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Faith after the Fight: Overcoming Doubts and Trauma from Warfare

Abstract

In the aftermath of intense kinetic battlefield engagements where friendly, civilian, and enemy casualties occur, Christian combat veterans express difficulty reconciling God's omniscience, omnipresence, and benevolence with their traumatic experience. The result has been prolonged episodes of despondence with God that presents itself as an impediment to continued faith or worse, an outright rejection of His existence. Exposure to the horrors of armed conflict can have a profoundly detrimental effect on a service member's faith, but a person can begin the process to heal the invisible wounds of spiritual trauma by not abandoning their faith in God but instead clinging to it and finding a resolution to their doubts through an exercise in theodicy; all within a community context with genuine and consistent confidants who serve as mainstays throughout the introspective process.

Keywords

Combat Stress, Theodicy, Veterans, Religious Doubt, Community

Cover Page Footnote

Donald Anthony Baker III, Commander, United States Navy, is currently serving as the Ethics Advisor and teaching Military Faculty at the Joint Forces Staff College, a school of National Defense University. He holds a Bachelor's of Science degree from Florida State University (2000) and Master's degrees from Duke University (ThM, 2019), Liberty University (MBA, 2011) and Regent University (MDiv, 2008). He is currently Ph.D. student at Liberty University.

Introduction

“I saw death. Lots of death.”

Lieutenant Colonel Houston “Jay” Sheets, Green Beret, United States Army

Many who served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) during the late 2000 and early 2010 decades were first-hand witnesses to human carnage of the most brutal kind. The civilian and combatant alike suffer in a war zone, neither group exempt from death’s indiscriminate choice of victim; once a war projectile leaves the weapon, it moves in the direction its operator directed it to and injures what lies in its path, intended or not.¹ In 2010 while deployed to the Helmand province in Afghanistan at the pinnacle of Taliban violence of OEF, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Sheets led a team of U.S. Army Special Forces—colloquially known as Green Berets due to the dark green head covering the elite group wears—² to conduct counter-insurgency (COIN) operations near the mountain country’s southern border with Pakistan. It was on LTC Sheets’ ten-month deployment where he beheld unnatural occurrences, grotesque by ordinary standards, that created the slow but steady descent into doubting his faith.

He recalls one particular raid³ on a Taliban redoubt, doubling as a local civilian village,⁴ that was especially harrowing for him. Not for the casualties

¹ Nathan Solomon, “‘Only God Can Judge Me’: Faith, Trauma, and Combat,” *Interpretation* 69, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 64. Here Solomon describes war as a “chaotic and random affair” where life and death often comes down to fractions of an inch, tiny distances from where a bullet hits on person could mean a simple flesh wound healable with basic treatment or striking a major organ where death is imminent in short order.

² The green beret is a highly coveted uniform item among Army soldiers for what it represents and what it signifies for the wearer. To earn a green beret requires a year’s long process to become a member of the Army’s most elite special forces unit, this assuming a soldier meets the mental and physical qualifications to attempt the process as well as even having an invitation to try. The Green Berets are world renown for their skill in in unconventional warfare, knowledge of weapons systems, and specialized ability to conduct counter-terrorism operations, hostage rescue, and reconnaissance.

³ According to *Army Doctrine Publication 3-90 Offense and Defense*, a raid is a type of offense operation by ground maneuver forces that destroys or defeat the enemy with rapid execution and of short duration (3-17). The intent to is for the attacking force to quickly to infiltrate an enemy position to confuse, kill, and demoralize the enemy then quickly withdraw to a previously held defensive location.

⁴ A known common practice among Taliban and terrorist groups is to use noncombatant dwellings, schools, mosques, and civilian gathering sites as their operating bases. This is done for two primary reasons. First, after nearly twenty years of the war on terror, America’s enemies are familiar with the general rules of engagement which articulate a reticence to attack civilian targets

affected on members of his outfit—in fact, there were none—but for the effectiveness of their fires upon the Taliban insurgents in the less than twenty-four-hour kinetic engagement. In the battle epilogue, the local women and children returned the same evening to find their village largely decimated of men, their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons either dead or mortally injured by an overwhelming defeat from a tactically superior foe. For Sheets, it was not the battle itself that was particularly traumatizing nor the violence he and his team were responsible for but rather two distinct things.

First, it was the lingering odors, smells of flesh man and animal flesh, projectile propellant, dust, and destroyed structure (a scent he describes as death itself).⁵ These odors can have a uniquely profound psychological effect, deeply ingrained in the brain's recesses, so much so that it conjures unprovoked hallucinations at seemingly random times at distant future dates.⁶ These hallucinations are not necessarily precluded by a specific trigger but can be invoked from a seemingly innocuous practice such as silent personal reflection on one's memories.⁷ The second contributor to his trauma was the distinct noises only produced in and after combat, particularly the sounds after the intensity of the event. For Sheets, the agonizing clamor of the not-yet-dead men and beasts still clinging to the fledgling strands of their life continues to be acutely memorable. That, combined with the sound of Afghan mourners beating their chests in despair and wailing out in the dark—a cacophony of emotional outbursts borne out of a verbally inexpressible sense of profound personal loss—was especially troubling. The sound of the bereaved carried well on into the night, with remnants of mourning still heard the following day.⁸ On that same evening and against this backdrop, Sheet's faith as a devout Christian was fundamentally shaken to its foundation, he questioning God's plan, purpose, and involvement in humanity in a way he never doubted before and has never since.

in order to limit unintended collateral damage. Second, and perhaps of greater importance, is that if the U.S. military initiates an offensive where civilian casualties occur, the enemy can document and promulgate the information through media, social media, and word of mouth to undermine American reputation and diminish the will to fight through pressure from civilian leadership and their constituents.

⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Houston Sheets (Green Beret, United States Army), "God in the Firefight: My Story from Helmand Province," Personal interview, May 18, 2021.

⁶ William P Nash, "The Stressors of War," in *Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research, and Management*, ed. Charles R Figley and William P Nash (New York: Routledge, 2007), 20.

⁷ *Ibid*, 11-30.

⁸ Sheets (Green Beret, United States Army), "God in the Firefight: My Story from Helmand Province."

LTC Sheets maintains that none of what he witnessed challenged his belief in God's existence, but many combat veterans do not share his steadfastness. God's goodness and attributes—mainly his omnipresence and omnipotence—come into question as many service members have difficulty reconciling how a God who is supposed to be benevolent and all-powerful seemingly failed to intervene to prevent what they experienced.⁹ Other dimensions of combat stress injury can compound a service member's doubts of faith, typically leading to self-isolation, anger at God, church despondence, and a general decline of spiritual health.¹⁰ Exposure to the horrors of armed conflict can have a profoundly detrimental effect on a service member's faith to the point where they doubt God's existence or reject Him altogether, but a person can begin the process to heal the invisible wounds of spiritual trauma by not abandoning their faith in God but instead clinging to it, and finding a resolution to their doubts through an exercise in theodicy;¹¹ all within a community context with genuine and consistent confidants who serve as mainstays throughout the introspective process.

Combat Stress

What LTC Sheets experienced is not altogether unique. War veterans having doubts of faith is one of several common manifestations of what psychologists and psychiatrists call combat stress. The recently coined clinical term is broadly defined as the unique stress service members are exposed to in a combat environment.¹² Historical analysis reveals that combat stress is not a nascent phenomenon brought about by modern warfare, but an effect combat veterans of all generations have experienced,¹³ although advances in logistics and

⁹ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Invisible Wounds of War: Coming Home from Iraq and Afghanistan* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), 183.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 183.

¹¹ In *The Problem of Evil*, Marilyn McCord Adams broadly defines a theodicy to mean “any theistic response to questions about how theism can be true in view of the existence of evils” (3). The nuance to theodicy here will be more aligned with Daniel Howard Snyder's definition in *The Evidential Argument from Evil* to mean a “justifiable reason for God to permit the sorts of evil we find in our world” (xvii). This is a distinctly positive approach as opposed to offering a defense for a particular objection to theism in light of evil.

¹² Rosa Delgado-moreno, José Juan Robles-pérez, and Vicente Javier Clemente-suárez, “Combat Stress Decreases Memory of Warfighters in Action,” *Journal of Medical Systems* 41, no. 8 (August 2017), 1.

¹³ Jim Frederick, *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death* (New York, NY: Crown Publishing, 2010), 170-171. Archived soldier's diaries have

combat support have pushed the limits to what the human mind and soul can endure.¹⁴ As study in combat stress has progressed, specialists in the field have identified five different categories of stressors—physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual—that sufferers can experience.¹⁵ When further subdivided, twenty-six specific stressors emerge from the five main groups.¹⁶

One aspect of combat stress that fascinates psychologists and their psychiatric counterparts is why the same traumatic event impacts people differently. This is in spite of several foundational commonalities between the people involved: education level, economic class, choice of vocation, familial bonds, and political persuasion. One service member involved in an intense battle sequence may demonstrate high levels of resiliency by rebounding quickly from an event to reintegrate quickly back into the organization for continued employment. Another individual at that same event, from the same unit, can immediately demonstrate the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a nebulous and difficult to define condition, but real nonetheless, where the sufferer can display symptoms of anxiety, cold sweats, nervousness, sleeplessness, nightmares, and sensory hallucinations.¹⁷ Service members with severe PTSD often have difficulty assimilating to normal civilian life post-military service and account for a disproportionate number of homeless veterans.¹⁸ Even still, there is

been a useful window to the past on the warfare effects on the human mind from yesteryear. Much of the combat stress symptoms are the same between today's modern warrior and those from the past: despondence, isolation, feelings of disconnectedness from the citizenry, and nightmares. Even still, Frederick notes that scientist have only been studying what psychologists now call "combat stress" only since World War II.

¹⁴ On page sixty-five in Grossman's 1996 book *On Killing*, the author remarks "Some psychiatric casualties have always been associated with war, but it is only in the twentieth century that our physical and logistical capability to support combat has completely outstripped our psychological capacity to endure it." Technological advances in logistics have created the capability for continuous, long-term deployment for the modern warrior within a kinetic battlespace. It is only in the last quarter century that scientists have begun to discover that while a service member's physical body may be able to endure lengthy deployments (although this is questionable), the non-physical human components, the psyche and soul, cannot withstand prolonged combat stress without severe repercussions to the individual.

¹⁵ Nash, "The Stressors of War," 28.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 19-29.

¹⁷ Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Rev. ed. (New York: Little, Brown and Co, 2009), 68.

¹⁸ Jack Tsai, Robert H. Pietrzak, and Robert A. Rosenheck, "Homeless Veterans Who Served in Iraq and Afghanistan: Gender Differences, Combat Exposure, and Comparisons with Previous Cohorts of Homeless Veterans," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 40, no. 5 (September 1, 2013): 404. The study found that combat

no single demographic determiner or personal character trait, at least none that has been discovered yet, that sets the course for a person to develop PTSD from an intense combat engagement and a teammate at the same event have no onset of any perceivable negative effects. The one exception that is increasingly difficult to ignore is how belief in a higher power, specifically God, directly contributes to individual resiliency after the trauma of combat.

Clinging to Faith

Belief in God and having a personal faith foundation seem to have an important role in overcoming traumatic circumstances. Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, chronicles his time in Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* in which he observes the correlation between the will to live and individual personal meaning derived from faith in God. As a member of the faith, academic, and medical communities prior to his imprisonment and subsequent exposure to the most depraved human treatment by Nazi guards towards their detainees, Frankl had a uniquely trained eye in which to process and record all that he witnessed. Within several Nazi prison encampments, Frankl was both witness and subject to unprovoked beatings, torture, sleep and food deprivation, verbal cruelty, dehumanization,¹⁹ and callous murder in cold-blood²⁰ (the latter which he was able to inexplicably avoid), by all measure trauma to the limits of human capacity.

Frankl notes the sincere religious praxis within the camp, even amongst prisoners who were not previously rigidly observant, that brought a sense of hope and normalcy in an uncertain situation. He writes, "The religious interest of the prisoners, as far and as soon as it developed, was the most sincere imaginable. The depth and vigor of religious belief often surprised and moved a new

veterans with PTSD who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan in OIF, OEF, or OND (Operation New Dawn, OIF's successor) were over-represented in their research on homeless veterans. On page 401 of their article, they document that of the 994 homeless OEF/OIF/OND veterans they sampled, 662 (or 66.6%) were clinically diagnosed with PTSD. The PTSD status of the other 332 home was unknown at the time of the study.

¹⁹ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Revised and updated. (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), 42-44. Among the degradation Frankl experienced none carried the injury as the being likened to a "pig," an unclean and debased animal according to Jewish custom. The Nazi guards understood the weight of the inference and would knowingly use the term to maximize the verbal injury to their Jewish prisoners. Frankl writes that the most painful part of their verbal attacks in this way was the insult which they imply (43).

²⁰ Ibid, 21-115.

arrival.”²¹ Spontaneous prayer huddles and improvised religious services were common in the camps, Frankl observes, even in humble locations that the average civilian parishioner outside the camp would not find befitting for a reverent observance.²² Prisoners transformed cattle cars, dingy outbuildings, and flea-infested sleeping quarters to makeshift places of worship, offering them momentary transcendence from their squalid conditions.

Frankl makes the connection between an individual’s faith and the ability to persevere through their trauma and beyond it, even if the person was uncertain about their eventual fate within the prison. Faith in God gave meaning, purpose, dignity, and hope to the prisoners who believed, this in spite of the complete and utter impoverishment of their conditions. Individuals who lacked an anchor to tether their hopes to, inclined toward ultimate disillusionment and terminal despair, sooner or later, as there was nothing beyond the limits of their own will that gave them any reason to continue living. While lack of food, sleep, and basic human essentials killed many prisoners, those who simply gave up the will to live for lack of hope (even if they had basic necessities to continue to live) died much faster than their religious counterparts.²³

When Trauma Causes Doubt

“If there was such a thing as hell on earth, that was it.”

Master Gunnery Sergeant (MGySgt) Hank Rimkus, United States Marine Corps

That is not to say those who endured the horrifying Nazi death camp experience were without episodes of doubt that covered the range of human emotions—doubts in God, doubts they would see loved ones again, doubts they could physically and mentally return to normalcy post-liberation, if that ever came, or doubts they would even survive the ordeal.²⁴ Camp life was an odd mix of monotonous doldrum and incertitude, each day certain to require meaningless

²¹ Ibid, 54.

²² Ibid, 54.

²³ Ibid, 95-97. Between Christmas 1944 and New Year’s 1945, Frankl writes that the death rate in his camp increased at rate “beyond all previous experience” (77). He attributes the spike in prisoner deaths because many lost hope that they would ever be liberated. A rumor circulated amongst the men that Allied troops would free them by Christmas and they could return to their homes (77). When this did come to pass, Frankl remarks that many lost the will to live and subsequently died in short order.

²⁴ Ibid.

labor from the prisoners coupled with the uncertainty that they may be randomly chosen to die. Living with this constant threat cast doubt into all aspects of life.

MGySgt Rimkus, an OIF combat veteran, describes similar episodes of uncertainty and doubt during his Fall 2004 to Spring 2005 deployment to Iraq's Mahmudiya district, an area known inauspiciously as the "Triangle of Death."²⁵ His unit—Echo Company, Second Battalion, Twenty-Fourth Marines (Echo Co. 2/24)—had the mission from higher headquarters to secure their portion of the area of operation from insurgent activity.²⁶ The enemy combatants attacked Echo Co. 2/24 with rockets, indirect fire, and gunfire no less than three times in a twenty-four hour period, sporadically interspersed throughout the day to keep the U.S. military off-guard.²⁷ This constant threat had a profound negative psychological effect for the Marines due to the irregularity of the attacks compounded with the guaranteed assurance that each day brought new explosions from the sky or improvised explosive devices.

As a newcomer to Christianity in 2004, Rimkus was enthusiastic about his budding faith journey but admittedly still lacked a godly depth and knowledge that only comes after years of a consistent walk with God.²⁸ The unremitting violence of the 2004-2005 deployment was traumatizing for Rimkus in its own right but missing in that chaotic environment was a strong faith community to serve as a support and encouragement staple by which he could continue to progress as a Christian and process the trauma he experienced. The apex of his trauma, which subsequently resulted in his darkest period of religious doubt, came in the days following the near-fatal injury to one of Rimkus' squad leaders in October 2004.

²⁵ Frederick, *Black Hearts*, xiii. In a 2008 CBS *60 Minutes* Army General Ray Odierno, then the Commanding General of the United States and Multi-National Forces in Iraq, described that U.S. military and Iraqi civilians endured more than one hundred insurgent bombing, rifle, rocket, and mortal attacks every single week during the height of Mahmudiyah's unrest. The area became known as the Triangle of Death due to the sheer volume of violence and resulting deaths.

²⁶ Master Gunnery Sergeant Hank Rimkus (United States Marine Corps), "My Battle with PTSD," Personal interview, May 25, 2021.

²⁷ In the process of researching for this project, the author discovered the award-winning film documentary "The Triangle of Death," directed and produced by Folleh Shar Francis Tamba, that chronicles the Mahmudiya district, Iraq, in 2005 after the Sadaam Hussein's ouster. A significant percentage of the film's footage is derived from personal video from the Marines on the ground at the time. One particular clip of a beheaded Iraqi civilian discarded on the side of the road, MGysgt Rimkus captured the clip himself and forwarded to members of his higher headquarters.

²⁸ Rimkus (United States Marine Corps, "My Battle with PTSD."

Echo Co. 2/24 suffered minor and catastrophic casualties throughout the deployment but one particular event in October 2004 troubled Rimkus because he held himself responsible for a combat injury that permanently crippled one of his subordinates. During an intense kinetic engagement, Rimkus motioned to his teammate, Sergeant Nick Bennett, to come near. As Bennett approached, an enemy mortar landed between the two Marines, severely injuring Bennett²⁹ and leaving Rimkus largely unscathed aside from the head trauma he received as a result of the percussion blast. The belief that he directly contributed to a debilitating injury for one of his Marines created a full range of emotions for Rimkus: anger at God, doubts of faith, fear, skepticism, sleeplessness, and, when he did sleep, night terrors.

Personal Theodicy: Reconciling the Evils of War

As a believer, MGySgt Rimkus was forced to confront a dilemma that challenged his Christian beliefs to its foundation—how to reconcile the evil he and his men were experiencing with the all-good and all-powerful God he believed in. What Rimkus was wrestling with is known the “problem of evil” (POE) question, a specific pedantic field of study theologians approach either negatively—in the form of a defense to demonstrate there is nothing incoherent about belief in God in spite of evil—³⁰ or positively, or to give reasons why evil exists from a theistic framework.³¹ The latter is known as a theodicy.

The problem of evil (POE) question comes in two types: (1) the logical argument from evil, and the evidential problem of evil.³² In explaining the logical argument from evil, J.L. Mackie presents the classic deductive argument with the fundamental beliefs in mind: God is omnipotent, God is wholly good, and yet evil

²⁹ Bennett personal account of the attack and the PTSD that followed at <https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/mission/meet-a-warrior/>. His current work includes traveling to Wounded Warrior events to encourage other combat veterans who struggle with PTSD as well as his support for Indiana Canine Assistant Network (ICAN), an organization that trains and provides assistance dogs to qualified service members needing support for daily functions. His work with ICAN can be found at <https://www.icandog.org/news/ican-salutes-veteran-nick-bennett/>

d with To Sergeant Nick Bennett retired from the Marine Corps in 2007. He doe

³⁰ Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford : Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 2010), 18.

³¹ Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, eds., *The Problem of Evil*, Oxford readings in philosophy (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.

³² Daniel Howard-Snyder, “Introduction: The Evidential Argument from Evil,” in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Howard-Snyder, Daniel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), xii.

exists.³³ For Mackie, and those who subscribe to the logical problem evil, it is an impossibility for God, as is generally understood about the character and nature of God, and for evil to co-exist. Current and historical examples of evil defeat any notion of God, according to Mackie.

The logical problem of evil is defeated with the possibility that some greater good may come out of instances of evil, and so the academic community has largely dismissed the logical argument³⁴ and adopted the evidential problem of evil. William Rowe sketches the evidential POE in the inductive statement (presented here in short form):

1. Suffering and evil exists which an all-powerful and all-knowing God could have prevented without losing a greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. A wholly good God would prevent evil and suffering unless God could not do so without losing some greater good or permitting equally bad or worse evil.
Because evil and suffering exist then,
3. A wholly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God does not exist.³⁵

The entirety of Rowe's argument hinges on assuming that some greater good or worse evil cannot come to fruition as a result of an instance of evil but this is unknowable unless one claims omniscience. At best, the evidential problem of evil is a probabilistic one,³⁶ and depending the values you assign when using Bayes Theorem, and is hardly conclusive when determining whether or not God exists.

Combat veterans struggling after the fact may not articulate their doubts of God into logical statements fit for an academic discussion on the POE, like

³³ J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 200-212.

³⁴ William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 10. Here Rowe admits that no one has "succeeded in establishing such an extravagant claim." Rowe concedes that a fairly can be made that the existence of evil is logically consistent *with* the existence of theistic God. Alvin fatally defeated the logical problem in his 1977 book *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

³⁵ *Ibid*, 2.

³⁶ Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Howard-Snyder, Daniel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 70-83.

Mackie, Rowe, or Plantinga, but the need to reconcile their experience with their faith is no less necessary. The human mind continually works towards coherence, to logically and rationally make sense of its environment as part of its natural function; a constant enterprise towards balance and equilibrium. Combat veterans often describe the chaotic and disorienting nature of war,³⁷ and when their faith in God is undermined by pain, suffering, and evil in armed conflict the spiritual vertigo is no less debilitating than a physical injury, maybe even more so.

The existence of God is not the foremost theological question combat veterans wrestle with but it is God's seemingly missing goodness that one expects to manifest itself in the form of benevolent care, concern, and involvement in human affairs that creates incoherence. God presents Himself as disinterested, indifferent, or worse yet, cruel against a backdrop of violence and malevolence found on the battlefield. The incongruence ultimately leads to disillusionment with God and can stunt a believer's growth in their faith journey.

Yet, in the process of struggling through the POE, a unique opportunity for growth as a Christian presents itself and a personal theodicy for the combat veteran is most useful. For each soldier working through the POE, the process will be as unique as their specific experience; each combat veteran with their own distinctive set battlefield circumstances, as only seen and felt through their senses, that they must reconcile—their place on the battlefield, the decisions they made that may have directly or indirectly contributed to the outcome, their feelings and emotions (or the lack thereof), their own encounter with death, their own survival when others died, and their own post-war physical condition, especially if they were maimed, disfigured, mutilated, or crippled.

A veteran struggling with doubt would benefit from a negative POE examination (to understand how belief in God is consistent with the presence of evil), but a theodicy could be more helpful because it seeks to understand “the why” that many who have experienced battlefield trauma ask. Why did God allow my friend to die? Why did I survive? Why did God not protect the innocent from harm? Why do the nightmares continue? A fully satisfying answer may never come to any of the questions a traumatized soldier may ask but a theodicy can help put the entire experience into a greater context and a greater framework to understand God's providential hand steady at work in the greater corpus of humanity, generally, and in the believer's life, specifically, as part of His sovereign plan.

³⁷ Solomon, ““Only God Can Judge Me,”” 64.

John Hick refers to God's divine work through suffering and pain as "soul-making,"³⁸ a lifelong journey where God perfects men and women through their inevitable encounter with evil through the natural course of living. Evil is part of the common universal human experience, and, while subjection to it is painful, it ultimately serves a greater good for the individual first; this because suffering through evil develops the soul to a depth and breadth that is impossible to achieve any other way. Suffering connects the human soul to the Divine, as step in the development of man from only "a rational and responsible person capable of personal relationship with the personal Infinite"³⁹ but towards "perfected persons whom the New Testament calls 'children of God.'"⁴⁰ Evil can have an inexplicable and senseless component to it, as military members often describe how the violence of war is, but, for Hick, this is a mystery, an incomprehensible paradox of evil that is both absolutely necessary yet vehemently unwanted. Of the evil experience enigma, Hick writes, "It may be that the very mysteriousness of this life is an important aspect of its character as a sphere of soul-making."⁴¹

The Road to Right in Community

"Every day, I reflect on those six men, and I don't think there ever will be a time I will not."⁴²

Major General William Seely, United States Marine Corps

To reconcile the horrors of combat with the existence of an all-powerful and all-knowing benevolent God through focused theological reflection is an evolution that each warrior must undertake to redeem the event from the effects of evil and turn it into a good by which their soul develops. But there is a one significant caveat to this prescription—it must be done within the context of a community support structure. Combat veterans experiencing doubt and trauma tend to withdraw from inter-personal relationships and social networks with

³⁸ Hick, John, "Soul-Making and Suffering," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 168–188.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 168.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 168.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 186.

⁴² Cindy Fisher, "3rd Recon Leader Accepts Bronze Star by Recognizing Full Battalion," *Stars and Stripes*, January 16, 2008, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/news/3rd-recon-leader-accepts-bronze-star-by-recognizing-full-battalion-1.73569>.

intentional self-isolation.⁴³ Much of the social withdrawal is a matter of control and safety. In combat, adrenaline creates heightened awareness and subsequent afferent overload through the major five senses working in overdrive to digest the chaotic nature of the battlespace. The greater the chaos and danger a soldier experiences, the greater the need to control their environment,⁴⁴ a feeling that remains with them well after the deployment ends. However, control is difficult in social situations with too many external variables at work; the logical option is to withdraw and isolate where a traumatized veteran control as much as they are able.

For Major General William Seely (USMC), Commandant of the Joint Forces Staff College, his withdrawal was less physical isolation and more emotional seclusion, shielding his grief from his men, and then his family upon his return from deployment, out of necessity to continue to effectively lead his unit in a combat zone amidst the violent casualties they incurred.⁴⁵ Like Sheets, General Seely never questioned God's existence but had feelings of doubt about God's plan and purpose for humanity.⁴⁶ Even still, General Seely describes how his faith in God has grown, his emotional isolation notwithstanding, since the 2006-2007 deployment by staying connected to the church, talking about his experience to confidants, and keeping in communication with members of his unit.⁴⁷

Staying engaged in a faith community has particularly cathartic results for doubters and the traumatized. A 1993 McIntosh, Silver, and Wortman research study found that the social support of religious participation lessens feelings of

⁴³ Kent D. Drescher, David W. Foy, and Mark W. Smith, "Spirituality and Readjustment Following War-Zone Experiences," in *Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research, and Management* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 295–310.

⁴⁴ Nash, "The Stressors of War."

⁴⁵ Major General Seely, then a lieutenant colonel, served as the commanding officer for 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, on their September 2006 to April 2007 deployment to Al Anbar province in Iraq. Six Marines were killed in Iraq and another eight were injured on that deployment. A *Stars and Stripes* news article provides the names of the Marines killed in action here <https://www.stripes.com/news/3rd-recon-leader-accepts-bronze-star-by-recognizing-full-battalion-1.73569>

⁴⁶ Major General William H. Seely III (United States Marine Corps), "My Experience in Iraq," Personal Interview, June 9, 2021.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

depression, loneliness, and isolation for those experiencing grief and loss.⁴⁸ General Seely grieved for his dead and wounded Marines, but it was anger that manifested outwardly to those around him. For him, it was the church community, along with carefully chosen confidants, that were instrumental in overcoming doubts and his subsequent anger; finding relief from anger and overcoming doubt within the church is the case for many combat veterans. Even more, practicing faith in a community setting places those struggling with doubt and trauma among caring individuals who can demonstrate the Christian praxis of forgiveness, patience, self-control, and gentleness that naturally tempers anger, rage, and a desire for revenge.⁴⁹

The hope for combat veterans is that regardless of what they encountered and endured in battle, faith in God is not only possible but an opportunity for a deep, rich, and full relationship with Him presents itself in the aftermath. Neither Lieutenant Colonel Sheets, Master Gunnery Sergeant Rimkus, or Major General Seely abandoned their faith in God after the war ended for them, all continue to serve both their country and local churches with vigor and distinction. Each military officer readily admits the journey to get to where they are has been difficult, but clinging to their faith has been worth the doubts that came with it.

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⁴⁸ Daniel N. McIntosh, Roxane Cohen Silver, and Camille B. Wortman, "Religion's Role in Adjustment to a Negative Life Event: Coping with the Loss of a Child," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65, no. 4 (1993): 812–813.

⁴⁹ Drescher, Foy, and Smith, "Spirituality and Readjustment Following War-Zone Experiences."

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