

The Spiritual Lives of Soldiers Part III – After the Fighting is Over

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After the Armistice in 1918, a British officer remarked, “now that this war is over, we can go back to real soldiering.” There is much truth in that statement, though perhaps not the way he intended – the war continues for its veterans even after the shooting stops – in fact, at that point their war is just beginning.

One of the greatest challenges for any warrior is the return to routine. Discipline and attention to detail is seldom questioned in a war zone because survival depends on it. Back in garrison, however, discipline may seem nonsensical, appearing to emphasize minutiae merely for the sake of compliance, and placing importance on activities that are far from life or death situations. On the other hand, veterans who remain in military service, even in peace, continue to benefit from their accountability to the institution and the structure it provides, whether they like it or not.



There is another population of veterans who do not have that: those who, after a wartime experience, retire or are discharged. Reservists and National Guard who demobilize and return to their civilian occupations fall within this category. Our priests and parishes can help these individuals, but they must first know something about the stress that comes from the high tempo of operations since 9-11.

Following a wartime deployment, a warrior may experience the after-effects of physical, emotional, and spiritual “wear and tear,” especially if they deployed multiple times and saw action. They will have undoubtedly experienced the loss of someone close, whether a buddy who died alongside them, or someone they knew getting killed, or perhaps a loved one who died back home. Even in wars fought for righteous causes, there can be moral strife and inner conflict. An individual may be critical of a leader’s decision that, in their estimation, got people killed, or of superiors who behaved unethically. Perhaps they judge themselves for not measuring-up to their own expectations their first time in battle.

Everything can be a reminder – a passing garbage truck may stimulate olfactory memory of the smell of death, or certain perfumes of the scent used to mask it. Someone whose convoy was hit by an IED may be unable to drive over the cables used to count traffic or recoil at the sound of 4th of July fireworks. Even without such triggers, placid surroundings can be met with resentment of those who never went to war.

The threat from the enemy may have ceased, physical wounds healed, but the mental and spiritual scars of battle continue to fester and place veterans at risk of sickness, injury and even death. Without the camaraderie of those who shared their dangers and hardships, they might underestimate the ability of others to empathize or even care. Some may crave an adrenaline rush and find it through careless, potentially self-destructive behaviors, such as binge-drinking, substance abuse, driving under the influence, speeding, defiance of authority, and denial of love to their families and to themselves.

The headlines may declare the war to have ended, the troops may come home, but the devil has not signed any capitulation and continues to attack, and in some cases defeat, our warriors. Some veterans create their own hostilities, committing acts of domestic violence including murder and suicide while others succumb to divorce, joblessness and homelessness.

Various reactive measures, including interventions, may be effective in these situations, but a more proactive, pastoral approach is warranted to prevent their occurrence.

The military takes care to thoroughly equip and train its personnel before sending them in harm’s way. Since 9-11, the phenomena of Combat and Operational Stress (COS) and Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) has been matched with “stress-inoculation” and other programs designed to build resiliency long before their exposure to trauma. This includes realistic combat simulations but also the inculcation of values and skills that help them to identify dysfunction early and make them want to seek help for it. That many combat veterans, including the seriously wounded, are able to cope

This article concludes the three-part series, “The Spiritual Lives of Soldiers.” All of the articles are available in “Supplements” on the *Jacob’s Well* section of our Diocesan website: nynjoca.org.

