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# Why Would Anyone Miss War?

By SEBASTIAN JUNGER

SEVERAL years ago I spent time with a platoon of Army infantry at a remote outpost in eastern Afghanistan, and after the deployment I was surprised that only one of the soldiers chose to leave the military at the end of his contract; many others re-upped and eventually went on to fight for another year in the same area. The soldier who got out, Brendan O'Byrne, remained a good friend of mine as he struggled to fit in to civilian life back home.

About a year later I invited Brendan to a dinner party, and a woman asked him if he missed anything at all about life at the outpost. It was a good question: the platoon had endured a year without Internet, running water or hot food and had been in more combat than almost any platoon in the United States military. By any measure it was hell, but Brendan didn't hesitate: "Ma'am," he said, "I miss almost all of it."

Civilians are often confused, if not appalled, by that answer. The idea that a psychologically healthy person could miss war seems an affront to the idea that war is evil. Combat is supposed to feel bad because undeniably bad things happen in it, but a fully human reaction is far more complex than that. If we civilians don't understand that complexity, we won't do a very good job of bringing these people home and making a place for them in our society.

My understanding of that truth came partly from my own time in Afghanistan and partly from my conversations with a Vietnam veteran named Karl Marlantes, who wrote about his experiences in a [devastating novel](#) called "Matterhorn." Some time after I met Karl, a woman asked me why soldiers "compartmentalize" the experience of war, and I answered as I imagined Karl might have: because society does. We avoid any direct look at the reality of war. And both sides of the political spectrum indulge in this; liberals tend to be scandalized that war can be tremendously alluring to young men, and conservatives rarely acknowledge that war kills far more innocent people than guilty ones. Soldiers understand both of these things but don't know how to talk about them when met with blank stares from friends and family back home.

"For a while I started thinking that God hated me because I had sinned," Brendan told me after he got back from Afghanistan. "Everyone tells you that you did what you had to do, and I just hate that comment because I didn't have to do any of it. I didn't have to join the Army; I didn't have to become airborne infantry. But I did. And that comment — 'You did what you had to do' — just drives me insane. Because is that what God's going to say — 'You did what you had to do? Welcome to heaven?' I don't think so."

If society were willing to acknowledge the very real horrors of war — even a just war, as I believe some are

— then men like Brendan would not have to struggle with the gap between their world view and ours. Every year on the anniversary of D-Day, for example, we acknowledge the heroism and sacrifice of those who stormed the beaches of Normandy. But for a full and honest understanding of that war, we must also remember the firebombing of Dresden, Frankfurt and Hamburg that killed as many as 100,000 Germans, as well as both conventional and nuclear strikes against Japan that killed hundreds of thousands more.

Photographs taken after allied air raids in Germany show piles of bodies 10 or 15 feet high being soaked in gasoline for burning. At first you think you're looking at images from Nazi concentration camps, but you're not — you're looking at people we killed.

I am in no way questioning the strategic necessity of those actions; frankly, few of us are qualified to do so after so much time. I am simply pointing out that if we as a nation avoid coming to terms with events like these, the airmen who drop the bombs have a much harder time coming to terms with them as individuals. And they bear almost all the psychic harm.

Change history a bit, however, and imagine those men coming back after World War II to a country that has collectively taken responsibility for the decision to firebomb German cities. (Firebombing inflicted mass civilian casualties and nearly wiped out cities.) This would be no admission of wrongdoing — many wars, like Afghanistan and World War II, were triggered by attacks against us. It would simply be a way to commemorate the loss of life, as one might after a terrible earthquake or a flood. Imagine how much better the bomber crews of World War II might have handled their confusion and grief if the entire country had been struggling with those same feelings. Imagine how much better they might have fared if there had been a monument for them to visit that commemorated all the people they were ordered to kill.

At first, such a monument might be controversial — but so was the Vietnam memorial on the Mall in Washington. Eventually, however, that memorial proved to be extremely therapeutic for veterans struggling with feelings of guilt and loss after the war.

Every war kills civilians, and thankfully our military now goes to great lengths to keep those deaths to a minimum. Personally, I believe that our involvement in Afghanistan has saved far more civilian lives than it has cost. I was there in the 1990s; I know how horrific that civil war was. But that knowledge is of faint comfort to the American soldiers I know who mistakenly emptied their rifles into a truck full of civilians because they thought they were about to be blown up. A monument to the civilian dead of Iraq and Afghanistan would not only provide comfort to these young men but also signal to the world that our nation understands the costs of war.

It doesn't matter that most civilian deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan were caused by insurgent attacks; if our soldiers died for freedom there — as presidents are fond of saying — then those people did as well. They, too, are among the casualties of 9/11. Nearly a decade after that terrible day, what a powerful message we would send to the world by honoring those deaths with our grief.

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