

The New York Times

Opinionator

NOVEMBER 4, 2010, 8:25 PM

Damage Control

By PHIL KLAY

[Home Fires](#) features the writing of men and women who have returned from wartime service in the United States military.

Tags:

[Iraq](#), [medical facilities](#), [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder](#), [the Marines](#)

In the time since my Home Fires post, “[Death and Memory](#),” was published, I’ve received a number of illuminating and often quite touching responses from readers. I’d like to address some of them here.

Perhaps the most heartening came from Garth Lindelef, one of Marines injured on the day I wrote about. If you’ve read it, you’ll remember him as the one pictured smiling and flashing a victory sign from a stretcher. After some kind words about the post, he wrote:

The other Marine who came in with me, Cpl. William Gadsby, had his leg amputated above the knee. He bounced back though. He met his wife while recovering at a military base back east. Their son was born on July 21, 2009, two years to the day of our injuries.

Several readers who commented focused on the experiences of medical personnel, who place themselves in danger to repair the damage of war and save lives. Wfhansen of Yakima, Wash., writes:

“[I am a retired Navy nurse](#). I served with Navy surgical support company attached to the Marines aboard the U.S.S. Iwo Jima during the first Gulf War. I think you are being unfair to yourself by trying to minimize what you are feeling or to say that you really didn’t experience horror or pain in any significant way because you were not involved in direct combat. You were in fact in the heart of the meat grinder and are bleeding as much as that marine you described. No man can hold an injured or maimed child in their arms and not say they have not seen the beast.”

It is true that the challenges our military medical personnel go up against are extraordinary. At the beginning of my deployment, so many injured came through TQ Surgical, not simply U.S. military but also Iraqi security forces, civilians and enemy personnel. The Navy docs, nurses and corpsmen were in a constant fight to save lives and limbs. Early in my deployment, when a suicide truck bomber detonated among a crowd of Iraqi families going to mosque, they took in so many injured they rapidly ran out of trauma tables and were doing surgery on the floor. With resources strained, they treated 50 people that night.

I’ll also always remember the conversation I had with a Navy nurse at TQ. He described how a Marine injured by an enemy sniper had come in with severe injuries. Despite frantic efforts, they couldn’t stabilize him, and he died. The scene would have been similar to that portrayed in the last of [Grif’s photos](#), sailors with downcast eyes listening to a brief prayer led by the chaplain. Except moments later, word came that the enemy sniper had been captured, was injured and was being transported to TQ Surgical for treatment.

When the enemy sniper came in, the surgical team worked furiously to save his life. Unlike with the Marine just moments earlier, they succeeded. This sailor then had to serve as a flight nurse, keeping the enemy stabilized as they took him to another hospital. As trying as that experience must have been, to me it seems emblematic of our military at its finest. A sailor, with every reason not to, caring for the enemy and respecting his humanity.

Home Fires [Death and Memory](#)
Read Phil Klay's previous post.

• [More From Home Fires](#) »

[Mohammed Azeemullah of Zliten, Libya](#), writes: “Hope suffering and death of other people in other community also spark the same emotions in you.”

Of course they do. One of the reasons I joined the Corps in the first place was because I thought that, regardless of whether the wars were good ideas, now that we were in them it was important they be executed well. Failure in that regard would mean lives, not just American lives but Afghan and Iraqi lives, too. That sentiment is not unique to me. Several of the sailors at TQ Surgical mentioned to me that the hardest but sometimes most rewarding thing about their job was dealing with children. As Al Qaeda's grip on Anbar started slipping, we saw a number of completely indiscriminate attacks by Al Qaeda against not just U.S. military but Iraqi civilians. The skill of our medical staff helped heal a lot of truly unforgivable damage.

Bob Lembke of Philadelphia writes about [demographic trends in the military](#), stating that “For the first time, the elites and rulers take no direct part in the war, at least not in the fighting.”

I have conflicted feelings about this. On the one hand, I think that the Marine Corps is, contrary to popular opinion, a good cross-section of America. This includes the so-called elites. When I started working for the 2nd Marine Division Public Affairs Office my boss was a Duke graduate, my two fellow lieutenants were Brown and U.C. Berkeley graduates, and I myself went to Dartmouth, for what that's worth.

Also, the latest [recruiting statistics](#) show that a majority of recruits come from middle and upper income neighborhoods and have received more education than the national average.

That said, it is true that certain segments of the population seem to view military service as passé or somehow beneath them. While I was in college, one professor urged me to see her in office hours so we could discuss how I was throwing my life away by joining the military. Another mourned that I had so much potential but was instead opting to head for a “desert of the mind.”

In the aftermath of Vietnam most Ivy League schools arranged for the removal of ROTC from their campuses. These institutions are proud of their alumni who go on to be corporate lawyers, doctors, philanthropists, investment bankers and educators. They seem less interested in providing the future military leaders who will execute national policy and represent America abroad. Students at these schools are missing out on an opportunity to accept tremendous responsibility and challenge, and our country is missing out on a possible crop of great leaders.

Furthermore, there are certainly geographic regions that provide more than their fair share of military recruits. I was always amazed at the number of Marines I met from Ohio and Texas. And as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates pointed out in a [speech at Duke University](#), “The state of Alabama, with a population of less than 5 million, has 10 Army ROTC host programs. The Los Angeles metro area, population over 12 million, has four host ROTC programs. And the Chicago metro area, population 9

million, has 3.”

A friend of mine was occasionally asked why would he join the Marine Corps, given that he was such a die hard liberal. His response was that he was joining precisely because of that stigma, in some circles, against military service. Our country’s military, in his mind, should represent the nation. I would agree.

Several readers have written about PTSD and its effects on the lives of service members. [Ann Byrnes of Ontario, Canada, writes](#): “An earlier post mentioned that you should create a support system around you in case the emotions do come pouring back at a later time. This is really important to do. Having been in the PTSD program with many soldiers who fought in Afghanistan, I saw first hand the issues they had with nightmares, flashbacks, concentration and anger problems, and potential alcoholism, among others. These trauma effects can surface immediately or be delayed for many years (20 years in my case).”

I agree about the importance of either formal support groups or simply networks of support for veterans. I myself have a community of veteran writers, some of whom have written for Home Fires ([Roy Scranton](#), [Maurice Decaul](#)), and that has been wonderful for me.

Finally, the first comment on my piece came from a veteran of the Korean War. Hank Nicol of Eureka, Calif., wrote:

I am an old (80) soldier (Korea). I take photographs at military funerals of other old soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen. I, too, feel emotion while looking at the pictures that I did not feel while looking through the viewfinder or while just looking for a good shot.

I remember feeling detached, almost as an onlooker, during a close in firefight. The emotion, or was it just unused extra adrenalin, afterward.

Thank you, sir, for your service. And thank you for your comments. It is always good to know that you are not alone, that the feelings that you have had, feelings that have caused self-doubt, self-reflection and self-incrimination, are shared, common, and human.

Phil Klay served in the Marine Corps for four years. He deployed to Anbar Province, Iraq, as a public affairs officer with the 2nd Marine Logistics Group (Forward) from January 2007 to February 2008. He is currently an M.F.A. candidate at Hunter College’s Graduate Program for Creative Writing.