

End-of-Life Care for Veterans

By Chaplain (CDR) David Thompson, CHC, USNR (Ret.)

Editor's Note: Chaplain David Thompson, a former MCDES member, is a retired U.S. Navy Chaplain who has worked extensively with returning veterans and is the co-author of *Beyond the Yellow Ribbon: Ministering to Returning Combat Veterans* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009). This article has been adapted with permission from an article by the author entitled "End of Life" in MCA's spring 2015 issue of *The Military Chaplain* magazine

After retiring as a military chaplain, I served for a number of years as a grief counselor for a large Twin Cities Hospital Hospice Program and later as a chaplain for a very large nursing home in the Twin Cities. During that time I discovered there is a special grief challenge for many veterans dealing with unresolved things they experienced during their military service that has often been repressed for many years, surfacing again at end-of-life. Anyone dealing with end-of-life issues in older veterans may want to explore this issue further. There is a great four-minute clip on NPR's *All Things Considered* program presentation "End-of-Life Care Can Be Different for Veterans" (see: <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/28/382218316/end-of-life-care-can-be-different-for-veterans>).

I ran into this challenge with some frequency when I was working with older veterans in hospice and in a nursing home. I would often have conversations with elderly veterans, many from WW II and Korea and one from WW I. When they found out I was a veteran they would really open up; first tentatively telling me about "a funny thing that happened to me on the way to a war;" then they would tell me about a close scrape with death or injury in war, often with a tinge of irony or humor; and if they felt safe, they would let me in on the fear they felt parachuting into Normandy on D-Day or landing in the first wave at Iwo Jima in a hail of bullets and shelling in WW II.

And if they really felt safe in sharing those experiences, they would begin

to share unresolved grief over loss of buddies or share things they did or did not do that resulted in their friend's deaths. Some shared being involved in killing unarmed German soldiers who had surrendered. Several shared getting rid of an incompetent officer that was going to get them all killed, by not telling him where they knew a minefield was; and they let the officer walk out into the mine field and be blown up (and they then got an replacement officer who was more competent, giving them a better chance at survival in the war).

Many times I'm sure I was the only person to whom they ever told such dark stories, that few, outside of their band of brothers, would understand. I was just another veteran who would listen. Maybe because I was clergy (a former military chaplain), they felt free to unburden themselves at end-of-life. I'm sure they never talked to their immediate family about these experiences, but they would to someone from "their veteran family," or non-judgmental clergy, or an attentive caregiver, whom they trusted, who would listen to their story with reverence and empathy.

One day in 1985, as a Navy chaplain serving Marines on Okinawa, Japan, the site of the worst battle in the Pacific in WW II, I got invited to "walk the battlefield" with the Marine Commanding General. He was later awarded the Medal of Honor for heroic actions in that battle in 1945, where he single-handedly killed over 100 attacking enemy soldiers while surrounded alone on a hill in this battle.

The Medal of Honor was awarded to him 53 years later in 1998, seven months before his death.

On the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa, memorializing the 12,500 American soldiers, marines, and sailors who were killed (as well as 110,000 Japanese soldiers), the general just needed to "walk and talk" about those days, when as a 22-year-old Marine Corporal, he was young and brave. It turned into "a grief walk" as he explained the battle to me, with its deafening noise, filth, suffering, and death, recalling by name so many friends he lost in that battle. He just needed to talk, to unburden his soul and come to some sort of peace with his war-time experience. I was so



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glad I was there to listen and felt so privileged to share that reflective and grief-filled moment with him.

Some veterans face moral injuries after war. They were trying to find grace at the end-of-life for sins of omission or commission in war. For others, it wasn't so much a religious thing, with a capitol "R," but just needing help to find spiritual closure to events in life that were intruding late in life; due to something they saw, did, or did not do in their military service many years ago (like the Vietnam veteran in a clip of the PBS American experience program "War Letters" (see: <http://robertkennerfilms.com/films/files/detail.php?id=6>).

For veterans suffering moral injuries, which often emerges as a late-blooming problem in end-of-life situations, there is an attempt by a veteran to find some resolution to things they saw or did (or refrained from doing) suffered earlier in life, as they try to prepare for a "good death."

Most of these veterans had frozen in time those war-time moments, to later be able to recall them in vivid detail, telling of years of nightmares they put up with most of their lives, rarely having had a good night's sleep since the war (see: <http://storycorps.org/animation/germans-in-the-woods>).

I remember one veteran, who was actively dying, telling me that, after coming home from air combat with the 8th Air Force "Bomber Boys" over Germany in WWII, he had wartime

nightmares almost every night of his life. Only 20% of his contemporaries ever completed the required 25 missions safely; 80% of the airmen were either killed, wounded or became a Prisoner of War. He said he looked forward to dying, because he thought, "I'd finally get a good night's sleep."

All caregivers involved in working with veterans at the end-of-life have a unique opportunity to help veterans talk about their wartime experiences, recalling moments of bravery and courage as well as times of fear, suffering, and grief. It is a great opportunity for us to help a veteran find their voice to long repressed experiences; and as caring listeners, help a veteran find their way home from war.

I think we are just touching the surface on this stuff that has been there all along after our wars, but which we really haven't talked much about as a culture. War does bad stuff to many people in their hearts and minds. We have to make provisions to help returning veterans tell their war stories well, including both good and bad experiences, so they can live full, not haunted, lives after honorable wartime service.

Awareness of unique issues for veterans at the sunset of life will help clergy, medical personnel, therapists, and social workers deal with these issues, assisting veterans in navigating the tricky waters of coming to terms with often long-suppressed war stories of their lives.

Further Reading/ Viewing: Suggestions from David A. Thompson

- Junger, S. (2014). "Why Veterans Miss War." TED Talk. Available at https://www.ted.com/talks/sebastian_junger_why_veterans_miss_war?language=en.
- Litz, B. (2015). "Moral Injury and Repair in Veterans of War." 2015 Ethics Lecture at the U.S. Naval War College, New Port, RI. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubD1aQ2r_80.
- Maguen, S., Litz, B. (2012). "Moral Injury in Veterans of War." *PTSD Research Quarterly*. Available at <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/newsletters/research-quarterly/v23n1.pdf>.
- Marlantes, K., Cook, M. (2015). "A Conversation About What It Is Like To Go To War." 2015 Ethics Lecture at the U.S. Naval War College. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tC2mRSAZAs>.
- Nash, W. P., Litz, B. (2013). "Moral Injury: A Mechanism for War-Related Psychological Trauma in Military Family Members." *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*. Available at <https://www.law.upenn.edu/live/files/4754-nash-and-litz-moral-injury-in-military-familiespdf>.
- Pryer, Lt. Col. Douglas A. (2014). "Moral Injury: What Leaders Don't Mention When They Talk of War." *Army Magazine*. Available at: <http://armymagazine.org/2014/08/14/moral-injury-what-leaders-dont-mention-when-they-talk-of-war>.
- Thompson, D.A. (2014). "Moral Injury: An Often Untreated Veteran Injury" *Military Chaplain*. Available at: https://mca-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/TMC_Fall_2014_web.pdf.

...I am defining moral injury as violation of conscience regarding what a person did, or sometimes what the person did not do, in a morally ambiguous situation under authority in a military system.

– David A. Thompson, from "Moral Injury: An Often Untreated Veteran Injury," *The Military Chaplain*, Volume 87, Number 3, Fall 2014. Available at: https://mca-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/TMC_Fall_2014_web.pdf.