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The Killer Veteran – The Spiritual Implications for Veterans who Kill in War

RESEARCH

MURRAY DAVIES

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ABSTRACT

For many veterans who have been forced to make the decision to kill in war, the memory of what has happened may last far longer than the milliseconds it took to fire their rifle or launch their missile. As veterans they carry the shame and guilt of what they have done for the rest of their lives. This is a critical issue for veterans and their supporters, as Spiritual Injuries (SI) can be a significant cause of distress and discomfort and may become a major contributor to mental health issues and have negative effects on their overall well-being. In order to help practitioners work with veterans, this paper identifies the spiritual implications for veterans who kill in war. Sadly, it will be necessary to develop some understanding of the nature of killing in war and the particular circumstances of those that kill. Initially, there is be a brief literature review of some of the key material published on this topic. The overall aim is to identify the key features of killing in war. In particular, that killing is not an isolated act involving one person, but rather part of a Kill Chain. How and where personnel are placed along the chain substantially shapes the depth and nature of their spiritual need. Discussions regarding spiritual need are set within the framework of earlier work on SI and is squarely aimed at creating a list of spiritual implications as well as a redemptive process that both veterans and their supporters can use to help find peace.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Murray Davies
Wounded Spirit, AU
murray.davies62@gmail.com

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ATONEMENT

On the night of February 12, 2009, an Australian 1 Commando Regiment team, including a number of Afghan National Army personnel and Afghan interpreters, headed towards the village of Sorkh Morghab in Uruzgan Province to search for Taliban leaders. Upon arriving at the compound, they discovered no Taliban personnel in location and were ordered to move to a second compound where intelligence had also identified Taliban activity.

At this point, the 1 Commando team were engaged by the Taliban. Afghan interpreters called on them to cease fire, but the Australian soldiers subsequently returned fire with rifles and a grenade. When the enemy firing ceased, they realised there were not only a number of dead Taliban fighters in the room, but there were also women and children. Three children were dead and several badly injured. Two babies who were evacuated for medical treatment did not survive, taking the death toll to five children.

Two Australian soldiers were charged with manslaughter as a result. One of the soldiers would later go on to tell the ABC's Australian Story program:

> From the moment I realised there were dead children, I was horrified, numb, just struggling to grasp. When you realise you've killed children, devastating doesn't even begin to describe it, and I feel like I can't fix it and I can't atone for it. I can't do anything to undo the damage that was done. (Grasswill & Davis, 2016)

Atone is an interesting word to use in the present context. The soldier is acknowledging their responsibility for the incident and their inability and frustration with being unable to remediate or "fix" what has happened. Although the particular soldier's spiritual beliefs are unknown, it is not unreasonable to infer that the soldier is appealing to some greater power or entity for help to attain forgiveness. The veracity of the inference is confirmed by the choice of the word "atone." To atone is to "make amends or reparation," and is often used in the context of atonement for sin(s). (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.)

When soldiers leave the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and transition into civilian life, they will join a total veteran population in Australia which is estimated at just over 614,000 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2018.). Australia's veteran population reaches back as far as the Second World War. How many of these veterans have been placed in a situation where they have had to kill in war is unknown. However, their spiritual care falls to Faith Practitioners (authorised or accredited Ministers, Rabbis, Pastors, Priests, etc.) across the broader civilian community. In many cases (and with great respect), it is unlikely that many of these practitioners will have a deep understanding of the cultural or spiritual needs of the veteran population. This is particularly true regarding the issue of killing in war.

In order to help these practitioners in their work with veterans, the approach of this paper is to identify the spiritual implications for veterans who kill in war. Sadly, it will be necessary to develop some understanding of the nature of killing in war and the particular circumstances of those that kill. Initially, this paper takes on a brief literature review of some of the key material published on this topic. The overall aim being to identify the key features of killing in war. In particular, that killing is not an isolated act involving one person but rather part of a Kill Chain. How and where personnel are placed along the chain will substantially shape the depth and nature of their spiritual need. Discussions regarding spiritual need will be set within a largely Christian approach and against the framework of earlier work on Spiritual Injuries (SI). The argument is aimed squarely at creating a list of spiritual implications and a redemptive process that both veterans and their supporters can use to help find peace (Davies, 2020). This is a critical issue for veterans and their supporters as SI can be a significant cause of distress and become a major contributor to mental health issues and have negative effects on their overall well-being.

PUT TO THE SWORD

Killing in war is perhaps one of humankind's most universal acts. *The Bible* in Joshua 22–28 (*King James Version*, 2017) tells of a particularly violent ambush and attack upon the city of Ai (c1406 BC):

> Israel cut them down, leaving them neither survivors nor fugitives. But they took the king of Ai alive and brought him to Joshua.
>
> When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the wilderness where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword, all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it. Twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai. But Israel did carry off for themselves the livestock and plunder of this city, as the Lord had instructed Joshua.

Thousands of years later, the Battle of Solferino in 1859 was equally violent and destructive. Over 20,000 were

killed in the gruelling 9-hour battle (Tognina, 2009). The terrible single-day figure was repeated on the first day of the Somme in 1916 and across the whole of the Great War, during which nearly 10 million soldiers were killed (Forces at War Records, n.d.). In the Second World War, the death total doubled to 20 million (National WW2 Museum, n.d.). Of course, it is not just soldiers who are killed by other soldiers in war. Even with the very precise modern weapons and targeting systems that characterise information-wave warfare, it was estimated that during the 2003 Iraq War over 500,000 Iraqi civilians died (Agence French Press, 2013).

In every culture, geography, and time, soldiers have killed in war. The practise is common to all races, religions, and sexes. Throughout history it has been lamented and regretted, justified and encouraged, and even lionised and glorified. Killing in war has been captured on and in every conceivable medium from prehistoric rock art to video games. It has also been studied intensely. These studies have looked at everything from what is the motivation for soldiers to kill, and conversely why soldiers choose not to kill. There has also been exhaustive study of the mental and moral health implications of killing as well as the sheer practicalities of how to kill and how to train and lead soldiers to kill more efficiently.

One of the most famous, albeit somewhat controversial, of these studies was S. L. A. Marshal's (1968) book *The problem of battle command in future war*. In a series of subsequent works, Marshal concluded fewer than 15 to 25% of men in combat actually fired their weapons. Marshall referred to this as the "Rate of Fire" and concluded that social conditioning against killing was so strong that many soldiers could not do so even at the risk of their own lives (p. 53). The ultimate goal of Marshall's work was to make the Rate of Fire more effective through better training, control, and leadership.

Although the validity of some of his data collection methods have been challenged, Marshall's basic conclusions were similar to other studies performed in other armies. For example, in David Grossman's (1995) *On killing*, he argues that approximately 24,000 Confederate rifles were recovered from the Gettysburg battlefield still fully loaded with one of more live charges. In one case, one soldier had reloaded his weapon 23 times without firing a shot in between. Whilst these may be explained away as misfires or weapon failure or even battlefield confusion, Grossman, like Marshall, believed that it was the same factor that "prevented 80 to 85 percent of World War II soldiers from firing" – an unwillingness to kill (p. 85). At the same time, many more Confederate soldiers must have fired, as over 3,155 Union soldiers died that day (HistoryNet, n.d.).

One of the most definitive studies was conducted by Shira Maguen et al. (2009). Their study, "The impact of killing in war on mental health" examined the United States soldier during the Vietnam War. Maguen et al. used survey data which identified the percentage of male Vietnam veterans who killed an enemy combatant, civilian, and/or prisoner of war. Maguen et al. further examined the relationship between killing in war and a number of mental health and functional outcomes such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or anxiety. Those who reported killing in Vietnam displayed higher symptoms on most mental health and functional impairment measures. Killing was associated with PTSD symptoms, peritraumatic dissociation, functional impairment, and violent behaviour.

KILLING IN WAR

There are three ways of looking at killing in war. The first is lawful killing. War by its very nature is a bloody and terrible act, but it is not an excuse for the unrestrained use of force. There is a body of convention that has broad international acceptance known as the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC), which has been developed to address such issues. During the actual conduct of military operations, most forces will develop and operate under Rules of Engagement (ROE). ROE are military directives which are sanctioned by a government and are meant to direct the circumstances under which armed forces enter into and continue combat with opposing adversaries. These are carefully developed and balanced documents that undergo a tremendous amount of scrutiny before they are issued. For example, Sir Michael Wood, chief legal officer for the UK Government's ROE during the 2003 Iraq War stated to the Iraq War Inquiry (2017), a considerable number of FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) lawyers worked on various aspects of Iraq. While the emphasis changed over time, the issues included UN sanctions; enforcement of the No-fly Zones; the use of force (*jus ad bellum*); the application of the laws of war, including targeting and rules of engagement (*jus in bello*) [prior to the invasion] (p. 2).

The importance of ROE in attempting to manage killing was dramatically summed up by a Colonel of the British Army's Royal Irish Hussars in a famous pre-battle speech to his soldiers during the 2003 Iraq War. Lieutenant Colonel Tim Collins gave some sense of the difficulty of managing killing in a statement to his soldiers before the final battle in front of Basra by saying:

> The enemy should be in no doubt that we are his nemesis and that we are bringing about his rightful destruction. There are many regional commanders

> who have stains on their souls and they are stoking the fires of hell for Saddam [Hussein]. He and his forces will be destroyed by this coalition for what they have done. As they die, they will know their deeds have brought them to this place. Show them no pity.
>
> It is a big step to take another human life. It is not to be done lightly. I know of men who have taken life needlessly in other conflicts. I can assure you they live with the mark of Cain upon them. If someone surrenders to you then remember they have that right in international law and ensure that one day they go home to their family. The ones who wish to fight, well, we aim to please.
>
> If you harm the regiment or its history by over-enthusiasm in killing or in cowardice, know it is your family who will suffer. You will be shunned unless your conduct is of the highest – for your deeds will follow you down through history. We will bring shame on neither our uniform or our nation. (Collins, 2003)

The second way to look at killing in war is what the political theorist Michael Walzer (1977), in his work Just and Unjust Wars, called "extra killing." Whilst some analysts and researchers point to an unwillingness to kill, there are many stories of vicious and unnecessary killing. The recent inquiry into the ADF's Special Operations Task Group operations in Afghanistan by the Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force (IGADF), unearthed a practice of "blooding." Junior soldiers were required by their patrol commanders to shoot a prisoner in order to achieve their first kill. "Throwdowns" or planted evidence such as weapons, explosives, or radios would then be placed with the body to create a cover story for purposes of operational reporting and to deflect scrutiny. This was reinforced by an unofficial code of silence which permeated the Special Forces (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

The third way of looking at killing in war is demonic killing. In some circumstances, there is a point where the scope, scale, approach, and nature of the killing is so violent, so indiscriminate, that not only is it illegal and immoral, but it is also well beyond what might be, in any conceivable sense, military necessity. The action is also a complete breakdown of military discipline and control and often bears no resemblance to the behaviour that the perpetrators demonstrate in their civilian lives. Unfortunately, throughout the annals of military history there are numerous examples of such killing where soldiers have gone far beyond Walzer's (2015) description of extra killing.

One of the most infamous examples of a demonic killing occurred during the Vietnam War in the village of My Lai. The massacre was one of the most horrific incidents of violence committed against unarmed civilians in that conflict. A company of American soldiers brutally killed most of the people, women, children and old men, in the village of My Lai on March 16, 1968. More than 500 people were slaughtered in the massacre, including young girls and women who were also raped and mutilated before being killed (History, 2020).

Ostensibly, the action was classed as a "Reconnaissance in Force" mission by Charlie Company, First Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, and in particular, the Second Platoon under the command of Lieutenant William Calley, Jr. Their aim was to destroy a large and well-armed force of Viet Cong that had been reported in the area. The presence of such a force, or even significant weapon and supply caches, was never proven. Likewise, the veracity of the intelligence indicating the presence of Viet Cong at My Lai also came under considerable doubt. Certainly, the Viet Cong's method of operation was to blend in with the local population, although in the case of My Lai, the majority of casualties were among the young, elderly, and included pregnant women. Making the case that these people were in fact insurgents and therefore combatants would seem most unlikely. That this was a case of demonic killing is strongly suggested by the repeated cases of rape that occurred on the day. In one case, the victim was 10 years old. There had been many such cases of rape attributed to Lieutenant Calley's unit prior to My Lai. One fellow US Army officer within the battalion said that every woman his platoon encountered would be raped within moments (Levesque, 2018).

In each case, these actions were conducted by uniformed personnel initially acting under defined and authorised orders on a declared military operation. The sheer fury and ferocity of the action even in a war setting was inhuman and breached the societal, cultural, and spiritual norms of the national conscience they come from. Both examples were perpetrated by advanced First World nations with a long history of human rights, social justice, and sophisticated moral and religious beliefs. It is as though the perpetrators were no longer acting under the orders of human leadership, but rather something demonic and purely evil. Whilst there is no doubt that there is a range of psychological, sociological, and chemical reasons why people act in such a way, there also needs to be a recognition that in some circumstances and for some people, the event has occurred through malign and demonic influence.

KEY FEATURES OF KILLING IN WAR

The review of some of the literature and the above examples indicate much about the nature of killing in war. There are

several common features that seem to encompass most geographies and cultures:

THE KILL CHAIN

Killing in war not a solitary act. When the two Canadian Air Force Technicians pictured below (***Figure 1***) finish preparing the CF -188 Fighter Jet for flight, they will doubtless remove the two bright red "Remove Before Flight" tags on the missile and signify to the pilot that the missile is ready to fire. When that missile hits its target, it will cause tremendous damage and, in all likelihood, kill enemy personnel. It follows then that if the pilot is guilty of killing within war, then so too are the two technicians who loaded and prepared the missile. Their culpability being demonstrated by the removal of the two seemingly innocuous tags (see ***Figure 1***).

A person may pull a trigger to fire a rifle or push a button to launch a missile, but there is a whole chain of personnel who run down the operational and logistic chains of command who are equally involved in the background to such an action (see Appendix). Ultimately, they all bear some responsibility for the action. This is the Kill Chain. For some, the weight of responsibility can be as intense as a Rifleman who actually pulls the trigger and sees an enemy fall dead to the ground. The Kill Chain concept is not, however, an attempt to create a universal tool to spread and dilute blame. Rather, it is a tool to demonstrate that being anywhere along the chain can create issues of guilt or shame that last well beyond the date of discharge and carry into their post-combat years as a veteran. It is a common misconception that only those at the immediate point of war suffer the aftereffects of their decisions and actions.

LEADING KILLERS

If the analyses of S. L. A. Marshall (1968) and David Grossman (1995) are correct, in the vast majority of cases, soldiers do not want to kill in war and will go to great lengths to avoid doing so. Yet the statistics on deaths in war quoted above demonstrate that they do kill and in great numbers. Managing any doubt or unwillingness to kill is controlled by leadership. Military commanders at all levels are closely involved in the leadership of the troops under their command. It is their job to ensure that the assigned mission is achieved. If part of that mission involves the physical destruction of the enemy, then they are responsible for ensuring that their troops use their weapons as effectively as possible within the ROE. Of course, leadership sometimes fails. William Calley's Battalion Commander knew about the reputation of second Platoon well before and did nothing (Levesque, 2018). Likewise, the bulk of war crimes committed in Afghanistan by Australian Special Forces were by highly trained soldiers predominantly at the rank of Sergeant and below (see Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). In light of their action many people asked where were the officers (Taucher & Aszkielowicz, 2020)? Leaders at all levels will often bear a special level

Figure 1 Remove Before Flight Tags.
Note: Image copyright by Net News Ledger (2014).

of responsibility on the Kill Chain as they may be the ones whose instructions may lead to numerous deaths. The sheer weight of numbers of killing may weigh heavily on the mind of a veteran who was a combat leader.

SHOOT TO KILL

In the movie the hero will quickly draw their weapon and instinctively shoot a gun out of the enemy's hand. In reality this does not happen. Despite the huge advances in military weaponry in recent years, no weapon is that accurate even in the most highly trained hands. Consequently, soldiers have been taught since the first use of hand-held gunpowder-based weapons to "shoot for the centre of the seen mass." In other words, the largest part of the body of the opponent that can be seen is the first and primary target. Since the invention of repeating, semi-automatic, or automatic weapons, this order now comes with an additional direction, fire twice. Also sometimes referred to as a "double tap," it is not a case of extra killing or a waste of ammunition, but rather to ensure that one's enemy does not get up again and do the same. It is ingrained in soldiers from their first time on a firing range that they are to "shoot to kill."

QUICK AND SLOW

A bullet from the Australian Army's standard infantry weapon, the Austeyr F88A2, travels at 930 metres per second (mps; Australian Army, n.d.). That is similar to the US Army's M4/M4A1 at 910 mps, but faster than the basic AK-47 at 710 mps (Small Arms Survey, n.d; *Military.com*, n.d.). If the standard engagement range is 300m, that means that from the moment a trigger is pulled to the time it hits its target is approximately one third of a second. That means that one well aimed or lucky shot could take a life in less than a second. Of course, it can be much slower. Even the best weapon will miss given the noise, movement, and chaos of battle. It might be a wide miss, a recoverable wound. or a mortal wound where the victim dies slowly and painfully over a number of days or weeks or months.

In the "fog of war" the person that fired the shot may never know for certain whether they killed anyone at all. For instance, Veteran 22462 (2018) was an Australian Army officer in 2000 in Timor-Leste during its independence period. In an incident on the East-West Timor border, an Australian Army platoon shot and killed a suspected terrorist. An immediate investigation was ordered, and Veteran 22462 interviewed every member of the platoon (30) to determine what had happened. Although the subsequent investigation proved that the suspect was killed by a fragment of a bullet that could have been fired from either side, over half the platoon members were convinced and formally admitted that they had fired the fatal round.

In other cases, the person who fired the bullet or launched the missile might get an up-front close view of their death or images from a sensor that chronicle the event in graphic, millimetre detail. Slow or quick, for some of the perpetrators of these actions, the details of these events will haunt them forever. long after their service has ceased, many veterans will still be able to detail a killing event with vivid recall. In some cases, as they get older and other parts of their life, like partners or children or full-time work leave, case, or pass the memory of these events can even become stronger.

A CONSCIOUS DECISION

Whilst accidents do happen, killing in war is usually the result of a conscious decision-making process. On a practical level, every weapon has a two-stage firing process. The weapon first needs to be armed or activated either through the entry of a complex code or firing sequence, or it may be as easy as removing the safety catch on a rifle. In the second step, a trigger must be pulled, or a button pushed. In any case, at least two decisions must be made if a weapon is to be used to kill.

AN IMPERFECT DECISION

Military operations are incredibly complex undertakings. Some of the most advanced technology in the world is employed in Reconnaissance, Intelligence Surveillance, and Target Acquisition (RISTA) sensors and decision support tools. These complex RISTA tools, when combined with a vast array of weapons systems, can literally be used to kill a person on the other side of the world. Military technology is also at a point where Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS) can operate on a battlefield without any human intervention. Colloquially known as killer robots US Department of Defence Directive 3000.09 describes an AWS as "a weapon system(s) that, once activated, can select and engage targets without further intervention by a human operator" (Congressional Research Service, 2020). In such an environment, it might be easy to assume that human participation in the Kill Chain is in some way circumvented. These systems could take away the possibility of error and responsibility and as such decisions are made with perfect clarity and total precision delivery. Unfortunately, this is not true as the human presence in the Kill Chain still exists. Instead of a quartermaster issuing ammunition, there is now a technician activating the particular AWS, a programmer building an algorithm to guide a missile, and a commander somewhere authorising a strike by a remote weapon such as a drone. Killing, no matter how well supported with advanced technology, is still an imperfect decision since the Kill Chain is still controlled by imperfect humans.

IS KILLING IN WAR A SIN?

Presently understanding something about the nature of killing as a conscious act the obvious question must be asked, is killing in war a sin? The question is an important one given that many religions and belief systems hold the concept of sin as pivotal. The nature of sin is a complex issue, and one that has occupied the minds of theologians for many centuries. One initial approach is to think of sin as a two-part equation. First, there must be an act which is considered sinful in terms of the specific culture and group. For Christians the obvious one is "thou shall not kill" (King James Version, 2017, Exodus 20:13 KJV). The second part of the sin equation is forgiveness. In the opening example for the present piece, the Australian Commando seems to be seeking atonement in order to make amends for his sin of killing. Within *The Bible*, sin and forgiveness are most often discussed in unison with the sum of the equation being redemption (sin – forgiveness = redemption), spiritual wellness and a repaired relationship with God.

Questions regarding sin are always complex, passionate and often inconclusive. Killing is frequently discussed in the Old and New Testaments, and prohibitions against it are stated, restated and repeated at least 100 times in one form or another (*Open Bible*, n.d.). Having said that, war is a frequent and bloody event in *The Bible*. This contradiction has occupied some of history's greatest thinkers who have persuasively argued that killing in war is in some cases a duty to God and the state. Proponents of the argument stretch back into antiquity to include Greek and Roman thinkers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero. It also includes works by early Christian writers such as Origen, Adamantius, Lacantius, Ambrose, and Augustine along with later writers such as Thomas Aquinas, Francisco de Vitoria, and Hugo Grotius.

Following the lead of these reflections, killing in war may not be a sin if it is conducted within the strict parameters and criteria of a Just War. To St. Augustine, God regulated the occurrence and duration of wars for providential ends (Wynn, 2013, p. 233). As every aspect of human society in a polis was directed towards becoming closer to the *City of God*, Augustine believed that, "Peace should be your aim: war should be a matter of necessity so that God might free your necessity and preserve you in peace" (Augustine of Hipp, *Confessions*, n.d.). If war was necessary, then care must be taken as,

> the real evils in war are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power, and such like; and it is generally to punish these things, when force is required to inflict the punishment, that, in obedience to God or some lawful authority, good men undertake wars, when they find themselves in such a position as regards the conduct of human affairs, that right conduct requires them to act, or to make others act in this way. (Augustine of Hippo, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, n.d.)

Closely linked to the position that violence was not an individual right but the prerogative of states and princes to whom God has given the sword of government in order to punish the wicked (Romans 13:4). A few issues are important here. Augustine believed that role of the individual and the state hinged on the importance of original sin, and that God willed civil order as a means of punishing wrongdoers and restraining evil (Swift, 1983, pp. 110–111). In *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, Augustine argues that Christians need not be ashamed of protecting peace and punishing wickedness when directed to do so by a government. Accordingly, if a soldier kills in a Just War, it is not a sin, "in fact one who owes a duty of obedience to the giver of the command does not himself kill…he is an instrument, a sword in its user's hand" (Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, n.d.). Augustine reinterprets parts of the New Testament to fit with the idea of killing and sin in a Just War. For example, when commenting on Jesus' command to "turn the other cheek," Augustine says, "If I have said something wrong, then point it out, if not why do you strike me (John 18.23). Thus, he did not follow his own commandment" (*Confession*).

SPIRITUAL INJURIES

In the end, the decision on whether killing in war is a sin lies in the heart of the perpetrator and with the judgement of the Holy Spirit. From at least the human perspective, for many years Army chaplains have followed the Augustinian view when counselling soldiers on such issues. That is, the soldier owes a "duty of obedience to the giver of the command does not himself kill…he is an instrument, a sword in its user's hand" (Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, n.d.). At the same time, some veterans may feel that regardless of the fact that they were on operations governed and controlled by LOAC and appropriate ROE, following authorised and legal orders, their act of killing was a sin that pushes them beyond God's love. For example, the following impromptu exchange occurred between Australian Army Anglican Chaplain (referred to as padre) and an Australian soldier in Iraq in 2003:

> Soldier: 'Padre? Do you think that God still loves me?'
> Padre: 'Yes but why do you ask that?'
> Soldier: 'Because I had to kill two men yesterday.
> (Veteran 209–270420, 2019)

Whether the soldier still feels this way and carried such doubt into civilian life is presently unknown, but it is a good example of a SI. There are a number of important factors to notice in the exchange. Tellingly, the soldier had deliberately sought out a Faith Practitioner to ask the question. The religious affiliation of the soldier is unknown, although they specifically asked a question about what "God" thought. There is perhaps an implication of some level of acceptance of God, and perhaps some form of an already established relationship. The soldier is effectively seeking approval, forgiveness, or solace for their action as they feel that they have in some way offended, angered, or disappointed God.

There is a considerable amount of overlap between the concepts of spirituality and morality in conjunction with SI and Moral Injury (MI). MI is associated with an existential crisis, stemming from the violation of values pertaining to the sanctity of life. Bearing witness to intense human suffering during or in the aftermath of battle creates an ethical and moral challenge. These challenges cause individuals to struggle with transgressions of moral, spiritual, or religious beliefs, and afflicts them with various forms of dissonance and internal conflicts. In such a framework, harmful attributions cause guilt, shame, inability to forgive, and self-condemnation.

Note, the definition of MI includes the term "spirituality." Both MI and SI share some basic commonalities. Factors such as shame, guilt, sorrow, remorse, redemption, and the need for punishment and/or forgiveness are common. There is a natural, cooperative, and complementary relationship between MI and SI, but they are fundamentally different concepts. The difference lies in the context of the injury. MI occurs within the context of the broad norms, ethics, or morality of human society. SI occurs in the context of an individual relationship between a person and their concept of God (Davies, 2020). For some, a break in the relationship may be a significant cause of distress and discomfort, and become a major contributor to mental health issues while also having negative effects on their overall well-being.

A SI will often occur as a result of a Potential Spiritually Injurious Event (PSIE). A PSIE is a catalytic event and it occurs when an individual is in a situation, event, or incident that may or may not be within their control and causes doubt in their personal relationship with God. In the "fog of war," the nature of these events, and their subsequent effects will often blur, overlap, or collide (Davies, 2020). When a soldier kills it is a Participant PSIE. This occurs when a soldier causes a PSIE through their own action. They are the principal actors in their own SI, as they were the ones who killed or played some role in the Kill Chain. The Commando who could not atone for the death of the children, the soldier who wondered if God still loved him and the Special Forces Patrol Commander were all trapped in PSIEs of their own making. (Australian Story, 2016; Commonwealth of Australia, 2020; Veteran 270420).

SPIRITUAL IMPLICATIONS OF KILLING FOR VETERANS

It is likely that the Australian soldiers previously discussed have now been discharged from the ADF and become members of Australia's 600,000 plus veteran community (AIHW, 2018). It will ultimately fall upon Faith Practitioners, community faith and religious leaders as well as family, friends, caretakers, and the veterans themselves to heal these SI and rebuild or repair their relationships with God. Before examining the spiritual implications of killing in war, there is one essential issue that must be considered: military culture. Faith Practitioners (particularly those without a background in any of the armed services) need to understand the utter pervasiveness of that culture in the life of a veteran.

Regardless of how long a soldier served, military culture will leave an indelible mark on the attitudes and behaviour of a veteran. This is a deliberate process, as throughout history militaries have worked hard to inculcate a sense of difference for the people who have joined (or been forced to join) their organisations. Initially, it is often done to reduce the impact of individual thought or behaviour within a group so they follow orders and can share a single guided goal. The aim is to create a sense of comradeship and teamwork so that the unit fights efficiently. This is achieved and encouraged through discipline, leadership, stories, badges, uniforms, language, flags, banners, and so. All of these belong to the particular military organisation, but the individual who joins a group is given the opportunity, the honour, to wear or participate in the culture. Depending upon the particular national culture and role of the military within a given nation, this can be an exclusive and sought-after honour.

This experience does not diminish when a soldier leaves the military. In fact, it can often get more intense over time. Veterans will often wear items like ties or badges that demonstrate their allegiance and will continue to use words and language that comes from their past. Attitudes and behaviour around issues like the importance of loyalty and punctuality will also be hard to change. For civilian Faith Practitioners seeking to help veterans, these last two issues may translate into an unwillingness to discuss events that happened if they in some way are cast in a poor light.

Faith practitioners should also be conscious that some veterans will seem spiritually immature in their approaches and level of understanding. In the 2016 Australian Census,

30% of Australians claimed no affiliation or membership of any religious group or body (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). These figures are likely to be essentially the same for the Defence population, both active and veteran. As such, and for many veterans, the first time they encountered any form or organised religious or faith activity was in the service, possibly at some ceremony like a ship's naming or the concentration of regimental colours. Whilst religion is not compulsory in the ADF, it is fair to note that military chaplains do form an important part of the life and work of many units. The nature of chaplaincy in the ADF is different than it is to the broader community. Although military chaplains represent their particular faith group, the nature of their work is ecumenical, and they work with any ADF member regardless of religious affiliation.

The dominating military culture may sometimes mean that veterans face difficulties seeking help for their SIs as they lack a broader understanding of the whole faith-spirituality-religion paradigm. Additionally, as military organisations have their own language, symbols, and sense of exclusiveness, so too do churches and faith facilities. Accordingly, some veterans find it difficult or fit into a specific faith community. Finally, the complexity and depth of military culture means that some civilian Faith Practitioners will not necessarily have the depth of specific experience regarding the particular military aspects of a veterans. It can make it hard for the practitioner to relate to the veteran's experience and hard for the veteran to trust someone who "wasn't there."

The list below summarises the key points discussed so far, and is offered in order for those who seek to help veterans, or are veterans themselves, have a start point to understand how PSIE that involves killing in war may be influencing the overall health and mental well-being:

GUILT

Guilt is an old emotion and plays a key role in many of the world's religions. It is also a common consequence for trauma victims, particularly the victims of combat trauma. In studies of US Vietnam War veterans, it was noted that the survivor "of Vietnam carries within himself a special taint of war. His taint has to do with guilt evoked by death" (Opp & Samson., 1989, p. 159). Guilt is defined as "the consequence of some real or imagined violation of the conscience, as a feeling of culpability for offenses, and as regret accompanied by self-attribution" (Oxford Dictionary, n. d.). One psychiatrist has expanded this by noting that guilt is the "thought and feeling generated when a boundary set by the superego is transgressed" (Campbell, 1984, pp. 62–64). Essentially, guilt is regret over the soldier's involvement in a killing event which has established a feeling of personal responsibility and generates powerful self-condemning thoughts." Subject 209–270420's question "Does God still love me?" seems to be predicated on some teaching or experience that reinforced Biblical precepts such as "Thou shalt not kill." The soldier seems to suffer guilt over breaking a "Commandment."

Guilt can be a particularly condemning consequence if it either cannot be expressed in a healthy manner, or if the soldier rejects social support, giving way to feelings of helplessness and isolation. A 2010 paper in the Journal of Traumatic Stress demonstrates some of the potential dangers of such guilt. US Department of Veterans Affairs researchers studied 2,797 US soldiers returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom. Some 40% of them reported killing or being responsible for killing during their deployment (Maguen et al., 2010, p. 86). Even after controlling for combat exposure, killing was a significant predictor of PTSD, alcohol abuse, anger, relationship problems, and suicide risk (Sites, 2014).

SHAME

Shame and guilt are similar conditions in many respects but are different as they relate to issues within the psyche. "Shame results from a failure to live up to certain internalised standards of behaviour" (Singer, 2004, p. 380) This is often described as either "internal shame" where the individual is devaluing themselves in their own eyes against the norms of the group or "external shame," which is linked to a perception that others look down on the individual and see them as inferior or inadequate in some way (Fry, 2016, p. 22). "Divine shame" concerns the relationship that the individual has with God and may present itself in one of two ways. The first is because of their behaviour, the act of killing itself. Accordingly, they believe their relationship with God is broken or over, as how could a kind and all-loving creator possibly love someone who has been so "bad?" God is ashamed of them because of what they did or because of how they feel about it. This last aspect is also related to what Dave Grossman (year) calls "survivor euphoria." It refers to the concept of an individual that committed the act of killing is happy at being alive themselves and such happiness is inseparable from the death of the other person. But the soldier might then ask a troubling question: "I just killed and I am happy about it. Does that mean I like killing" (Public Broadcasting Service, n.d.)?

The second presentation may be the reverse if that soldier is ashamed of believing in a God who was not present and did not intervene at a time when they needed help and guidance or control over their actions. Many members of the ADF have no affiliation to a religion or faith group. There are many reasons for this and most individuals within the ADF see this as a personal matter. A small group, however, feel the need to be more public in their atheism, and will often half-jokingly refer to the concept of a God or Creator figure with such terms as "the sky fairy" and those who

profess a faith as "God botherers" or "born agains." An even smaller element within the group may also feel the need to ridicule or harass those with a faith out of a sense of what they think as funny or perhaps a more malign influence. When a soldier with an existing faith is involved in a killing, childish and seemingly comic, and often repeated taunts such as "so where is your Messiah now?" (American Film Industry, 2012) may have a disproportionate effect. In the chaos and confusion following a Kill Chain event, an individual may feel that they have made a mistake in their belief system and been shown to be foolish. In this case, the break in the relationship with God can have significant self-esteem issues.

FAILURE

Closely linked to the idea that an individual may feel that an omnipotent God could have stopped them from being in a particular situation. For example, on 22 April 1995, a United Nations team, composed largely of Australian Army medical personnel, was providing aid to the refugee population of a large camp at Kibeho in southern Rwanda. That morning, Rwandan People's Army soldiers entered the camp and began to indiscriminately shoot at refugees. Australian troops were ordered not to return fire for fear of trapping the refugees in a deadly crossfire. Over 4,200 refugees were killed. One Australian medic remembered thinking to himself during the event, "Why were we not allowed to fire our weapons to defend these poor refugees? God, I hope I live through this" (Pickard, 2010, p. 11). This PSIE is a demonstration of an event where neither the tactical situation nor the orders given allowed for the soldier to kill. The language used by the soldier has elements of both a plea for protection and a heartfelt question about why they could not react. Although the order provided to the soldiers was tactically correct, seeing such a situation as the work as the hand of a benevolent God at work would be hard. As one US veteran from the Vietnam War later wrote, "I cannot believe in a God who would permit what I have just lived through" (Klay, 2017).

PUNISHMENT

For the first time ever in Australian military history, a number of soldiers at present are facing the real prospect of both civil and military charges being laid as a result of the IGADF's inquiry into Special Forces activities in Afghanistan (McGowan, 2020). These killings may lead to significant periods of incarceration for some soldiers. For some veterans, there is a natural assumption that the sin equation discussed earlier is actually a three-part equation, sin + punishment – forgiveness = redemption.

The possibility of divine punishment, let alone that of the courts, will often stop veterans who have killed in war from reaching out for help with their SI. Some veterans will assume that Faith Practitioners will merely seek to condemn them and promise an eternity of continued pain. A deeper understanding of scripture shows that punishment is not on the agenda of a loving God. Rather, Christians at least believe that the sins of the world were removed when Christ died upon the cross and with that "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). In this sense, the role of the Faith Practitioner is to help the veteran understand the nature of their actions and where they fall within a broader spiritual perspective and to provide that most desirable of all conditions, hope. This will change the nature of the equation to its correct state: sin – hope – forgiveness = redemption.

REDEMPTION

Redemption is a complex equation with many different variables to include, and solving it requires active leadership from Faith Practitioners who have an understanding of military culture and support from allied professionals such as doctors, psychologists, counsellors, as well as those with a meaningful understanding of MI. Ultimately, from the spiritual perspective, there is one clear goal, a redemptive process that both veterans and their supporters can use to help find peace.

Atonement is an essential part of redemption. Atonement is the ancient religious act of cleansing impurity, thus laying the way open for people to return to the community. Throughout the *Old Testament* the process usually occurs with the shedding of the blood of an animal whose innocence renders the repentant sinner innocent as well (Leviticus 1:4–5 and 17:11). Few religious cultures still require ritual slaughter of animals to facilitate atonement, although the essential concept remains. The general idea is that a person taking action to correct previous wrongdoing on their part, either through direct action to undo the consequences of that act, equivalent action to do good for others, or some other expression of feelings of remorse. This is an area where Faith Practitioners can play an important and practical role in helping veterans with their SI.

Many religions and faith groups have their own practices and rites to guide the atonement process. Where there is no rite appropriate to a veteran's circumstances, something such as the following Veteran's Atonement Drill might be appropriate:

STEP 1 – UNDERSTANDING THE SIN

In this first step, the Faith Practitioner working with the veteran needs to help the veteran develop a clear understanding of what happened and precisely what had been the role of the veteran was. To start, it is important to understand whether the killing could be considered legal,

extra, or demonic. Also, where their action occurred along the Kill Chain. The aim here is to honestly determine the level of a given veteran's guilt.

STEP 2 – ACKNOWLEDGE THE IMPACT

Such acknowledgement has two different aspects. The first is to develop a statement of what occurred and as much as possible, begin to outline how the deeper effects of the killing may have affected the victim's family, tribe, or group. The second is to determine what impact it had on the veteran. It might be phrased as simply as a result of this incident I cannot sleep/bear the guilt/interact with my family/and so on.

STEP 3 – OWN THE GUILT

Once the incident is more than roughly understood, it is necessary to make a clear confession to God of what happened.

STEP 4 – ACTS OF GRACE

It may be impossible for the veteran to take direct action to undo the consequences of that act. If the veteran has committed an illegal act, the Faith Practitioner must encourage them to report the incident to the appropriate legal authorities. If this is not necessary, there needs to be an opportunity for the veteran to start to explore some equivalent action of performing service for others. There are no shortages of charities or organisations who help the veteran community (over 3,475 ex-service organisations in Australia alone; Aspen Foundation, n.d.) and who could benefit from the skills veterans have.

FORGIVENESS

The final step before redemption is achieved is forgiveness. It can be described in its simplest form as the act of deliberately forgetting. In Isaiah, God says, "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions, for My own sake, and remember your sins no more" (43:25). Ezekiel says, "none of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them" (18:22). Within a Christian setting, forgiveness has already been fully granted through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

The challenges that veterans who have killed in war will face are either the feeling as if they are not deserving of forgiveness, it or that it does not apply to their own particular circumstances. The answer to these objections lies in the concept of authority. Every military organisation, past and present, is essentially a hierarchy. A General/ Admiral/ Centurion/Prince or leader commands and those who follow are comprised of a larger group of legionaries, soldiers, sailors, or airmen/women. This is as true for a Roman Legion in Gaul 55 BC as it was for an Australian Infantry Battalion in Iraq 2003 AD. In all circumstances, the order of the leader was conveyed down the chain of command to the troops. Military personnel are trained to accept orders without question. If Caesar made an order which was subsequently delivered by a Centurion to a Legionary, then that was still Caesar's order.

The same paradigm applies today in terms of accepting forgiveness. If a veteran has approached something like the Veterans Atonement Drill with an honest and open heart, been led by Faith Practitioners with support from allied professionals such as doctors, psychologists, or counsellors then it is part of a process of forgiveness. Once such has been sought and issued within the tenants of the religious or faith doctrine of a group, it carries the seal of legitimacy. Of course, like all orders, it needs to be monitored, followed, encouraged and assisted in its execution. Regardless of when the veteran left the service, they remain under orders and are forgiven. Whilst it may seem a trite and convenient approach, it fits with both military culture and provides a strong framework to which the veteran can relate.

STAND DOWN

The expression *stand down* refers to an order which is given to military personnel to direct them to stop the fight, withdraw from their assigned position and to rest. Not all veterans who have killed in war will find such a proposition a difficult course to follow. As such, they may well feel their actions were regrettable, but necessary and justified in their application of the LOAC and ROE. They may even feel a sense of euphoria that although they have killed another human being, they themselves remain alive.

For others, standing down might not be as easy, and the memory of what took place may last far longer than the milliseconds it took to fire their rifle or launch their missile. As veterans, they carry the shame and guilt of what they have done for the rest of their lives. Redemption requires the active leadership of Faith Practitioners who have an understanding of military culture. Its healing also needs to be communicated by trained and accredited allied professionals such as doctors, psychologists, counsellors and those with a deep and meaningful understanding of MI. Ultimately, from the spiritual perspective there is one clear goal, a redemptive process that both veterans and their supporters can use to help find peace.

In order to help these faith practitioners in their work with veterans, they must develop an understanding of a subject that may well be way outside of their apparent calling, that of killing in war. Killing is not an isolated act involving

one person, but rather part of a Kill Chain. How and where personnel are placed along the chain will substantially shape the depth and nature of their spiritual need and SI. By understanding the scope of the potential spiritual implications of killing in war, Faith Practitioners can be part of a process to implement a redemptive process that both veterans and their supporters can use to help find peace.

APPENDIX: KILL CHAIN EXAMPLES

Scenario

Rifleman X, acting under legitimate orders given by an authorised authority within the appropriate guidance of LOAC and by direction of the approved ROE shoots and kills an enemy soldier. Although Rifleman X has pulled the trigger of his weapon with the clear intent of killing the enemy the links in the logistic and operational chains may include hundreds of people. For example:

Logistic Chain

- Manufacturer of the ammunition
- Storage and Supply personnel issue ammunition
- Transport and supply personnel who move point of entry in area move ammunition
- Transport and supply personnel who move point of entry in area move ammunition to Battalion
- Battalion Supply staff who move ammunition to Company
- Company staff who move ammunition to Platoon Area
- Platoon Sergeant who issues
- ammunition to Rifleman X
- Riflemen X fires

Operational Chain

- Operational Area Commander HQ that plans and initiates the operation based on supporting intelligence
- Tactical Local or Regional area commander that plans and initiates operation based on supporting intelligence
- Battalion Commanding Officer that issues orders based on supporting intelligence
- Company Officer Commanding that issues orders
- Platoon Commander that issues orders
- Section Commander who issues orders to Rifleman X
- Rifleman X fires

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Murray Davies *orcid.org/0000-0001-9254-0802*
Wounded Spirit, AU

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