



The Guilty Veteran: The Spiritual Implications of Veteran's Guilt

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ABSTRACT

Guilt is a very old and powerful force in humanity that crosses most boundaries of culture and religion. Feeling guilty or fearing pronouncement of guilt can significantly influence a veteran's mental health. It can be manifested in several ways, including flashbacks, terrifyingly vivid dreams, and startle responses, all of which blur distinctions between past and present realities. It also has a powerful spiritual dimension and the relationship between guilt-sin-punishment-redemption is a feature of many religions and faith groups. This paper seeks to outline the spiritual implications of guilt for veterans and their families. To achieve this, it will be necessary to initially understand guilt in both a general and spiritual sense. From this basis, the potential sources of guilt can be examined, and then critical spiritual implications can be understood. Management of veterans and their families with guilt issues must always be a collaborative effort, undertaking trained and accredited professionals in all of these areas.

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A PICTURE OF GUILT

At first glance, **Figure 1** (below) seems to be a perfectly happy picture: A joyous gathering of a large extended family in the comfortable middle-class Sydney suburb of Haberfield, where they celebrate the long-awaited return of a much-loved family member from the Great War. Second Lieutenant Horace Milton Garling (seated second row, front right), known to the family as “Chump,” is pictured on the front steps of his parent’s home in April 1919, surrounded by his family and friends. He had left his home in 1915 and served in a medical role as a lieutenant attached to the 5th Machinegun Battalion. Despite having seen some of the worst fighting of the war at the Somme, Passchendaele, and Messines, he appears to have survived with little more than a mild case of pneumonia (*Daily Telegraph*, 2020). The rest of his life seems to have been fairly ordinary; he married in 1921, fathered a son, and died in 1964 at the age of 70 (Family Search, n.d.).

Whilst this picture (see **Figure 1**) is a display of happiness and relief, it is also a picture of guilt: Garling’s guilt for having survived the war and returned when so many did not. That guilt would no doubt surface with alarming regularity on ANZAC day remembrances and at battalion reunions, a guilt for things he did or did not do.¹ As a medic, Garling may have felt that he did not do enough for the men of

his battalion. Typically, machine gun battalions during the Great War suffered very high casualty rates due to their often-exposed positions and proximity to the enemy (Larkins, 2014). Noting that religious affiliation and church attendance in Australia was much higher during this period (over 90%) than it is currently (61%), religion and spiritual issues may also have played a significant factor (Australian Government, *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, Part VI: Religions*, ABS 1921 and Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013).

Veteran’s guilt is also familial. Whilst Garling’s family and friends would have been happy at his return, they may have also experienced guilt that their family member returned to them safely while so many of their neighbours in Haberfield lost their relatives and friends. This may have lived on every time they saw a family member or neighbour wearing black.

Guilt can have a significant influence on veterans, ranging across any number of religious or spiritual disciplines. It is a very old and powerful force in humanity, which crosses most boundaries of culture and religion, and research has noted that the influence of guilt based on a negative spiritual basis is, “harmful to the trajectory of mental health diagnoses” (Johnson, 2009, p. 60). From a psychological perspective, a study in the *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* found that guilt was a significant predictor of the



Figure 1 The Garling Family – Sydney 1919.

Note: Image copyright *Daily Telegraph* 2020.

severity of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among US veterans and military members (Cunningham et al., 2017, para. 2). Feeling guilty or fearing pronouncement of guilt can significantly influence a veteran's mental health. It can be manifested in flashbacks, terrifyingly vivid dreams, and startle responses, all which blur distinctions between past and present realities (Singer, 2004, p. 377). Because of these findings, guilt is considered a core symptom of what is called Moral Injury (Hodgson & Carey, 2017, para 8; Jinkerson, 2016, para. 27).

Whilst guilt is a key factor in MI, it also plays a critical role in a Spiritual Injury (SI). There is a natural overlap in many areas of MI and SI. The critical point is that SI is related to the one-to-one relationship of an individual to God, while MI is related to the relationship an individual to the morals, laws, and ethics of a society, culture, or group.

In order to explore this further and to assist those who seek to work with veterans, this paper will outline the implications of guilt for veterans and their families. It will also pay particular focus to the spiritual aspects of guilt. Initially, it will be important to understand guilt in both a general and spiritual sense. From this basis, the potential sources of guilt can be examined and then critical implications understood.

GUILT

Participant "Veteran 210121," was a young Australian Army combat engineer serving in Afghanistan. His role was to support local Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) teams in rendering safe Improvised Explosive Devices (IED). Shortly after his arrival in Afghanistan, he became concerned about how the teams would react when they encountered IEDs. Often, they would remove or tamper with the device before trained Explosive Ordnance Demolition (EOD) personnel could arrive. On one occasion, one of these teams removed a live device to present it to him for inspection. Not surprisingly, this was a very dangerous practice which could have had serious consequences for all.

In response to this incident, Veteran 210121 directed future ANP and ANA teams to leave an IED in place and report its location to him, after which he would despatch a team to deal with the IED. Shortly after this order had been issued, an ANP team encountered a device and duly reported its location to him. Veteran 210121 recounts the experience:

I told them to wait. I wanted to properly brief my team and give orders prior to leaving the FOB (Forward Operating Base). By the time we were

ready to respond, it was too late. The ANA had tinkered with the device and it had exploded. I felt somewhat responsible for preventing the local forces from employing their own risk mitigation procedures and then not reacting fast enough to the reports. Our US partners were extremely vocal about the incident and how I could have done more to prevent the deaths. Images of the bodies, amputated limbs and decapitations were paraded in front of me after the US team had conducted the post-blast assessment and clean-up. Although I could rationalise my decision and felt justified in exercising caution, I still feel guilty that this incident occurred.

Tactically, the actions of Veteran 210121 seem correct, yet he still felt guilty due to the multiple deaths and wounds that his actions caused. Of course, this guilt was only increased by the inexplicable actions of the US partners who chose to pass the images of the victims in front of him as a display of his failure. This event demonstrates two concepts about guilt and its application and effect. The first point is that doing the right thing does not necessarily protect a veteran from guilt, as the damage caused and the implications of the event may consume any justification of the tactually correct action. The other point is that other parties have an influence in the way a veteran perceives guilt. In some cases, this may even include parties or individuals who were not even physically involved in the guilt-rendering event.

The American Psychological Association (APA; n.d.) defines "guilt" as "a self-conscious emotion characterized by a painful appraisal of having done (or thought) something that is wrong and often by a readiness to take action designed to undo or mitigate this wrong" (para. 1). Within this definition, the word "emotion" implies that the perception of guilt may not be necessarily based on what an individual actually did, but rather on a feeling or personal interpretation of what they *thought* they did. Whilst the nature of the guilt is conceptualized as remorse, regret, or self-condemnation in this way, it is most often linked to an event (Kopacz et al., 2014, p. 3). "Wrong" is a subjective term, although it indicates that the action or event judged in some way and found to disagree with the standards of an individual, a belief system, or a community. A "painful appraisal" seems to indicate that the perpetrator themselves takes pause to think deeply about the event. Furthermore, thinking deeply about guilt is also "an uncomfortable, even viscerally disturbing condition" (Tilghman-Osborne et al., 2010, p. 469). There is also a sense that guilt as a state is temporary, as there is a readiness to take action toward correcting the situation.

GUILT AND PUNISHMENT

Joanna Bourke's (1999) work includes the memoir of a Royal Air Force (RAF) pilot who shot down a German plane during the Battle of Britain. Immediately after this had occurred, the pilot's plane was engaged by another German fighter. The RAF pilot remembered thinking, "They saw me do it! They saw me shoot him down! Saw him crash, now they are going to kill me for it!" (p. 223)

"Guilt" and "punishment" are often used in the same sentence. This seems to be true across legal, moral, ethical, and spiritual areas. For example, for the first time in Australian military history, 15 soldiers are facing the very real prospect of both civil and military disciplinary charges for war crimes, including torture and illegal killing, being laid as a result of the inquiry into Special Forces activities in Afghanistan (Knaus, 2020). If found guilty, these killings may lead to significant punishments in the form of incarceration for the soldiers. At one point, the event might have led to the removal of the unit's Meritorious Conduct Citation award (Callinan & Knaus, 2020, para. 1).

This is currently a topic of passionate debate within the Australian veteran community, as many are asking how these soldiers (including a Victoria Cross medal winner) could be found guilty of killing in war (Dillion, 2020). Ultimately, the end of this debate will be won not on the battlefield, but in court. A legal decision will be made, though such an intense process of judging guilt and assigning punishment may have to wait for many years. For example, the alleged events in Afghanistan are thought to have happened between 2007 and 2013, and many of the alleged perpetrators have resigned since then. For many veterans, this type of circumstance creates the concern as to whether their actions in the past may also be questioned. Another example of this was evident in the proceedings brought against former British soldiers in 2019 who had allegedly committed crimes during the Bloody Sunday Riots in Northern Ireland in 1972 (Graham, 2021, para. 2). Living with the fear of guilt is a terrible burden some veterans live with for years even if they are not actually guilty of anything (Caprara, et al., 1992, p. 159).

Guilt and punishment are also closely linked when judgement is applied by peers. Any military organisation is first and foremost a subculture unto itself. This is particularly true when soldiers are deployed on operations. Deployment follows months or even years of training and inculcation into the specific language, approaches, techniques, and rituals of their unit. Soldiers will often develop incredibly strong relationships with their peers. As one Australian veteran of Afghanistan noted, "You think, 'Well, things are getting pretty hairy, I don't know if I'll get through this,' and the only comfort you've got is the bloke standing next

to you and he is doing the exact same thing." The same veteran added, "I know the men next to me, they cared for me more than they cared for their families back home" (Lopez, 2015). In such intense circumstances, the most grievous guilt-rendering act is to let down your peers. To do so would incur, as a Special Air Service veteran of the same war noted, a fate, "worse than death you don't let your mates down" (Nelson, 2016).² Such external shame can be so intense that it lasts a lifetime.

CAUSES OF GUILT

If guilt relates to an "appraisal of having done (or thought) something that is wrong" (APA, n.d.), there are several situations that veterans may encounter during their careers that may lead to this appraisal. Perhaps the most obvious yet complicated source is the issue of killing in war. Killing in war is possibly one of humankind's most universal acts. In every culture, geography, and time, soldiers have killed in war. The practise is common to all races, religions, and sexes (Fry, 2008, para 2). Throughout history, it has been regretted, justified, encouraged, and even glorified. At the same time, no society accepts that killing is morally or spiritually acceptable, and most modern military organisations seek to make a distinction in the use of deadly force as a controlled, state-sanctioned tool.

Alongside its universality, the taking of a human life is also one of humankind's most reviled acts. Many veterans, despite having political, religious, or moral justifications, still find the act of killing a major source of guilt, though killing in war is rarely a solitary act. A soldier may pull a trigger to fire a rifle or push a button to launch a missile, but there is a whole operational and logistical chain of command that is equally involved in the background to such an action. Ultimately, they all bear some responsibility for the action. This is referred to as the "kill chain" (Davies, 2020).

Another common source of guilt suffered by veterans is when they survive or pass through a traumatic event, but their peers or colleagues do not. Because there is a randomness and unpredictability of events, the idea causes the survivor to realize how easily they could have been the victim instead. This is called "survivor guilt," and it is by no means a new condition. Jonathan Shay, (2003), reflected upon Achilles's guilt at the death of his friend *Pátoklos* during the Trojan War. Achilles said, "I could not help my friend in his extremity ... He needed me to shield him or to parry the death stroke. Here I sit, my weight a useless burden to the earth" (Shay, 2003, pp. 69–70). Shay said Achilles's feelings are bound up in the intense bond some soldiers share. In a very real sense, Achilles felt that *Pátoklos* was a *therapon*, or substitute/stand-in, and that

Achilles should have died instead. As such, the death of Pátoklos was a wrongful one, an unintended substitution (p. 70). In a more colourful example, Shay also discussed a US Army Sergeant who was tortured by guilt over the death of a friend who said, “when he needed me, I wasn’t there.... I should have taken the ***** round myself!” (p. 69)

Another cause relates to being willing and able to deploy, but not being given the opportunity or clearance to do so. This is referred to as a Denial Potential Spiritual Injurious Event (PSIE; Davies, 2020). While deploying to a war zone is not the only mark of a veteran, *not* deploying can be a source of discomfort and guilt for many soldiers. Australian Army personnel spend considerable time training for wartime roles, but some never get an opportunity to practice these skills. This is a very real frustration, as it plays directly into the professional self-image personnel have of themselves and their military capabilities. One of the strengths of military culture is the cohesion which is formed through stories of previous operational events. Some soldiers may feel they are denied their opportunity to be part of this story, and they may see the exclusion as a punishment.

A veteran can feel as though their service did not “count,” as it was not spent in a harmful and presumably foreign environment. In some cases, the military tends to propagate this idea, as campaign medals are usually awarded for a specific location and period. Thus, even if a member served in a home base location supporting a particular operation while they are still legally considered a veteran, they will not receive the relevant campaign medal and may not consider themselves as veterans.

Guilt does not start or stop at a particular rank level. There does seem to be an assumption that leaders do not suffer from a “painful appraisal of having done (or thought) something that is wrong” (APA, n.d., para. 1). This is possibly because military leaders want to project an image of strength, control, and confidence. Accordingly, guilt is a luxury they cannot afford if they are to make difficult decisions. Statements such as, “I still feel guilty that this incident occurred,” from Veteran 210121 would indicate otherwise. Rather than a self-indulgent luxury, guilt is an unavoidable consequence of leadership in war or conflict.

A strong example of this is provided in Major General John Cantwell’s book *Exit Wounds* (2012). General Cantwell is a 38-year veteran of the Australian Army. He served in the Gulf War from 1990 to 1991 as a tank squadron commander, and then again in Iraq in 2006 as the Director of Strategic Operations, Headquarters Multi-National Forces. In 2010, he became the Commander of Australian Forces in the Middle East Area of Operations. It is an impressive leadership record by any standard. *The Sydney*

Morning Herald would agree, as it speaks highly of Cantwell in its 2012 review of *Exit Wounds*:

devoted to the death, or deaths, of young Australians under his command, and therefore under his care. He speaks to each dead young soldier in his coffin. Guilt and remorse are piled upon nightmare and depression. (Windsor, 2012, para. 6)

Cantwell did indeed visit the open coffins of every Australian soldier that was to be sent home from Afghanistan (Henderson, 2012, para. 3). *Exit Wounds* is an honest, brave, and raw exposition of leadership guilt by a senior operational leader. He discusses his mental health journey, including the times he spent in a psychiatric ward. The following description by Cantwell (2012) speaks volumes about the influence guilt upon veterans who were leaders:

When the guilt reduces me to tears, or when the anger blinds me to the hurtful things I say, or when I convulse in fear at the slamming of a door, the real me – the thinking person who has led soldiers in battle and managed the most complex problems – watches aghast at the blubbing, twitching, confused fool I have become. I’m a mess. (pp. 343–345)

The word guilt is peppered consistently throughout *Exit Wounds*. Cantwell (2012) is not afraid to describe his struggles in intimate detail, and he very clearly assumes the responsibility for the death of his soldiers on his shoulders. The reality of the war in Afghanistan was very much a tactical war fought at section or squad-level, often well of the sight, command, or control of superior headquarters such as those where Cantwell operated. His command, Joint Task Force 633, did not directly run the operational battle but was a national contingent headquarters. The Coalition land battle was managed by other headquarters. Therefore, there is a very reasonable and entirely legitimate argument that Cantwell should not have claimed any responsibility whatsoever for the death of his soldiers.

Herein lies an inherent challenge of military leadership. Whilst there may be many such arguments, the ruling and absolute paradigm which has been reinforced throughout the centuries of international military tradition is that the leader is responsible for their soldiers at every level of their command. This responsibility does not cease when a leader retires. In many cases, including those of the Australian Army, an officer’s Commission or instrument of appointment is for life. Thus, for some leaders, guilt may seem endless.

The idea of endless guilt is what Milton (1674) described in *Paradise Lost* as “torture without end” (Poetry Foundation, n.d.)—the cruellest possible fate for a veteran. At the same time, there is hope that it can be the basis of something positive. One writer has even gone so far as to suggest that “for certain patients, expressing the guilt-laden wish to die is tantamount to expressing remorse for their crimes” (Singer, 2004, p. 378). From this point, the therapist can commence the process of moving forward as the “paradox, (of) feeling unforgivable, including the wish to die, may be essential to the wish to live” (Singer, 2004, p. 378). Another less confrontational approach is laid out by Sherman (2010):

Guilt is an important sign of the soldier’s humanity, and something admirable.... it moves people who hear expressions of guilt to feel moved, morally moved, by those who show it. In the case of the soldier, guilt is often a testament to an understanding of accountability in the use of lethal force. (p. 91)

SPIRITUAL IMPLICATIONS OF GUILT

As previously indicated, guilt is a core symptom of MI. Kopacz et al. (2014) noted that “spiritual and pastoral care (SPC) providers have always held a stake in supporting those affected by the sense of burden, distress, or struggle encapsulated in MI” (p. 3). Indeed, the most common definitions and descriptions of MI include spirituality. For example, Sonya Norman and Brett Litz (n.d.) describe MI for the US Veterans Administration:

[MI is] a construct that describes extreme and unprecedented life experience, including the harmful aftermath of exposure to such events. Events are considered morally injurious if they “transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (referred to as Potential Morally Injurious Events – PMIEs). Thus, the key precondition for moral injury is an act of transgression, which shatters moral and ethical expectations that are rooted in religious or spiritual beliefs (author’s emphasis), or culture-based, organizational, and group-based rules about fairness, the value of life, and so forth.

Although spirituality is a component of MI, there may be situations where the type of injury, the circumstances of the event, and the attitude of the individuals involved leans more toward the spiritual. The key pivot is the individual’s relationship to the concept of God, or “a spirit

or being believed to control some part of the universe or life and often worshipped for doing so, or something that represents this spirit or being” (Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d.). If an individual feels the event is God-centred, they may be suffering from a Spiritual Injury (SI). An individual suffering from SI may feel that God will judge them as guilty for their actions, or that God is the guilty one for causing the action to occur in the first place. As an example of this, an Australian Army Chaplain tells of dealing with many logistic personnel, both in and out of theatres, whose vital roles in particular areas or functions meant they could not deploy or could deploy only to soft areas. When the Australian Army logistician (Participant “Veteran 210–270618”) was told “thank you for your service” by a well-meaning civilian, he replied, “God didn’t let me serve, so don’t thank me.”

MI and SI are not mutually exclusive, and there is a natural overlap in many areas. An individual may commit an act for which they feel spiritual guilt but no moral guilt, and vice versa. As such, they can also exist in separate states. The critical point is that SI is related to the one-to-one relationship of an individual to God, whereas MI is related to the relationship an individual has to the morals, laws, and ethics of society, a culture, or a group.

When this spirituality is expressed within a religious setting, most faiths have a rich language and dogma when it comes to guilt. In Exodus 34:7, we hear that the Lord “does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation” (King James Version, 2017). Similarly, the Quran states that “Allah loveth not the impious and guilty (I-Baqara, Chapter 2, Verse 276), and the Hindu Vedas proclaim, “Let me not suffer for the guilt of others!” (Himalayan Academy, n.d.). It is interesting to note in all three examples, there is a real sense of guilt as a feeling that is to be feared and dreaded. It also has a powerful spiritual dimension and the relationship between guilt-sin-punishment-redemption is a feature of many religions and faith groups.

If guilt is seen as SI, it can also be adaptive. A response to a transgression might motivate the person to take reparative action (e.g., going to confession, asking God for forgiveness), and this may then relieve the distress associated with feelings of guilt and a stronger conceptualisation of other aspects of the person’s life (Varghese, 2015, p. 578).

MANAGING VETERAN GUILT

Most religions also have mechanisms for managing guilt. The Hebrew Bible describes various forms of guilt offerings that were mandated as redemption for various sins. For example, Leviticus 7:2 directs, “The guilt offering (typically livestock such as sheep or goats) is to be slaughtered in the

place where the burnt offering is slaughtered, and its blood is to be splashed against the sides of the altar” (King James Version, 2017). In a less bloody approach, the *Bhagavad Gita* has useful guidance to dealing with guilt. The popular commentator Sri Vishwanath describes a process of dissolving guilt:

Guilt is nothing more than a transformation in the heart of your consciousness. Learn to dissolve it. (Vishwanath, n.d.)

Forgiveness of guilt and sin in the *Quran* is discussed in detail at Surah 9 with the *At-Tawba*, or “The Repentance.” The *Quran* asks those who are guilty of sin to become repentant, seek Allah’s forgiveness, and make a sincere *tawba* (prayer of repentance) (Nasr, 2015, p. 503). In the Bible,

1 John 1:9 states that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (King James Version, 2017). More specifically for veterans, there is also a range of ecumenical spiritual tools, such as the “Atonement Drill,” that can be used (Davies, 2021, para. 60).

An important perspective on the provision of any approach to manage guilt is provided by Padre Gary Stone. Stone is the President of Veterans Care Association, an Australian charity working with veterans who are suffering due to their service. Padre Stone (2021) noted:

The strongest need and desire that veterans have expressed to me and our team has been their need for forgiveness – to forgive themselves, to forgive other people, and to let the haunting memories of the past go behind them. Without forgiveness and letting go thoughts and memories continue to torture them.

So important is this healing of unforgiveness or guilt, that on all of our programs we explore and discuss this issue and invite all veterans to participate in some practical activity of forgiveness. For some this might take the form of a sacramental religious rite of reconciliation for others it might involve making a phone call or writing a letter to a person with whom they need reconciliation. All veterans find this action of letting go to be a liberating experience in their lives particularly when they have carried burdens for many years and harboured resentment that has simply eating away at their soul. (Personal Correspondence, April 2021).

Regardless of whether a spiritual guilt issue or event has a stronger SI or MI basis, any approach to managing guilt needs to be cognisant of several critical factors to ensure that they resonate with the circumstances and needs of veterans.

MULTI-DISCIPLINARY

Any significant incident that occurs in an operational circumstance will be a complicated mix of physical, cultural, emotional, moral, mental, and spiritual issues. It will often occur in the most tumultuous and catastrophic circumstances. It is therefore unlikely that it will relate to a single factor, but rather a confusing blend of issues which will also change over time. For example, mental health or SIs may not emerge as major challenges until after a serious physical wound has healed. For some veterans, these issues may not arise for many years after they leave uniformed service. The critical observation that can be drawn from this statement is that the management of guilt issues in veterans will be a multi-disciplinary activity involving spiritual, moral, and medical professionals.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL

In the museum of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, there is a small bronze statuette of a Babylonian god with four different faces on the head. It is dated from approximately the 18th or 17th century B.C. and was found near Ishchali (ancient Nêribtum) in Iraq. Each unique face represents a different emotion as well as each direction from which the wind blows (Oriental Institute, 2021). This is a useful way of thinking about how guilt presents itself in veterans (see *Figure 2* below). The first face looks backwards to what a veteran *did*. It relates to an actual event or circumstance that occurred in which the veteran failed to do the right thing and was found guilty by some external and impartial group. The second face of guilt is what the veteran *thought*. It also relates to an actual event but in this case, the veteran acted as their own judge and determined that they did the wrong thing. Often there is not a reasonable basis for this assessment, which is referred to as false guilt (Bonura, n.d., para. 5). Nevertheless, the veteran suffers from very real feelings of guilt. The third face of guilt is similar, but in this case, relates to what the veteran *should have done* during the event. This is often vocalised as statements of regret for actions not taken or completed. The final face looks forward to what the veteran feels they *might do* if placed in a similar situation in the future. This is pre-emptive guilt and may be seen in statements such as: “I just killed and I am happy about it. Does that mean I like killing?” and “because I failed to do my duty, then I will fail again” (Public Broadcasting Service, n.d.).



Figure 2 Four Faces of Guilt.

Note: Image copyright Imperial War Museum.

FAMILIAL GUILT

The family of a veteran is not immune to the impact and influence of spiritual guilt.

Veteran 20210503 was an Australian Army medic who was deployed on a number of overseas missions (Personal Communication, 2021). After their return from another deployment, their partner killed themselves. This veteran felt a very real guilt over this event and stated,

I should be locked up with all of the Godless rapists and murderers. Where was my loyalty to the one person who had stood by me since I was eight? I was so wrapped up in my own career and wanting to show everyone that I was good enough to be in the Army.

Familial guilt is a complicated subject with several working definitions, including when a soldier's family searches for someone to blame for the death of a loved one. The Garling family's son, Horace, returned from the Great War, but the Gorman family's son, Charles, did not. After Gorman's death in action in 1917, the soldier's father, Oliver, received a King's Memorial Scroll to recognise "a brave life given" (see **Figure 3** below).

The Scroll was personally signed by King George V. Oliver returned the King's Scroll, but not before he wrote on it, "By whom? For whom? — was my son led out to his martyrdom? God will answer." (Triolo, n.d.). Oliver's emphasised final statement seems to be asking God who led his son to "his martyrdom" and to punish a guilty King, government, or perhaps even God himself.

SPIRITUAL PUNISHMENT

Whilst temporal and peer-driven guilt and punishment are important aspects of veteran's overall mental health, so too are spiritual factors. These factors can be a significant cause of SI (Davies, 2020). An example of this can be felt in the heart-breaking confession of one US Navy Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) team member, who would vomit for hours and beg God to "forgive us for what we are doing" after every black op mission in Cambodia during the Vietnam War (Bourke, 1999, pp. 223–224). To veterans such as this, God is a very real and all-knowing feature of their lives. Adam Linehan (2019) wrote in his *New York Magazine* article:

I watched friends die in Afghanistan. The guilt has nearly killed me. In Afghanistan, God and I had reached a mutual understanding. He knew I was an impostor, and I knew he knew. I had split off to accompany another squad just before the explosion (IED Ambush) and this was proof that I saw it coming and let it play out in order to have an opportunity to shine. I wanted to be a hero. I wanted more stories for the book I planned to eventually write. I couldn't fool God.

The essential idea is that God has a role in the perpetrator's spiritual schema and will punish them for the sin they have committed. For Christians, one of the most sacred of holy laws is the simple statement, "thou shall not kill" (King James Version, 2017, Exodus 20:13 KJV). Questions regarding sin are always complex, passionate, and often inconclusive. Killing is frequently discussed in the Old and

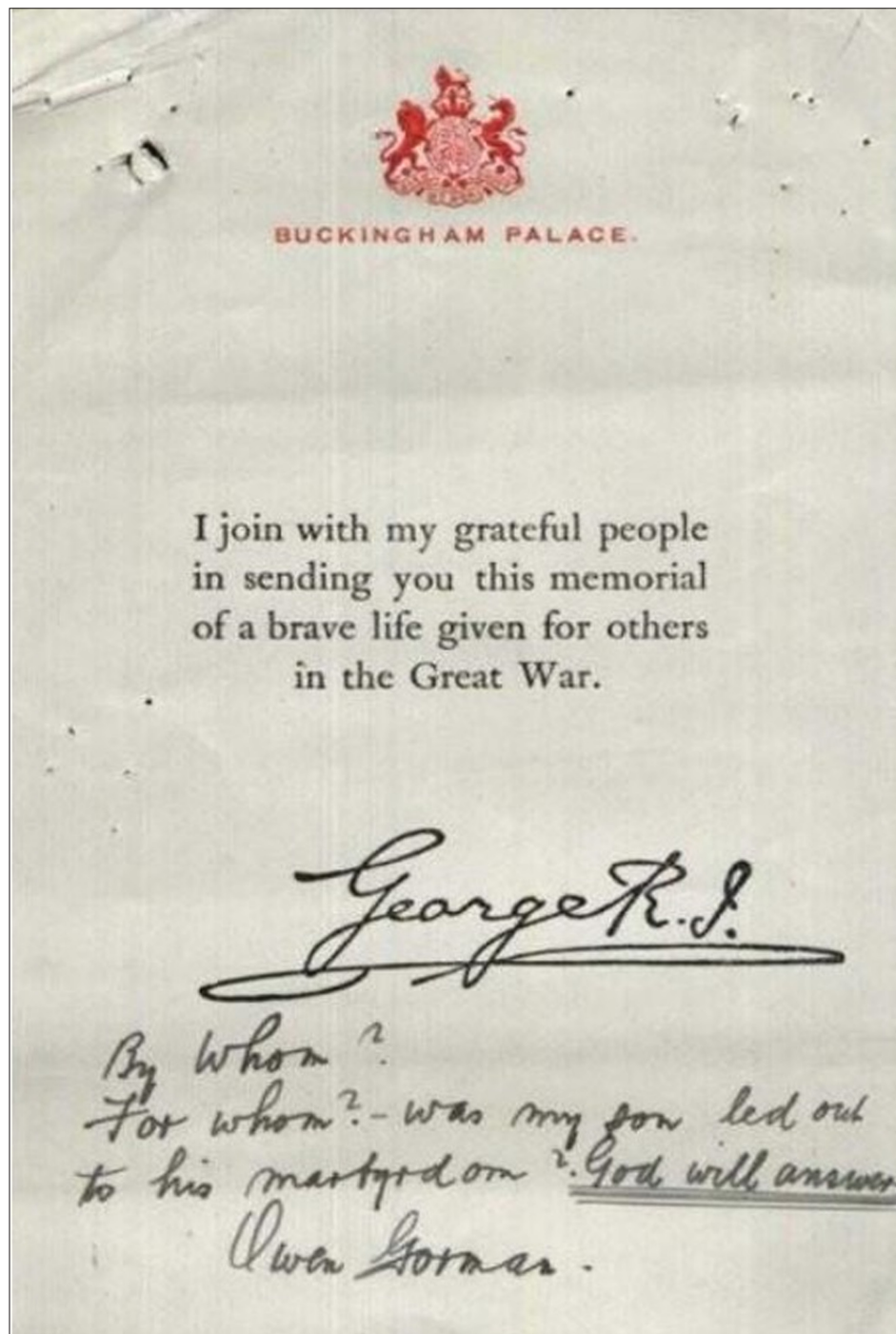


Figure 3 King's Condolence Letter.

Note: Image copyright National Australian Archives.

New Testaments, and prohibitions against it are 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, theologians, and philosophers including St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, many of whom have persuasively argued that killing in war is sometimes a duty to God and the state. This is a very significant area of

debate, but the basic argument is that killing in war may not be a sin if it is conducted within the strict parameters and criteria of a "just war." To Saint Augustine, a just war was one in which God regulated the occurrence and duration of it for providential ends (Wynn, 2013, p. 233).

Nevertheless, the decision on whether killing in war is a sin lies in the heart of the perpetrator and within the judgement of the Holy Spirit. For many years, Australian

Army padres have followed the Augustinian view when counselling soldiers on such issues, believing that 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, 426). At the same time, some veterans may feel that regardless of the fact that their operations were governed and controlled by Laws of Armed Conflict and Rules of Engagement, their act of killing was a sin. Despite following authorised and even legal orders, their guilt pushes them beyond God’s love.

RELIGION

Religion is a very complicated subject, as it can provide many veterans with great solace while also doing great harm to their mental health. One possible definition of religion provides some guidance as to its positive influence on veterans and their families:

Religion is an organised system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed to: (a) facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power, or ultimate truth/reality), and (b) foster an understanding of one’s relationship and responsibility to others in living together in a community. (Joint Health Command, personal correspondence, March 6, 2018)

Based on National Census data, many Australian veterans may not be formally affiliated with a religious grouping (Australian Government, ABS, 2013). For those who are, the “organised system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols” may feel familiar and comforting, providing structure in a life made chaotic by unresolved guilt issues.

One study suggested those with increased spirituality also had greater levels of social support, which effectively buffered against psychopathology and suicidal behaviours (Hourani, et al., 2012). Likewise, there is evidence that spirituality with a focus on seeking forgiveness (self, interpersonal, and divine forms) can lead to greater quality of life for veterans with PTSD (Wortmann et al., 2017, p. 251). In many cases, this seems to have greater success with veterans when the specific spiritual care interventions are led and facilitated by chaplains. This may be because chaplains and other types of spiritual practitioners have the skills and specific training to lead veterans through a guided series of religious prayers and confession rituals (Kopacz et al., 2014).

Sadly, some aspects of formalised religion can also cause additional stress and discomfort for veterans already suffering from guilt issues. For example, when asked how they would help a veteran who was suffering

spiritual guilt issues because they killed two men in battle, one Anglican chaplain answered, “Oh that’s easy, I would punish him. I would seek to have the veteran spend the rest of their lives on their knees begging forgiveness for their heinous sin” (Veteran 201806060, 2018). This sort of negative experience is corrosive and perhaps not unusual. It possibly stems more from the individual’s lack of understanding of the circumstances that veterans find themselves in over their careers as well as some corrosive and extreme religious views (Wortman, 2017). Veterans themselves can also contribute to this ideology if their faith is based on limited or shallow knowledge and experience, and an assumption of divine retribution rather than love and forgiveness. This is what one writer refers to as “an-eye-for-an-eye and a-tooth-for-a-tooth way of assessing their own actions and the actions of others” (Singer, 2004, p. 378).

HYPOCRITICAL

During the Vietnam War, a young soldier approached an Anglican padre in the aftermath of a battle and asked, “Padre, where was God in all of this?” In the same war, a company commander explained to a Methodist padre, “Your job is almost hypocritical, padre, because I’m here to make killers out of people. And you’re here to make them feel good about it” (Gladwin, 2013, p. 237). Such comments are typical of many others which can be found in even a cursory search of primary sources such as the letters and diaries of service personnel in the archives of the Australian War Memorial.

Most military organisations understand the potential for such physical or moral injuries and thus, service chaplains working as a part of multi-disciplinary medical teams go to great lengths to care for the spiritual needs of soldiers. In the end, medical and spiritual care serves an important purpose and is ultimately aimed at repairing injured soldiers so they can return to the battle. Of course, most militaries will go to extraordinary lengths to care for their soldiers, but if a soldier is unrepairable and cannot be redeployed for any reason, they will be discharged and passed over to a veteran’s administration. In some cases, this may mean that the soldier will be handed over “unhealed.”

One of the principal performance outcomes of the Australian Department of Veteran’s Affairs (DVA) is to “maintain and enhance the physical wellbeing and quality of life of eligible persons and their dependants through health and other care services that promote early intervention, prevention, and treatment, including advice and information about health service entitlements” (Australian Government, Department of Veterans Affairs,

2019). There is no statement or implication that the veteran will be returned to their former state, as that may not be possible. When it comes to MI, DVA is starting to look into this area to redress some of the moral damage that may have caused during service (Australian Government, Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). However, no such effort is afforded to SI, and so the treatment in this area is ignored rather than maintained or enhanced.

A GUILTY SPIRIT

If SI refers to a break in the relationship between an individual and their belief in God or another higher power, then Spiritual Guilt must relate to the act an individual commits which causes the break (Davies, 2020, para 20.). Temporal and spiritual guilt can exist together but dealing with one does not automatically remove the other. Temporal justice can determine legal guilt and appropriate state-sanctioned punishment but does not deal with the need for spiritual justice. For those veterans with religious or spiritual beliefs, spiritual justice can only be achieved when the relationship between God and the individual has been repaired. This repair can be affected by the veteran themselves through genuine confession but will be certainly enhanced if it is managed with the help and support of family and friends, such as those seated on the front steps of the Haberfield home of “Chump” Garling. Veterans will be further helped if they are also supported by spiritual practitioners working with allied health professionals who can guide and facilitate their journey.

NOTES

¹ ANZAC Day (short for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) is an important Australian national holiday to commemorate the landing of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps at Gallipoli in Turkey on 25 April 1915.

² The terms ‘mates’ and ‘mateship’ are used in the Australian cultural context of “the bonds of loyalty and equality, and feelings of solidarity and fraternity that Australians, usually men, are typically alleged to exhibit” (Dyrenfurth, 2015, p. 17).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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