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THE SATURDAY ESSAY

Treat Veterans With Respect, Not Pity

Too many Americans assume that troops who served in Iraq and Afghanistan must be traumatized.

By PHIL KLAY

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Luke Sharrett/Getty Images

A couple of years ago, I spoke at a storytelling competition about some Marines I'd known during our deployment in Iraq and my feelings on getting out of the Corps. After I left the stage, an older woman in the crowd came up to me and, without asking, started rubbing my back. Startled, I looked over at her. "It was very brave of you to tell that story," she said.

"Oh, thank you," I said, a little confused by what was happening. "I'm OK."

She smiled sympathetically but didn't stop. I wasn't sure what to do, so I turned to watch the next performer—and she remained behind me, rubbing me down as if I was a startled horse in a thunderstorm.

It was my first really jarring experience with an increasingly common reaction to my war stories: pity. I never thought anyone would pity me because of my time in the Marine Corps. I'd grown up in the era of

the Persian Gulf War, when the U.S. military shook off its post-Vietnam malaise with a startlingly decisive victory and Americans eagerly consumed stories about the Greatest Generation and the Good War through books like "Citizen Soldiers" by Stephen Ambrose and movies like "Saving Private Ryan." Joining the military was an admirable decision that earned you respect.

Early on in the Iraq war, after I accepted my commission in 2005, most people did at the very least seem impressed—*You ever fire those huge machine guns? Think you could kick those dudes' asses? Did you kill anyone?* I'd find myself in a bar back home on leave listening to some guy a few years out of college explaining apologetically that, "I was totally gonna join the military, you know, but…" The usual stereotype projected onto me was that of a battle-hardened hero, which I'm not.

The Colorado Springs Gazette/Associated Press

But as the Iraq war's approval levels sunk from 76% and ticker-tape parades to 40% and quiet forgetfulness, that flattering but inaccurate assumption has shifted to the notion that I'm damaged. Occasionally, someone will even inform me that I have post-traumatic stress disorder. They're never medical professionals, just strangers who've learned that I served.

One man told me that Iraq veterans "are all gonna snap in 10 years" and so, since I'd been back for three years, I had seven left. Another, after I'd explained that I didn't suffer from PTSD and that my deployment as a staff officer in Iraq had been mild, said that I needed to have an honest conversation with myself. And since I'm a writer, I've been asked more times than I can count whether my writing is an act of therapy.

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I'm never offended; these are genuinely concerned people trying to reach out. But I find it all strange, especially since the assumption never seems to be that I have the actual *symptoms* of PTSD—intrusive memories of some traumatic event, numbing behaviors, a state of persistent hyperarousal. Instead, it is more in line with the Iraq veteran Brian van Reet's observation that "PTSD has graduated from a diagnosis into an idiom used by soldiers and civilians to talk about all kinds of suffering, loss, grief, guilt, rage, and unrewarded sacrifice." For a certain subset of the population, my service means that I—along with all other veterans—must be, in some ill-defined way, broken.

I suppose it is the lot of soldiers and Marines to be objectified according to the politics of the day and the mood of the American people about their war. I know a veteran of World War II who hates the idea of the Greatest Generation. "War ruined my life," he told me. "I couldn't date girls after the war. I couldn't go with people. I was a loner… It took years after the war for me to realize that the Earth is beautiful, not always ugly. Because I had so many friends killed in front of me, on the side of me, and how they missed me, I have no idea."

Vietnam veterans—who, like World War II veterans, were a mix of volunteers and draftees and probably expected, at least at the beginning of the war, a similar beatification—had the opposite problem. In "Recovering From the War," Patience H.C. Mason relates her husband's story: "Bob, who never fired a gun in Vietnam…who saved hundreds of lives by going in for wounded when it was too hot for the

medevacs…got off the plane to buy some magazines in Hawaii. The clerk smiled at him and asked if he was coming back from Vietnam. He smiled back and nodded. 'Murderer!' she said."

Compared with that kind of reception, the earnest pity that Iraq and Afghanistan veterans often receive is awkward to complain about. It can sometimes even work to our advantage. When a friend of mine went apartment-hunting recently, he had a potential landlord cry and call him a "poor soul" because of his service. "I went along with it," he said sheepishly. He didn't want to blow his chances on the application.

Still, there is something deeply unsettling about the way we so often choose to think about those who served. "People only want to ask me about the worst things that happened," an Afghanistan veteran recently told me. "Never my best times in the Corps. Who were my favorite people I served with? Or even, hell, what was the biggest barracks rat I ever saw? It wasn't all bad."

The theologian Jonathan Edwards didn't consider pity an expression of "true virtue." Pity addresses the perceived suffering, not the whole individual. "Men may pity others under exquisite torment," Edwards wrote, "when yet they would have been grieved if they had seen their prosperity."

Pity sidesteps complexity in favor of narratives that we're comfortable with, reducing the nuances of a person's experience to a sound bite. Thus the response of a New York partygoer who—after a friend explained that the proudest moment of his deployment to Iraq came when his soldiers were fired on and decided not to fire back—replied, "That must make the nightmares even worse."

VETERAN HOWARD SNELL during a Pearl Harbor memorial service, Dec. 7, 2010. *Getty Images*

This insistence on treating veterans as objects of pity plays out in our national dialogue as well, whether it is Bill Maher saying on his April 4 HBO show, "Anytime you send anyone to war, they come back a little crazy," or a Washington Times article about PTSD claiming that, "Roughly 2.6 million veterans who serve in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD-type symptoms." That is roughly the total number of veterans who served, which suggests that the reporter thought there might be a 100% saturation rate of PTSD among veterans.

Expert estimates of the actual prevalence of PTSD vary between 11% and 20% for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, according to the U.S. Veterans Administration. A 2012 VA report concluded that 247,243

veterans had been diagnosed with the disorder at VA hospitals and clinics. (For some perspective on these numbers: According to experts cited by the VA, some 8% of the overall U.S. population suffers from PTSD at some point in their lives, compared with up to 10% of Desert Storm veterans and about 30% of those from Vietnam.)

Some of these diagnosed veterans are my friends, and though their injuries certainly deserve all the research and support that we as a society can give, the current narrative about PTSD does them no favors. Even the Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter David Finkel, who has produced some of the bravest and most admirable reporting on the Iraq war and its aftermath, can fall into uncomfortable generalizations. In his recent book "Thank You for Your Service," he writes of a battalion of 800 men: "All the soldiers…came home broken in various degrees, even the ones who are fine."

I don't know what it means to be simultaneously "broken" and "fine." I do have friends with real PTSD, which they manage with varying degrees of success. I also have friends whose pride in their service is matched by feelings of sorrow, anger and bitterness. But I wouldn't classify them as "broken." If a friend of yours just died on his seventh deployment in a war that hardly makes the news anymore and you didn't feel sad, angry and bitter, perhaps that is what counts as "broken." Likewise, if the absence of any public sense that we are a nation still at war doesn't leave you feeling alienated, perhaps that means you're "broken" too.

Pity places the focus on what's wrong with veterans. But for veterans looking at the society that sent them to war, it may not feel like they're the ones with the most serious problem.

Experts think PTSD occurs:

- In about 11-20% of U.S. veterans of the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan
- In as many as 10% of veterans of the 1991 Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm)
- In about 30% of veterans of the Vietnam War

Worse, those warm feelings of pity toward us broken veterans can too easily turn ugly. After the April 2 shooting spree at Fort Hood that left three soldiers dead and 16 wounded, the Huffington Post ran an article titled "This Map Shows the Deadly Aftermath of War Right Here at Home," complete with a graphic showing killings committed by veterans.

Such "ticking time-bombs" articles usually fail to put their numbers in perspective. Indeed, one Marine who had trained as an intelligence analyst crunched the murder-rate numbers for a VA blog and found that, if the Huffington Post's numbers were accurate, the rate for veteran-committed homicide would still be a fourth of that for the general population. (The Huffington Post later took down the article, admitting that it was "incomplete and misleading.") While the exact numbers are difficult to measure, it appears that the crime rate for veterans is comparable to, if not lower than, the civilian crime rate, with veterans actually underrepresented in the U.S. prison population, according to Justice Department statistics.

As Sgt. Dakota Meyer, a young Marine and PTSD sufferer who was awarded the Medal of Honor for heroism in Afghanistan, explained after the Fort Hood shooting, "PTSD does not put you in the mind-set to go out and kill innocent people… The media label this shooting PTSD, but if what that man did is PTSD, then I don't have it."

Kristen Rouse, a veteran and blogger who was struck by another article alerting fearful readers to ZIP Codes that have large numbers of veterans with PTSD, wrote that the article treated a PTSD database "like a sex offender registry." A recent opinion piece in the New York Times even tried to link combat trauma with membership in the Ku Klux Klan. If vets are truly "broken," after all, there really is no telling what they might do.

This perspective is more than a little bizarre. Veterans rank among our most engaged, productive citizens. Just look at nonprofit groups such as The Mission Continues, which provides public-service fellowships for veterans across the country ("Reporting for duty in your community," their website says), or at the engagement efforts of groups such as the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (which strives to connect "the 99% of the population who haven't served in Iraq or Afghanistan with the 1% who have").

In New York, the contributions being made by veterans couldn't have been more apparent than after Hurricane Sandy. When the city failed to coordinate relief efforts in the Rockaways, the veteran-led relief group Team Rubicon filled the leadership gap by using a data-visualization program to map conditions and coordinate efforts to help people stranded after the storm. Veterans are used to creating order in chaotic environments—just the sort of people a city in a crisis needs.

But let's not see the veterans engaged in this work as a group of "healthy" veterans who can be contrasted easily with a second group of "broken" veterans. Some of our most inspiring veterans have been plagued by the same issues that tend to receive such hyperbolic press. One of the founders of Team Rubicon, Clay Hunt, was a Marine who served two deployments in Iraq, provided relief efforts after earthquakes in Chile and Haiti, raised money for wounded veterans and helped lobby Congress for veterans' benefits. He also, at age 28, joined the sad ranks of veterans who have taken their own lives.

I suppose that pity is one natural response to such a story. But I find it difficult to pity someone who, when his life is considered in its totality, achieved so much good and touched so many people.

War subjects some of its participants to more than any person can bear, and it destroys them. War makes others stronger. For most of us, it leaves a complex legacy. And though many veterans appreciate the well-meaning sentiments behind even the most misdirected pity, I can't help feeling that all of us, especially those who are struggling, deserve a little less pity and a little more respect.

Mr. Klay served in the U.S. Marine Corps from 2005 to 2009, including a tour of duty in Iraq from January 2007 to February 2008. He is the author of "Redeployment," a short-story collection recently published by the Penguin Press.

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