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The passion to kill and then remorse

Phillip Knightley

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It is a well-known fact that the natural instinct not to kill a fellow human being is normally so strong that it takes considerable training and conditioning to overcome it. In fact, the main thrust of most military courses is devoted specifically to this. There is a delicate balance to be achieved. One US general told me that the aim is to train the recruit to kill on orders, and only on orders "because you cannot have a soldier returning to civilian life who feels free to kill if the mood takes him." This is a fascinating area for study. It is a huge burden for soldiers to carry the responsibility for taking life and it exacts a heavy toll on them. The figures are amazing. Something like 18 American veterans kill themselves every day. In California alone more than 650 veterans committed suicide in 2006, about 20 per cent of the total suicides in the whole state that year. The only account I have been able to find that delves into this moral quagmire is by an Australian author, Jeff Sparrow. He has written "Killing: Misadventures in Violence" (Melbourne University Press). I found one section particularly intriguing, that dealing with sniping and snipers. Sparrow interviewed a US Army sniper called Garrett Reppenhagen, who after he had returned from Iraq, became a leading member of Iraq Veterans against the War. Sparrow asked him what it felt like to kill people. "You mean the weight of knowing that you've killed someone? It's heaving. I've seen guys lose religion over it and I've seen guys gain religion over it. Especially if you are certain that you've killed someone. I know the guys that I hit with my sniper rifle, the people I've watched die. I watched them get hit by my round and go down." But Reppenhagen emphasised that he had never encountered any resistance to such killing. "You're so afraid of the enemy that you just toughen up and shoot to kill. I realised that the people we were fighting were just resisting the occupation of the country. So I felt really bad when I killed them. But I never hesitated. They were firing at me, so I fired at them." Snipers are trained to shoot for the "triangle of death". The area right around the nose and mouth. A hit there will most likely sever the spinal cord rendering the body immobile so that even if the victim wants to pull the trigger of their own weapon, they cannot. Snipers also take a course called

"The Anatomy of a Kill" which is all about what a damage a bullet does to the body, how it tumbles through the body ripping it apart. The effect of this knowledge on the sniper, however, was not taken into account. "We were trained how to do it, but they never told us what to do afterwards. The attitude to mental trauma was very backward. "Instead of having courses where they acknowledge that you will be in combat and you'll see some terrible things and this is how you'll deal with it, their message is better not let mental illness happen to you because if you do we're going to make an example of you and you're not going to like it." That said, Reppenhagen admits that no one comes through the experience unchanged. "Yeah, I'm not the same dud. I think the fundamentals are the same, but it's changed part of me, definitely. So much goes through your mind. I was afraid of letting my buddies down, a being that guy who just couldn't do it, who dropped his end so that somebody else got hurt." He agrees that there is also that feeling of elation from having survived that quick sprint along the face of death that many a veterans misses and even seeks out again. "Yes, I've never felt more alive than after a firefight." This agrees with what other veterans and war correspondents have told me: that the intensity of war experience gave those who had been through them a satisfaction that peace simply could not match. But then there must be a reckoning. And it is there in those astonishing suicide figures - eighteen US veterans a day feel that life is no longer worth living and take their own lives. What a dreadful price to pay for wars that our leaders take us into.