opened.