

**Achilles in Vietnam**  
**Combat Trauma and the**  
**Undoing of Character**

Jonathan Shay, MD, Ph.D. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. (New York: Atheneum, 1994) 236 pages, \$20.00 US

**J**onathan Shay has written a remarkable book. This book is at once erudite, eloquent and outspoken. Even though Canada was not involved in the prosecution of the Vietnam War, it is a book which should be read by every officer or non-commissioned officer who commands, will command, or intends to command, troops in battle. For them, this is a very important type to which they are not normally exposed by their training.

This is also a text that will have great value to officers and NCOs who are expected to be employed in peacekeeping duty, a duty for which Canada is justly famous worldwide. This observation is made not because of Dr. Shay's

military acumen, which has grown great through his patients, but simply because the book points out and underlines the evil and horror which men are capable of inflicting on each other. This is apparent in Yugoslavia, Somalia and Rwanda today.

Dr. Shay is a practising psychiatrist who, as a member of the Veteran's Improvement Program in Cambridge, Massachusetts, treats American combat veterans of the Vietnam War who are afflicted with severe chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He points out in the introduction to the book how, several years ago, he was struck by the similarity of the war experience of Vietnam combat veterans to Homer's account of Achilles in *The Iliad*, although *The Iliad* was written about 2,700 years ago. Written with the encouragement of Professor Gregory Nagy of Harvard University, a leading scholar of classical Greek literature, this is a very important and timely book.

No one should shy away from reading this book for fear that it is a psychiatric textbook, too complex to be understood. Though providing insights into the human character and its workings not easily found elsewhere, it is also an extremely well-written, clear, concise and accurate description of the trauma created in formerly rational human beings, through their continual involvement in deadly combat. In a sense, by juxtaposing the experiences of his patients with those of Achilles in *The Iliad*, Dr. Shay has demonstrated that "there is nothing really new under the sun." What is new, however, is the intensity, magnitude and seeming interminability of the conflict as well as the severity and longevity of the subsequent psychological illness which can

cripple the soldier who finds himself embroiled in it as easily and as permanently as a round from a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Dr. Shay's great contribution, however, is his emphasis on, and description of, the failure of leadership and the development of the "berserk" state. Both of these facets seem to be particularly endemic in the Vietnam war, and both are confirmed by the statement and/or actions of his patients over and over again. The nature of the combat in which these men found themselves engaged has, of course, occurred in war before; one immediately thinks of the siege and horror of Verdun, of Stalingrad, of the battles of Kursk and Kohima. All of these had their particular horrors, as did Vietnam.

Dr. Shay makes many penetrating observations with regard to the leadership of the Vietnam soldier, and perhaps the most important of these in relation to the failure of command is the lack of time to mourn. He points out that, after the death of a close friend in action that "thwarted, uncommunalized grief is a major reason why there are so many severe, long-term psychological injuries from the Vietnam war," and he ably demonstrates this with the observance of their respect for their own and enemy dead. He also contrasts the lack of contempt for the enemy displayed in *The Iliad* with the active contempt, rooted in racism, that occurred among American soldiers in Vietnam.

It is difficult to review a book from the galley-proofs; however, if the published editor is cognizant of the corrections made and revises accordingly, the technical quality of this text will be high. Dr. Shay's writing style is superb,

and he has a talent to grip and hold the reader from the beginning of his text until the very end. Liberally interspersed with anonymous but appropriate quotations from his tape recordings of treatment sessions with his patients, and incorporating wisely chosen and appropriate solutions from *The Iliad* in illustration of his points, this book is less of a text and more a work of literature that cannot help but be of benefit to all those who take the time and trouble to read it. It is one which reminds me very much of Guy Sajer's *The Forgotten Soldier* about the Russian front in World War II, and it certainly can proudly stand alongside John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*.

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