

COMBAT FELT LIKE 'HOME'

By Adam Walker

When people return from war, particularly those who actively participated in combat, there is something different about them. No doubt much of it can be attributed to post-traumatic stress, though many are reluctant to accept that diagnosis thinking it comes with a "damaged goods" or "victim" label. Men who willingly chose to take up arms and meet the enemy, who felt that it was a calling, will never see themselves as victims. Nonetheless, they recognize in themselves something unsettled and unanswered.

War is hell. It is not glamorous and the glory which appeals to young men quickly turns them into old men. The young men return disillusioned, angry, bitter, and aged beyond their years. They do not regret having fought. For a certain kind of man, the one thing worse than war is for there to be a war and to not be a part of it. When that man comes home one thing he hesitates to tell is that he misses it. He misses combat because combat felt like home.

What can this be? What can this mean? He can neither explain the feeling nor deny its truth. Is it madness? He is not a "killer" in the sense of a psychopath who enjoys inflicting pain. Yet, he has the capacity for violence if not the appetite. He feels great enmity towards his nation's foes, but not hatred. So, what is it? Why does he miss combat, why does he yearn to return to it, even knowing the great loss and pain it caused?

I have experienced this in my own life, and as an avid reader have seen those warriors in preceding generations express the same sentiment. I conclude it is because we felt the most alive when we were so close to death. We felt the closest to others when we shared danger and hardship when common purpose cemented us one to another. It was the last place where we felt like we really belonged.

As one navigates life upon the return from combat he often engages in recklessness. Risky behavior that defies reason but brings a "rush" is commonplace. It is hard to settle down to a nine-to-five job when the responsibilities you once had meant the difference between life and death. The veteran looks upon his country's social landscape with bitterness as people clash over race, political ideology, and other petty differences. When he was in combat, he fought and bled with men from every ethnicity, socio-economic, and educational background imaginable. Their differences were interesting but irrelevant. Their sameness bonded them, their shared values and purpose. Things made sense then. This is why combat felt like home and home feels like, well...alien.

A man needs a home. A place where he belongs, where he is a part of something greater than himself, where he has purpose, and where relationships are real. Combat gave him that, but in its wake...what to do?

Some remedy this by staying in uniform. There will be another war someday, somewhere. By becoming a "lifer" one can remain immersed in the culture and prepare the next generation for the next fight while remaining among

"your own people". Those who return to "Hometown USA" have a greater struggle. Only by maintaining relationships with their brothers in the veteran community can they navigate life as their hair turns gray.

The experience of combat should be appreciated, but not longed for. The cost was too high. Instead, the veteran should apply the principles where he now lives. Invest in relationships and people beyond the casual surface level. Find something with purpose, partnering with others, and mentor them. As you tell stories of those with whom you fought you honor their memory and, in a fashion, they live on. Their stories embody principles of sacrifice, courage, and love. They serve as an example and an inspiration to the next generation.

Instead of seeking danger, thrill, or manufacturing conflict to replicate the feeling of combat (where you felt the most alive), seek relationships with others. Just as you looked up to the old man who fought in yesterday's war, some young men now look up to you. What will they find? An unstable, bitter, and thirsty man? Or will they find one who takes the time to share his story, teach them, and encourage them to be their best selves?

The Marine Corps says it has three main purposes. To make Marines, to win battles, and to return to America better citizens. A citizen belongs to a community. You as the combat veteran have the obligation to be a better citizen. You are a leader. You have the power to serve as a unifying example as you remind people when the chips were down it did not matter what color, creed, or background a man came from. You fought for one another and each thought of the other before himself. You got through combat that way and you can help others get through life through these same principles.

You are privileged to have served in combat, not every warrior gets called to battle. Do not carry bitterness forward. It is worth repeating, though combat felt like home, it is because when you were that close to death, you felt the most alive and connected to those around you.

This life we have is short. Now that we are back here in "the good life" or "the world" we don't often reflect on its brevity until disease, accident, or disaster land on our doorstep. So, for the few remaining days we have been gifted, let us invest in people. Though we cannot fully replicate what we felt in combat, we can at least bring what was good of it here...and make it home. The brothers whom we lost wanted us to make it home, so now we must make home here.



Adam Walker served as a Marine infantryman for twenty-five years, retiring as a Master Gunnery Sergeant with three tours in Iraq and a Purple Heart. You can read more of his work on his blog: takeitontheleftfoot.com

