

Each Soldier a Thread



The violence that reached our shores left me at a loss—every attempt to conceptualize these tragedies failed to capture the emotions moving me. I tried to make sense of San Bernardino and Orlando by writing, but after a dozen drafts I realized that failure is at the heart of my shock and sorrow. We bore witness as attacks ravaged Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Turkey. I watched each attack unfold, felt each death defeat me. We fought for Afghanistan, for America, but it was for nothing.

My friends that served in Iraq echoed similar sentiments in the spring of 2014 when Daesh captured swathes of Iraq and Syria. They watched everything they struggled for fall apart. It was a cruel turn to watch ISIS flags fluttering from American Humvees. We were warriors in the world's most powerful military, but most of us were helpless to act. More than six thousand of our brothers and sisters died, more than fifty thousand wounded—what will their legacy be?

Like many of my brothers and sisters that served in Iraq and Afghanistan, I poured my heart and soul into this war. I knew we were fighting an uphill battle when I joined, but I thought if we fought for the Afghan people, maybe the terrorism they faced wouldn't come home with me. I failed. I remember reading a [Washington Post article](#) about my area of operations—the Jalrez Valley in Wardak Province—mere months after we returned

home in the fall of 2011. When we arrived, two girls' schools thrived just outside our outpost, our Afghan counterparts enjoyed good relations with the locals, and many local villagers helped us fight the Taliban shadow government. One girls' school is ruined now, the other beset by drive-bys and bombings. The article said Jalrez was named "the Valley of Death." My Afghan comrades—with whom I broke bread and bled alongside—despair that the population threw their lot in with the Taliban. The valley is theirs now, how long until they seize the province? The nation?

The day after Orlando was warm and sunny—the summer felt garish and irreverent against my frustration. I tried to explain to a civilian colleague what I felt, and she asked me how I could feel responsible for the attack. She said it seemed so removed from my deployment in 2010. Many of us were brought up in the military schooled in counterinsurgency, which taught us that what the "strategic corporal" did on the ground impacted the whole war. Indeed, leaders on the local level like Colonel H.R. McMaster influenced national policy. I learned that war is not just red and blue symbols on a map, but a complex and entangled system that includes every one of us. Each raid, each dollar, each soldier a thread in a web. It connects a rifle to a villager, a villager to a valley, a valley to a nation—each strand leading to another variable, another effect. What implications did losing Jalrez have on the war? I can't pretend to know what Omar Mateen thought of the war on his family's country, but if it was mine I would be full of rage and sorrow. I can't say where those feelings would take me, and maybe that's why I can't make Omar into the enemy no matter how hard I try. Every attempt to understand his decisions dropped me into a void. I told my colleague that I couldn't draw a line from Jalrez to a mass murder, only that I felt responsible.

In a society so divorced from the implications of war and foreign policy, veterans not only bear the physical and

emotional costs of war, but shoulder the moral responsibility as well. Only during the Global War on Terror has the term “moral injury” entered into the lexicon of [mental health and trauma](#). One need only look to the International NGO Safety Organization or Team Rubicon to see veterans’ commitment to duty and social responsibility. If one thing can be said of veterans it is our need to act, but there’s something else driving us. In the words of Chris Hedges, war is a force that gives us meaning. Danger makes life simple—survival supplants wardrobe choices and cocktail selections. There is a singularity of purpose and a definition of clarity I have found nowhere else. It joins us irrevocably. Sebastian Junger’s new book *Tribe* examines the bonds that come from collective hardship in wartime—one woman in the book, Nidzara Ahmetasevic, was evacuated from Bosnia only to make a harrowing return trip back to Sarajevo because it was too hard to keep going while her family suffered. “We were the happiest,” she told Junger. “And we laughed more.”

Like her, I miss much of my war. My brother, an active duty Infantry Sergeant and OEF vet, says he wishes he was back in Afghanistan. He holds out hope for another deployment, another opportunity to get back into the fight. The thought terrifies me, I don’t know what I would do if I lost my little brother. At the same time, another part of me wishes I could go back with him. War gave me camaraderie and meaning, but it was an addiction. Karl Marlantes called combat the crack cocaine of adrenaline highs, with crack cocaine consequences.

I look at the attacks at home and abroad, and I wonder if the source of my despair isn’t the tragedy of each event, but a yearning for combat. We said we were in Afghanistan to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, but when fighting season came I savored the fighting. It came to eclipse the desire to build infrastructure, capacity, and governance in Afghanistan. It even eclipsed the beauty of the little girls that welcomed us into their schools. I lost Jalrez because I

was too intoxicated by the smell of gunpowder and the power of calling Apache gunships to raze the valley. I kept the Afghans I was supposed to serve at rifle's length out of fear, alienating them. When I came home I tried to pay penance for my blood lust by working for veterans non-profits and by working with refugees to the U.S. I thought if I could save enough lives, make a big enough difference, then I could eventually make up for leaving Jalrez in chaos. For a while I told myself I was doing good work, making a difference. Then a car would backfire or the neighbors would set off a string of firecrackers—I would break into a sweat, my glands taking me out of reality and back into the fight. After that the pathways addicted to adrenaline reactivated like reopened wounds, a bitter reminder of internal war between my compassion and savagery.

After Orlando, it feels as if there may be no way of erasing my guilt because we brought home the dualism we took to war. In many ways, the contradiction of duty and conscience against violence and war reflects the contradictions in our national narrative. When we invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, we said it was to liberate the oppressed. At first that held true: many Afghans and Iraqis welcomed us, welcomed the opportunity we appeared to herald—though our collective desire for revenge colored the decision to engage in both wars. The product is the despair of a failed enterprise of our own making. We say that all men are created equal, but black Americans are still murdered with impunity. We call for an end to violence in Iraq and Syria, but our only action is to drop bombs. We brought other things home—our police forces mutated into paramilitary organizations, our xenophobia morphed into something that politicians actively encourage to win elections with. Perhaps this will be the legacy of the war on terror that so many of us veterans and countless more civilians suffered for.

My good friend and confidant Kristen is a fellow vet, a Florida native, and identifies as part of the LGBTQ community.

In the days following Orlando, she said,

“I fought for them. For the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. And it’s come to this.” Her tears fell.

I projected all my guilt, all my failure onto those words. In my head, I listed people I left behind in Afghanistan, the people that have to live with my mistakes. My guilt was immobilizing me into inaction, another failure. Kristen said something else.

“Why aren’t we celebrating the resilience of gay communities? Why aren’t we celebrating the lives of the people of color killed in this hate crime?”

I despair because I am complicit. We all are, yet despair and failure alone cannot define us. We must take ownership of our wars and their effects to face the future. We saw the consequences of war because we answered the call. For us, duty doesn’t end when we take off the uniform. We must share our experiences lest we leave the nation deaf and blind. Tomorrow, we build. Leading voices like Phil Klay, [call on veterans to make art](#) for the urgent cause of cultivating a more responsible body politic. Our definition of community must shift from the brotherhood of warriors to include voters, fighters, and victims of these conflicts. Then, we avenge the victims of these hate crimes, these terror attacks.

Then, when we fight it won’t be for nothing.