



“This is not a Republican or Democratic issue. This is a different kind of warfare, and I do not know what we are doing for our veterans, but it is not enough.”

The above words were at the end of an email I received this week from an associate sharing that his nephew—a Special Ops veteran—had ended his life. Here is how he put it:

"Last night, the demons that haunted him because of what he had seen, or what he had seen done to his comrades, or what he was ordered to do, overcame him and he chose to end his life."

Sadly, this is a story that is told daily by family members of our veterans. In fact, statistically it is shared by twenty-two families every day as that is the number of our veterans who commit suicide each day.

Prior to our release of *Invisible Scars* last May, I had very little contact with our hero veterans and rarely heard such stories. However, since the film's release we have received many similar emails and had many conversations in person and by phone with men and women who shared their stories after viewing our film. Early on in the process I came to the same conclusion - what we are doing for our veterans is not enough.

Yes, we do a much better job recognizing them and welcoming them home than with our Vietnam vets, but there is still much that needs to be done once the "welcome home" is over. We have found that one of the greatest obstacles to helping our combat veterans, who are struggling with the emotional and mental trauma of war, is getting recognition that this can be a problem.

Possibly, this much needed conversation will take on a larger dimension after this weekend's release of the film *American Sniper*. Eugene Cuevas discusses the reasons and the need in his review of the film in this month's article.

In closing, let me thank all of you who helped us in 2014 to make copies of *Invisible Scars* available to our veterans free of charge. Thousands of copies were given away. This year we anticipate giving away over ten thousand copies - perhaps tens of thousands if some of the partnerships we are developing come to fruition. So, if you are ready to stand with us in 2015 we can do even more. However we do it, let's all do our part to do more for our veterans.

May God Bless our Nation and Those Who Serve!

Bob Waldrep

## Inside This Issue

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## AMERICAN SNIPER: THE MOVIE, THE LEGEND AND THE DUTY BY EUGENE CUEVAS



Ice-cold soft drink - check, bucket of popcorn - check, box of candy - yes, sir! Check. Now where did I put that ticket? It's Friday night, or as we commonly refer to it in our family, "Movie Night." If you're hitting the theater this weekend, you have a few good choices, but many of you have been waiting enthusiastically for this one in particular be

cause tonight, *American Sniper* premieres nationwide. With the critical reception and the emotionally evocative trailers promoting this film, it's sure to draw crowds everywhere this weekend.

But what kind of movie do you expect to see? You may be looking for Clint Eastwood's next hit as a director or just curious to see if actor Bradley Cooper can really bring the dramatic delivery critics have claimed. Or maybe it's the real-life story of American Navy Seal Chris Kyle that's drawn your interest. Film critic Leonard Maltin claims, "Clint Eastwood has realized the full potential of this riveting story."<sup>[i]</sup> Kyle's story as "America's deadliest sniper" seems like that kind of larger-than-life experience that only a director like Eastwood or an actor like Cooper can fully illustrate, but let us not forget the real man that's represented here.

Kyle's book, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. History*, upon which the film is largely based, focuses primarily on Kyle's battlefield reports from his four deployments in the Iraq War. However, the film adaptation goes beyond that publication to further capture nuances of Kyle's struggles between each of his four tours and his final healing process returning home. According to those closest to Kyle, the film gets it right.

*American Sniper* focuses on the drive of Chris Kyle as what his father calls "the sheepdog." American military and first responder units have often referred to the motivation of some to be protectors and guardians as being like the sheepdog that stands between the sheep and the wolves. Kyle's guardian mentality characterizes each of his relationships on and off the battlefield, not only helping him in-

crease his stats as a sniper but also driving a wedge between he and his wife, Taya (played by Sienna Miller in the film). The responsibilities of duty become a burden that almost severs Kyle's marriage, but by redirecting that same sheepdog perspective, Kyle finds hope in serving other veterans wounded (physically or emotionally) in combat.

Viewing the film myself, I could not help but be moved by it. Sure, Eastwood directs the film with the expertise and respect needed in this story. And yes, Cooper's performance stands shoulders above any work he's delivered before this. Nevertheless, as the credits rolled without sound, I watched as my fellow movie patrons left the theatre in complete silence. Never having seen that level of awe at the end of a movie, I know it wasn't the glitz or glamour or cinematic language that had so captivated the audience. I believe the reality and impact of the real Chris Kyle had been so fully delivered through the film, viewers could muster no other reaction than sheer reverence.



While Kyle's statistics as a trained sniper earned him the moniker "Legend" among the Marines he protected, and certain accolades may be unique to him, much of his experience as a veteran is all too common. In reality, countless men and women have lived similar stories - stories of war, stories of fear and death, stories of the heartache and gritty complexities of returning from deployment.

War changes people, and as history professor Andrew Wiest said, "You can't see the things these young men and women have seen and not be changed by it."<sup>[ii]</sup> The experiences of war bring with them a horrific weight that doesn't simply fall off when the service member returns home. They each bear the burden of that weight back into their relationships, their jobs, and their identity. In "The



Things They Carried," a short story by Vietnam War veteran and author Tim O'Brien, he writes, "They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing - these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight." [iii]

In American Sniper, Kyle continually places himself in harms way instead of resting more securely in a sniper's perch because he feels he can't save enough of his fellow service members from that position. He carries the weight of responsibility as part of his gear, just like the small Bible he tucks into his chest pocket before each mission. The duty to stand against evil, to protect others from harm weighs heavily on his conscience.

What hope do we offer someone who has born such burdens of battle? A yellow ribbon around the tree and a handful of medals over the shoulder while offering much to dignify the service and sacrifice, present little in the way of

with the service he issued to others suffering the wounds of war.

Telling though is the commitment of FITCO Cares Foundation. According to a New York Times article, "In 2011, Mr. Kyle created the Fitco Cares Foundation to provide veterans with exercise equipment and counseling. He believed that exercise and the camaraderie of fellow veterans could help former soldiers ease into civilian life." [iv] After fighting through his own post war stress, Kyle found hope in helping other veterans adapt to civilian life. This mission characterized the man after the war - the man Kyle's family and friends want the film to honor. In honoring Kyle's life and his commitment to other veterans, FITCO released a public statement shortly after Kyle's death: "The need for awareness about PTSD is almost as important as the brave men and women who return from combat living with it. Chris knew this, was passionate about helping those with it, and following his procession, we intend to carry that legacy to fight it." [v]



healing. Clinically, we use the term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to identify emotional and psychological wounds. However, that term itself faces much scrutiny as so many veterans refuse to be labeled as having a "disorder." For many that moniker reflects the popular stereotypes of the "crazy Vietnam pilot" (think Howling Mad, "H.M." Murdoch from the 1980's tv show A-Team) or the more recent image of accused murderer Eddie Ray Routh, who will face trial in May of this year for the killing of Chris Kyle and fellow veteran Chad Littlefield. Both Kyle and Littlefield were killed while trying to help Routh work through his own post-traumatic stress. Such a pointless death offers nothing to reconcile the burdens of America's most prolific sniper

Returning home, the combat veteran continues to carry the weight of that battlefield, and fellow service members often must be the ones who carry the weight of healing. They should not fight this battle alone. We have a responsibility as a community to fight it with them and for them.

One battlefield today lies in distinguishing between the clinical diagnoses of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder versus other emotional/psychological wounds. What some veterans experience as a traumatic incident of war may be better classified in some cases as "moral injury." Brett Litz, PhD, and other research professionals define moral injury as "perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral be-





liefs and expectations." [vi] Put another way, in the line of duty, the service members may find themselves facing choices that conflict with their own moral code. We all have a spiritual/moral framework that guides our measurement of good and evil, yet the duties of war often attack that very framework and force the service member into moral compromise.

In the film American Sniper, we see Kyle struggle with the moral dilemmas of when to take a shot and when to wait. Kyle's first mission into the field puts a mother and young child in his crosshairs. As the mother hands a grenade to the boy and urges him to run into the advancing Marines, Kyle alone has to decide between taking the life of a child or allowing that child to kill others. From the comfort of our seats in the cinemplex, we can philosophize and second guess as to what we would do, but as Army Veteran John McCarty says, "Until you've actually looked down the sight to actually kill someone, you don't know what it's like." [vii]



Instead of trying to judge the right and wrong of it all, we bear a deeper responsibility to actually help the veteran heal from the wounds of that dilemma. When the soldier's morality shakes and the foundations of his worldview rattle in the heat of battle and the nightmares carried home,

what comfort, what peace, what grace do we offer?

The Apostle Paul when contemplating the evil he had committed in respect to the sins of the whole world, labeled himself "the worst of them all" (NIV, I Timothy 1:15). The atrocities committed by Paul himself stood so apparently opposed to his morality, he could think of no one, no sin, no evil worse than what he had done. Yet, Paul's confession finds balance in the peace of Christ, for in the same breath, he rests in this hope: "The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (NIV, I Timothy 1:14).

Paul found solace in knowing that in spite of, or better yet, in resolution of those moral infractions Paul had committed, God's love abounded, being "poured out" as salve for an invisible scar. Through Christ's work on our behalf, that same salve that covers Paul's moral compromises is available to you and I as well.

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