



Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character

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In this strikingly original and groundbreaking book, Dr. Shay examines the psychological devastation of war by comparing the soldiers of Homer's *Iliad* with Vietnam veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Although the *Iliad* was written twenty-seven centuries ago it has much to teach about combat trauma, as do the more recent, compelling voices and experiences of Vietnam vets.

Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character Details

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From Reader Review Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character for online ebook

David Sarkies says

Failures of the American Army

30 September 2012

This is one of the toughest books that I have read to date and pretty much halfway through the chapter on grief I found that my brain had been reduced to slush. Now, I have never been to war and never experienced war, but when Shay says in his introduction that this book will have a tendency to bring flashbacks to combat veterans he was not kidding. As I suggested, I am not a combat veteran and I found this book very hard going myself, and in a way, reading this book also brought about flashbacks from my past, and I would hardly say that I suffer from PTSD or have had a hard life compared to many others in our society.

Jonathan Shay is a psychiatrist that works with Vietnam vets helping them cope with civilian life and helping them (I feel that the word recover would be an inappropriate word since there are some things that one can never recover from, such as an amputation, and some psychological trauma simply cannot be healed) live with the psychological trauma that is likely to be with them for the rest of their lives. When somebody once coined the phrase (I cannot remember who it was but I believe it was some American General in World War II) War is Hell, he wasn't kidding, and the testimonies that we are told from the Vietnam Vets who had agreed shared their stories go a long way to demonstrate this.

As I read through this book the nagging feeling that kept gnawing away at me was whether the United States, in the way that they run their army as one would run a corporation, can really expect to be able to win a modern war. The way the army is constructed may be able to win a war where two nations throw armies up against each other, such as what happened in World War II, and even in Korea, but when the war that one is fighting is against insurgents who continually melt back into the civilian population, then the way one fights a war and constructs the armed forces, may need to be reviewed. An army is not a police force and a police force is not an army, and the Americans discovered that when they attempted to use the national guard to attempt to put down anti-Vietnam protests in the United States. The role of the police is to protect the order of society and to thoroughly investigate crimes to make sure that the real perpetrator is arrested. However, the job of an army is to defeat the enemy: in effect to shoot first and ask questions later.

One of the problems that Shay has pointed out, and this is something that is not new because this is the way wars have been evolving over the last half a millennium, is that the commanders are becoming more and more removed from the battlefield, to a point where they do not see that action and do not understand the nature of war. Von Clausewitz indicated this in his book 'On War' when he talks about the concept of the fog of war. The best way to describe this is that what may look good on paper does not necessarily work on the ground. It should be interesting to note that when a general actually joins the troops and leads the troops (as opposed to directing the troops from a bunker behind the lines, or even thousands of miles away) the effectiveness of the army actually increases, and we only need to look at Napoleon's successes to be able to see that.

However the nature of war has changed a lot since Napoleon's day. As technology advances we continually distance ourselves more and more from the enemy, to the point where it is almost becoming like a computer game. Shay talks about how the modern Judeo-Christian ethic seeks to demonise the enemy to make the enemy easier to kill. To some people it is easier to kill a dog than a human because the dog is not a human, so to get over humanity's resistance to killing another human, we turn the enemy into an animal. However, the opposite also works true in that by turning the soldier into an animal the human loses all concept of their

humanity and becomes like the animal. Of course, the problem that arises is that the human can no longer return to human society, a concept that is explored elsewhere.

I particularly appreciated his discussion of the way troops were trained. One particular movie that I have seen about the Vietnam war clearly brings this idea out (the movie is Full Metal Jacket) and that is where the trainer (and in cases commanders) are constantly focusing on where the person is failing rather than their successes. The belief is that by constantly denigrating the soldier it forces the soldier to overcome his or her weaknesses and thus becomes a better soldier. This is not the case (and I shall explore this when I discuss the nature of warfare and the corporation below). In Full Metal Jacket, the poorest performer in the group ends up shooting himself in the toilet, and we learn from this book that this is not as far fetched as it seems. We are told the story of a helicopter pilot that was torn to pieces for refusing to do something, then going out and killing himself.

Shay refers a lot to the Illiad in this book, and uses the story to show us what war is about. There are a lot of differences, but there is also a lot of insight into the effect of war upon the individual. Remember, in the ancient world, all males were warriors so all males had experienced war. Tragedy was a way to help the citizens to cope with returning to civilian life. Also, we note, that the main characters in the Illiad are all commanders, and they are all involved in the fighting. This is not the case today. Where the commanders in the Illiad knew what it was like on the ground, the commanders today do not. As such, the orders that are passed down come from people, in many cases who have not seen or experienced action, and expect the soldiers to obey them. I remember when I explored a military position after completing university, I discovered that I could walk into the army at the rank of major, which meant that I would never have to see combat action, and with my law degree, I would be dealing with people who had seen action with no understanding of what it would have been like to have been out there. Fighting a war on the ground requires quick thinking and a willingness to do things on the spur of the moment, however the chain of command does not allow the soldier to do this. The soldier must obey his commanding officer, and any deviation from that is punishable. They say that the back bone of the American Army is the chain of command, and by ignoring the chain of command will undermine the army. However, as we have seen in Vietnam, and more recently, in Iraq, it was the chain of command that proved to be the armies undoing.

Now, I will speak of the idea of the corporation as the army. Having worked in the corporation, I have seen many elements that have come out of the book. We take the idea of the manager as the commander. When you are on the floor, you may be exposed to direct customer contact, and in some positions that can be really draining. However, the higher up the managerial chain, the less customer contact you have. However the higher up you go, the more you are expected to have the people beneath you perform to a high standard. If the people beneath you fail, you fail. However, consider an irate customer screaming at you, and you are not permitted to terminate the call because the customer is everything. The customer pays the company money, and it is expected that the customer continue to pay the company money, however it is not the manager's job to take the call. The company has upset the customer, however the person on the floor is expected to resolve the complaint, and sometimes, even to convince the customer to upgrade their services. In some companies (McDonalds for instance) the managers are expected to be on the floor and to deal with customers alongside the staff, however many others do not.

I have also seen instances where berattng employees with the belief that that creates a better employee is used. This, once again, is not the case. Granted, if an employee that makes a mistake is not shown the mistake, then the employee is not going to learn. However, by constantly hammering the employee for their mistakes, without actually acknowledging what the employee has done right, and rewarding the employee for what they are doing right, will end up destroying the employee. The same goes with religious institutions. We get so caught up with trying to create better people by hammering them for their mistakes, that we actually are blind to the damage that is being done to that person.

Elizabeth Arnold says

I feel like this book needs an up-front disclaimer. While it is fair and accurate to describe the book as an interesting academic comparison of the the experience of soldiers in the Illiad (though the caveat must be added: the experience *as related by Homer*) and modern-day soldiers in Vietnam, as well as an argument for a particular framework to understand the 'failure mode' of humans under extreme wartime stress, there are also moments of 'throw you entirely out of the book' revulsion while reading.

But be prepared for racist and dehumanizing quotations, as well as graphic descriptions of death. That said- I don't think any of it is gratuitous. The book is primarily about psychology of soldiers in wartime, attempting to understand them probably *should* be jarring.

One love, one hate:

I loved the framework for understanding the contraction of social circle that results from stress. Strong examples both from the Illiad and modern experience showing how a person's 'tribe' becomes both more sharply defined and contracts under wartime conditions. Also interesting and practical ideas for how those conditions might be changed to prevent the social isolation and resulting socially unbound behavior of some soldiers.

I hated the argument that demonization and dehumanization of the enemy is a Judeo-Muslim-Christian phenomenon. (Although I appreciate that the author includes Muslim in this grouping, what he seems to actually mean is Abrahamic religion. And then he proceeds to use only a Christian interpretation of good and evil, so my appreciation is muted.) The biblical passages he sites to bolster his 'the enemy is animalistic' argument seem to do nothing of the kind, and he undercuts own his argument by referencing the wartime propaganda of the Japanese, who are definitely not culturally Abrahamic and have no problem demonizing and dehumanizing the enemy. Then, he begins the next chapter with an offhand comment that Homer's audience would have been descended from both sides of the Illiad conflict... which would *entirely* explain why the Illiad contains so little of the demonizing/dehumanizing language we have come to expect of soldiers in wartime!

Overall, a good read for anyone with an interest in psychology, history, and war. Would be a good discussion book paired with either the Illiad (duh) or On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society by Dave Grossman.

David Litwack says

The definitive work on Vietnam era post traumatic stress. The Author compares the way warriors (soldiers) dealt with the hardship of war in Vietnam and in the Trojan war, based on the Odyssey. The book is filled with moving vignettes, dialog from the Odyssey compared with actual discussions between Vietnam vets and the author.

Thomas says

Homer is ever present in modern culture, but his power is often reduced to a kind of cartoon. The Iliad becomes a sword-and-sandals Hollywood cliché and the Odyssey becomes the original road movie. Shay

brings the Iliad back to reality by shining a new light on the ferocious pain of Achilles, pain that today might be called PTSD, but which Shay calls "moral injury."

Shay reads the Iliad as a psychologist and observes in Achilles some of the same symptoms that he sees in his patients, many of whom are veterans of the Vietnam War. The common denominator -- and the thing that differentiates many Vietnam veterans from WWII vets -- is an element of betrayal and disrespect that became the core of the Vietnam experience. Shay calls this "moral injury." The anger of Achilles stems from the disrespect shown him by Agamemnon, and this anger blossoms into grief and rage, causing a breakdown in the soldier's social and moral constructs. When this happens in a combat theater, as it frequently did in Vietnam, the results are catastrophic.

The parallels that Shay draws between Achilles and the experiences of many Vietnam veterans are minutely detailed, including the gut-wrenching voices of the veterans themselves, and his argument is very persuasive. His conclusion is both instructive and practical. He doesn't bewail the existence of war and prescribe an idealistic pacifistic solution. Instead, in a deliberate and concrete way, he shows how vitally important leadership qualities are in the military. In some ways this book seems to be written especially for military commanders, as a reminder that the lesson of the Iliad is still ringing in our ears: to preserve the moral horizon, whatever the circumstances.

Emily Murphy says

Note: All of these ratings are based on a scale of 1-10, 10 being the best.

Writing Quality: 7

Literary criticism and medical nonfiction can be some of the most boring books on the market. Not so with this one. It's written at an accessible level. It is rather dry, befitting its genre, but definitely makes apt comparisons and keeps a good balance between example and explanation.

Setting: 7

Usually nonfiction books don't have a setting, but this one paints such a vivid picture of culture that I consider it a setting. I now understand the ancient Greek culture surrounding the Iliad much better, as well as the horrific culture experienced by Vietnam combat veterans. I can discuss the norms of military hierarchy without ever having experienced it. I do wish there was more of the Iliad for balance, but overall they were both well done.

Characters: 8

This entire book is, in essence, a deep character case study. We delve into the psychology of Achilles and the troubles of Vietnam vets. I never knew what caused such things as the "beserk state," but now felt able to sympathize with the feeling. I was impressed by this character development, especially in a nonfiction book. For confidentiality reasons, the veterans were not named, though this did take away from my understanding (as when Shay tags something like, "the same veteran we met earlier said this). That's the only reason points are docked.

Plot: 7

I am now thoroughly convinced we need better treatment of our troops. So the argument did its job. Since it's a complicated problem, the answer is quite complicated, and I can't state all of its facets here. I'm not sure I could follow a logical path, though, from one argument to the next, which is where the lost points come from.

Enjoyment: 5

I enjoyed the insights I learned with this book. But it's never pleasant to learn about combat.

Structure: 5

This book was highly structured, with many subheadings and such. It made for more focused reading certainly. But the overall book seemed not to have a common goal until the end. That was odd.

Emotional Story: 8

Getting inside the mental mechanisms of our characters means we develop an emotional attachment to them. Since it's not a novel, they don't arc, but it was an impressive emotional attachment all the same.

Hook: 4

While the insights were impressive, it's still as dry as its genre. If you've read a little bit, you can put it down and not care about the rest. But while you're reading it, it does have those impressive insights to keep you going.

All of this averages out to a 6.48/10, which is a 3.2/5, hence the 3-star rating.

Tim says

Shay's account of PTSD among Vietnam veterans is eye-opening to the horrors faced by soldiers both during and after the war. His juxtaposition of quotes from his patients and lines from The Illiad are well done and includes insightful analysis of the two. I found a frightening similarity between many of the Vietnam experiences and those of the recent wars in the Middle East. The military has learned, since Vietnam, to drastically curtail what the media can show of the war. In recent wars, this serves to hide, from the bits that leak out, many of the same misguided leadership decisions and atrocities that Shay discusses with his Vietnam veterans and so outraged the American public. It seems all too likely that returning soldiers today will experience the same traumatic effects as those in the book, despite supposed progress to the contrary.

Holly says

This is a somewhat difficult book to review, but I would go so far as to say this is an absolute must-read for understanding combat trauma. The Achilles argument was enlightening because it contextualized war within the scope of thousands of years of history and thousands of years of soldiering. Shay's treatment of the morally wounded is quite respectful and profoundly thoughtful. The book is peppered with the raw experience of combat survivors, so it is sometimes difficult to read; however, this works in way to allow the reader to increase his own understanding and compassion of those who've survived such experiences. One of the most important points of the book is an examination of what Shay names a "berserker" response which he introduces after outlining Achilles' rampage on the Trojans following the death of his closest companion, Patroclus. This was one of the more useful aspects of the book because such a response is rarely addressed with such thoughtful analysis as this is done by Shay- not just in the Achilles illustration, but in how he transfers the experience to our own time. Shay goes beyond just the devastating effects of the response and critically examines many aspects how it takes shape and why we observe its increased prevalence in the American military.

Adam Wahlberg says

Stunning work -- comparing the soldiers of The Iliad to the vets in Vietnam, what they come home with in terms of PTSD. Amazing insights and such a contribution to the scholarship in this area.

Laura says

Jonathan Shay is a psychotherapist – and impressive amateur classicist – who has spent decades treating Vietnam veterans with severe PTSD. In this fascinating book, he analyzes what he sees as the moral breakdown of Achilles in terms of factors common to the Vietnam War. The first section of the book outlines these factors: a betrayal of “what’s right”; the shrinkage of the social and moral horizon; grief at the death of a special comrade; guilt and wrongful substitution; and going berserk (a clinical condition, not slang). In each of the chapters he describes these conditions as revealed through years of treating veterans, often quoting transcripts of therapy sessions, and analyzes their presence in *The Iliad*. In the second section he goes through soldiers’ common reactions to these conditions, again drawing from Vietnam veterans’ accounts, and demonstrates the same reactions in Achilles. It’s convincing and utterly compelling.

I’m no classical scholar, but I have read *The Iliad* many times and can appreciate his deep understanding and meticulous examination. His book is worth multiple readings. In fact, *Achilles in Vietnam* has filled a role in my understanding similar to movies of favorite novels, like “Gone With the Wind” – now I can’t read *The Iliad* without this as context and subtext! I also was stunned by the descriptions of combat in Vietnam — both the conditions of guerilla warfare against the Viet Cong and common U.S. military practices seemed designed to inflict maximum psychological damage on our soldiers. Be forewarned: this is not for the faint of heart. If you’ve studied the Vietnam War then much of this will be familiar. If not, brace yourself; the accounts are from men whose combat trauma was debilitating enough that they sought professional help. Also, Dr. Shay quotes veterans’ words verbatim, and the profanity is almost as stunning as the substance. I have no tolerance for profanity and felt like I needed to wash out my head with a power hose, yet at the same time I couldn’t help feel sorry for both the lack of education that often produces such a low level of language and the obvious crutch that profanity was for these men; if the eloquent can’t find words to describe such horrors, what hope had they? (Not all the interviewees swear four or five times in a sentence; there are distinct levels of language corresponding to levels of education, a fact that the Vietnam veterans I know are quick to assert.) The final section of the book focuses on PTSD and possible healing, with less analysis of Achilles; nonetheless, it’s fascinating reading.

Zeus_slayer101 says

Achilles in Vietnam is a study of the impact of PTSD on the human personality, using *The Iliad* to illustrate the impact of this problem with emphasis on the reasons why Vietnam was more traumatic for many veterans than other conflicts have been. This was a good book to read along with *The Iliad* and helped me bring out some of the underlying themes throughout Homer’s text.

This book contained some very keen observations in it. You just have to fight through all of the boring psychology jargon and read it carefully and analytically to understand its numerous messages. If there is one problem I had with the way it was written, I would say that it throws a great deal of information at you and never lets up. Leaving you to sort out the mess inside your head. It’s a great analysis of the trauma of war though, and the way in which Shay can relate it back to the work of Homer is rather impressive. However,

while it was interesting, this is a very dry and difficult read, not something you should pick up just for kicks. I would recommend it to anybody looking to further their knowledge on any of these subjects, but don't expect it to be an enjoyable read.

Dave says

This was a great book in conjunction with The Iliad. He compares PTSD symptoms in Viet Vets he counsels to descriptions in The Iliad. Very intense depictions of modern PTSD copied verbatim from transcripts with the vets. One man describes leaving his house at night carrying a steak knife, walking down dark alleys hoping someone will threaten him. This is real.

Janell Rhiannon says

This book changed the way I saw Achilles. It helped me see the "human" side of the hero birthed by a nymph. Jonathan Shay did two things: described how modern soldiers are affected by war and how Achilles was affected by war. Chapter by chapter, he connects Achilles emotions and actions with the modern warrior. You understand how grief manifests into rage...for today's soldier, as well as yesterday's warrior, using the Iliad and Achilles as the touchstone. It's a fascinating read. I highly recommend it.

Joe Green says

I was writing a paper about Bill Anderson and his Civil War experience when I stumbled upon this work. Completely changed the direction of the paper, and my relationship with a friend who recently returned from combat in Iraq.

James says

A powerful study of the impact of PTSD on the human personality, using the Iliad and other classic literary portraits of traumatized warriors to illustrate the timelessness of this problem with special emphasis on the reasons that the Vietnam war was a more shattering experience for many veterans than other wars have been.

Diogenes says

Scholarly genius. A rock-solid read overlapping the Iliad with the Vietnam War and how, throughout history, combat soldiers have been dealt the burden of PTSD as a byproduct of war, beginning with his analysis of Homer's Achilles to which, Shay says, his loss of character after the death of Patroclus, is the ultimate tragedy of this most classic work. Although I would disagree on some points, the main emphases are sound, fascinating, and profoundly well done. Kudos to Shay for this great book.
