

1995

## Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character

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### Recommended Citation

Calhoun, William (1995) "Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 48 : No. 3 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol48/iss3/24>

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Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York: Atheneum, 1994. 246pp. \$20

Jonathan Shay is a psychiatrist with the Tufts Medical School who treats Vietnam veterans for severe, chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He begins this imaginative and extended analogy with a recollection: "A number of years ago I was struck by the similarity of their war experiences to Homer's account of Achilles in the *Iliad*." In Shay's view, his patients and Achilles share the same loss of their humanity, through the betrayal of *themis*, a Greek word Shay translates as "what's right." This loss can be defined as the undoing of character by the stress of experiencing combat. It concludes in tragedy for many modern veterans, as it did for Achilles over three thousand years ago. The similarities of their experiences include arbitrary or absent leaders, the death of friends, guilt over their own survival, and a killing rage (the "berserk state") in which a soldier loses (as did Achilles) all restraint and fear and, in some cases, commits atrocities.

Blending the first-person accounts of Vietnam veterans with verses of Homer and his own personal observations, Shay examines such analogous events as the arrogant seizure by Agamemnon of a war prize voted to Achilles and the capricious ordering of American soldiers to lethal missions. These arbitrary decisions not only betray the soldier's sense of what is right but feed his alienation and fury and contract his moral and social loyalties to a small group of fellow warriors. Achilles, at least, was permitted to mourn properly his fallen comrades and to honor his enemy, something American soldiers

were not able or oriented to do. That they could not serve to deny the enemy's humanity and devalue the grieving process, further undoing the soldier's character.

So Shay's patients came home from war without welcome and suffering PTSD. With the compassion of a healer, the author describes the chronic health problems associated with this disorder: loss of control of mental functions and memory, a constant state of mobilization for danger (triggering survival skills), and persistent feelings of betrayal, isolation, and suicidalness. Shay writes that "the painful paradox is that fighting for one's country can render one unfit to be its citizen."

Shay explores many interesting concepts, from the moral and personal fiduciary responsibility of the military and civilian command structure, to the reclaiming of Achilles' gods as a metaphor of social power. One of the most poignant and instructive parts of this book is Shay's discussion of the importance of narrative in rebuilding undone character. He explains how a fully realized narrative can bring together fragmented knowledge, sensations, and emotions, aiding the survivor to piece together what had been shattered by his trauma.

Although compelling in its use of literary comparison, this book has significant shortcomings. Shay provides no data concerning his methodology, the number of veterans he counseled, or how long he worked with them. Without this information it is difficult to gain a proper perspective on the majority of U.S. combat veterans, who repeatedly faced fire but remained whole in character. He address-

ses neither the atrocities committed against civilians by U.S. soldiers under his care nor their emotions concerning individual responsibility for their conduct in combat. There are also minor structural problems, stemming both from a disjointed style mixing moving prose and clinical stiffness, and from a repetition of quotes.

Shay rightly emphasizes the importance of trustworthy leadership and relevant training. He concludes with a few recommendations to help prevent combat PTSD: protecting unit cohesion, valuing "griefwork," control of "berserking," respecting the enemy as human, and more readily acknowledging psychiatric casualties. Shay writes, "I have written this book because I believe we should care about how soldiers are trained, equipped, led and welcomed home when they return from war."

America has yet to find its Homer as the Achaeans did; nonetheless, this creative and compassionate work is a worthwhile addition to the literature of combat and the narrative of the American trauma in Vietnam.

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Cheeseman, Graeme. *The Search for Self-Reliance: Australian Defence Since Vietnam*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1993. 255pp. \$A 24.99

Since the early 1970s the constant theme, heard with increasing loudness, in Australian defense policy formulation has been the drive to achieve "self-reliance." Faced with the possibility of having to defend Australia unilaterally,

Australian defense planners have been forced to square this enormous military requirement with limited resources. Despite the obvious pitfalls inherent in such a planning dilemma, there has been, with few exceptions, little criticism of the basic tenets of the policy of self-reliance.

One exception is Graeme Cheeseman of the Australian Defence Force Academy. Cheeseman argues that while the basic concept of self-reliance in Australian defense is achievable, the means chosen by recent Labor governments have been seriously flawed. To justify this contention, Cheeseman mercilessly exposes and critiques the problems of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). His bottom line is that Canberra spends too much for the defense capabilities produced. Cheeseman is of the school that believes that the Australian government's policies are predicated upon the U.S. security commitment—a foundation that in his opinion is neither reliable nor conceptually supportive of self-reliance.

In brief, Cheeseman argues that several steps are required for Canberra truly to achieve self-reliance: reducing the planned task-to-asset ratio of the ADF, increasing the ADF's capability to deal with real threats while maintaining a residual capacity for more remote contingencies, matching the ADF's structures and capabilities to existing and projected resources, and reducing the current overreliance on the United States for crucial supplies and services. To achieve this ambitious objective, Cheeseman advocates a policy that would tie Australia's security capabilities to the defense of the