"No one who has read this book will ever read the *Iliad* in quite the same way."
—Gary Kamiya, *San Francisco Examiner*

"His book is a cogent, painful reminder that in the broken lives of Vietnam veterans we are still paying for what was distinctly unoriginal about that war as well as for its peculiarly original evils."
—*The New Yorker*

"Thank God for people like Jonathan Shay, trauma surgeons in their own right who can bear the truth about war."
—Gail Caldwell, *The Boston Sunday Globe*

"Jonathan Shay's book is one of the most fascinating accounts of the Vietnam War and one of the penetrating analyses of the warriors' experiences."
—Lt. Col. Arieh Y. Shalev, M.D., (Res.) IDF,
Chairman, Dept. of Psychiatry,
Hebrew University, Jerusalem

"For a combat veteran who has no formal training in the classics, *Achilles in Vietnam* is a bolt of lightning cracking through the ages. What was then is now, and I felt that in the author's analysis. For literary and historical scholars it is a challenge in its insight. For the psychologist and psychiatrist it gives me pause to wonder, what the hell have you been doing all these years? Pick up this work of art and use it."
—Rod Kane, author of *Veteran's Day*

"Poetry, psychiatry, and horror are joined in this remarkable book."
—Daniel Ford, author of *Incident at Muc Wa*

"Jonathan Shay has made an important and valuable contribution not only to the clinical body of work regarding PTSD and its treatment, but to the literature of the Vietnam War. This is not only a book for clinicians, but for veterans themselves, their loved ones, and all who wish to understand the Vietnam experience "
—Robert B. Rheault, Colonel, U.S. Army, Ret., Founder and
Director of Outward Bound for Veterans Suffering from PTSD

"*Achilles in Vietnam* poignantly illustrates both the parallels and the divergencies of two wars separated by twenty-seven centuries and their impact on the lives of the soldiers who fought in them. Must reading for mental health professionals who work with Vietnam veterans—or veterans of any war."
—John V. Sommer, Jr., Executive Director of the American
Legion and Vietnam veteran

"An audacious, erudite, and above all, profoundly humane book by an exceptional psychiatrist who illuminates the suffering of the Vietnam veterans he treats and the human experience of combat and grief in Homer's 3,000-year-old poem the *Iliad. Achilles in Vietnam* rattles the heart but bestows hope."
—Gloria Emerson, author of *Winners and Losers*

"*Achilles in Vietnam* has a definite place in the classroom, offering students a bridge to the past. Shay makes Homer accessible to the modern psyche by demonstrating that many seemingly foreign aspects of the *Iliad*'s narrative are alive and well in any soldier's experience."

—*Bryn Mawr Classical Review*

"A heart-rending look at the permanent ruin war can wreak in any age."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"*Achilles in Vietnam* is destined to become a modern classic, just like the ancient classic upon which the book is based. This is because the book gets to the essence of the veteran, and represents a delightfully brilliant integration of history, art, psychiatry, and science."

—Erwin Randolph Parson, Ph.D.,
The Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy

"Shay has done a remarkable job of comparing and contrasting the Greek soldiers before Troy and U.S. grunts in Vietnam. This is a profoundly human book and a strong, realistic argument against modern warfare."

—ALA *Booklist*

"A summary gives no sense of the incredible power of this book. Shay's account of [the veterans'] pain overflows with understanding. We all lost our innocence in Vietnam. No one who reads this book will ever forget how radical the loss was."

—*Men's Journal*

"Carefully contrasting the legend of Achilles with his patients' debilitating traumas, Shay makes us understand that there are broad universal truths in the murky crossroads of morality and war."

—*Washington Post Book World*

"Shay's voice is informed and impassioned. *Achilles in Vietnam* should be required reading for all present and future government and military leaders. It is a valuable and inspirational text for all citizens."

—Philip K. Jason (U.S. Naval Academy,
Annapolis), *Magill's Literary Annual, 1995*

"If you want to read a book with great insight into the literature of war and a great understanding about the trauma and shattered lives of American combat soldiers, Jonathan Shay's book is a must."

—Tom Barden, Director of American Studies,
University of Toledo

"Once in a while a book comes along which is truly therapeutic. *Achilles in Vietnam* . . . has integrated for me many diverse elements, weaving and woven through the fabric of my own life and practice."

—E. Deborah Gilman, M.D., Women in Psychiatry column,
Psychiatric Times

"Order, meaning, and morality are fundamentally issues of religion, spirituality, and transcendence, and Shay's book brings a number of them to the fore."

—T. R. Hobbes, Professor of Old Testament,
McMaster Divinity College

Also by Jonathan Shay

Odysseus in America:
Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming

ACHILLES IN VIETNAM

Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character

Jonathan Shay, M.D., Ph.D.

SCRIBNER
New York London Toronto Sydney

SCRIBNER
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

First Scribner trade paperback edition 2003

SCRIBNER and colophon are registered trademarks
of Simon & Schuster Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases,
please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales:
1-800-456-6798 or business@simonandschuster.com

Manufactured in the United States of America

23 25 27 29 30 28 26 24 22

The Library of Congress has cataloged the
Touchstone edition as follows:
Shay, Jonathan.
Achilles in Vietnam : combat trauma and the undoing of
character / Jonathan Shay.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. War neuroses. 2. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961–1975—
Psychological aspects. 3. Homer. Iliad. 4. Post-traumatic
stress disorder. 5. Veterans—Mental health—United States.
6. War—Psychological aspects. I. Title.
RC550.S53 1994
616.85'212—dc20 93-32034
CIP

ISBN 0-689-12182-2
0-684-81321-1 (Pbk)

I respectfully dedicate this book to the men of the Veterans Improvement Program (VIP) who have generously taught me and entrusted me with their experiences of war. In the larger sense they are the authors of this book.

These are their individual dedications:

IN MEMORY OF Brothers Earl A. Nickerson, Cecil Lee Dobson, Stephen M. Kenoffel, and Thomas John Protrack
IN MEMORY OF David Lee Hinz
IN MEMORY OF Capt. William "Blue" Casey, U.S. Cav.
IN MEMORY OF Fred J. O'Connor, Jr.
IN MEMORY OF 173rd Airborne (The Herd)
IN MEMORY OF Paul
IN MEMORY OF Jimmy English
IN MEMORY OF First Battalion, Ninth Marines
IN MEMORY OF Preacher
IN MEMORY OF A young guy named Dougy
IN MEMORY OF Timmy
IN MEMORY OF those in The Herd on Hill 875
IN MEMORY OF a black trooper named John Kennedy
IN MEMORY OF the nurses and Donut Dollies who served and died in Vietnam
IN MEMORY OF John Durham

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In addition to the men of the Veterans Improvement Program (VIP) and present and past members of the VIP treatment team—James Munroe, Lisa Fisher, Christine Makary, and Kathryn Rapperport—so many people have helped me with this that I tremble to think of who I have forgotten to thank by name.

Special debts of gratitude are due to the following: My companion, Vicki Citron, and my daughters, Tamar and Hannah Shay, have never compromised on the standards they have demanded for this book. To these wonderful critics I can only say, yet again, *thank you*. My editor, Lee Goerner, required painful cuts in the manuscript, but having made them, I am grateful to him for having brought about a better book. Without the encouragement of Harvard's Professor Gregory Nagy, this book would not have been.

Others whose help I gratefully acknowledge are: David Barber, Eliza Bergeson, Robert Berkowitz, Arthur Blank, William Boomhower, John Burkett, Michelle Citron, Tom Daley, Yaël Danieli, Kathleen Patrick Donohue, John Egan, Robert Fagles, Charles Figley, William Finch, Peace Foxx, Paul Fussell, Sallie R. Goetsch, Mary Harvey, Judith Lewis Herman, Katherine Hurbis-Cherrier, Mick Hurbis-Cherrier, David Read Johnson, Terence Keane, Wyn Kelley, David Kiley, Jon Lipsky, Aphrodite Matsakis, Jonathan Matson, John McDonough, Arthur Meara, Sarah Michaels, Shirley Moore, Laura Nemeyer, Martha Nussbaum, Dale Petersen, Ronald Pies, Roger Pitman, Kathryn Rapperport, Bob Rheault, Everett Rollins, Renato Rosaldo, Peter Saba, Ray Scurfield, Bennett Simon, Kalí Jo Tal, Richard Taylor, Steve Tice, Fred Turner, Mary Wertsch, and Graham Zanker. I have savored every word of their praise and encouragement, but it is their criticisms that I now thank them for.

AUTHOR'S CAUTION TO VETERANS, THEIR FAMILIES, AND THEIR FRIENDS

To any veteran of any war coming to this book, please pace yourself and take care of yourself while reading, even if this means stopping and putting the book down. Some of the experiences described here by your fellow veterans may trigger reactions in you that can disrupt your life. Take it slow; don't try to plow straight through. If stuff does get stirred up, find other veterans you trust and talk about it. Vet centers around the country are a good place to do this. You don't have to go through this alone—no veteran should have to!

To families and friends of combat veterans, if this book helps increase your understanding of what the person you love has lived with since his or her war, I am very pleased. But I do want to caution you that no book should give you the illusion that you "know what it was like." There is no substitute for listening to the particular experience of the person that you love—if he or she is able and ready to tell you about it, and if you are ready and able to hear and endure the emotions it will stir up in you. Two excellent books written primarily for wives of Vietnam veterans, but also valuable to others who share their lives with veterans, are *Recovering from the War* by Patience Mason (Viking, 1990) and *Vietnam Wives* by Aphrodite Matsakis (Woodbine House, 1988).

I don't know what the best general advice is about encouraging the veteran you love to tell his or her story. Some would say that the best advice is "Don't try this at home!" However, if you offer to listen to these experiences, you also need to pace yourself and take care of yourself. If the veteran you love thinks you are going to be injured by what he or she has to say, there will be silence. Most vet centers offer support groups for families of veterans of all wars, not only the Vietnam War. You shouldn't have to go through this alone either!

Jonathan Shay

INTRODUCTION

I am the psychiatrist for a group of American combat veterans of the Vietnam War who have severe, chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A number of years ago I was struck by the similarity of their war experiences to Homer's account of Achilles in the *Iliad*. This observation led to an article in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, "Learning about Combat Stress from Homer's *Iliad*," which led to this book. The thrust of this work is that the epic gives center stage to bitter experiences that actually do arise in war; further, it makes the claim that Homer has seen things that we in psychiatry and psychology have more or less missed. Homer's *Iliad* was composed about twenty-seven centuries ago; it is about soldiers in war. In particular, Homer emphasizes two common events of heavy, continuous combat: betrayal of "what's right" by a commander, and the onset of the berserk state.

To my astonishment, I was told that knowledge would also flow in the opposite direction—that scholars and critics of the *Iliad* would be better able to interpret the great epic if they listened to combat soldiers. This book came into being largely because of the encouragement of one of the world's leading *Iliad* scholars, Harvard's professor of classical Greek literature Gregory Nagy. The perspective of the combat soldier has never been applied in any systematic way to understanding the *Iliad*. It is a privilege to say *anything* new about a work of art so great that it survived the crash of the Greek civilization that created it and of later civilizations that passed it on.

However, my principal concern is to put before the public an understanding of the specific nature of catastrophic war experiences that not only cause lifelong disabling psychiatric symptoms but can *ruin* good character. I have a specific aim in doing this: to promote a public attitude of *caring* about the conditions that create such psychological injuries, an attitude that will support measures to prevent as much psychological injury as possible. It is my

duty as a physician to do my best to heal, but I have an even greater duty to *prevent*.

What are the psychological injuries? Let us listen to the words of Vietnam combat veterans with severe PTSD as they tell what their life is like today:[1]

> I haven't really slept for twenty years. I lie down, but I don't sleep. I'm always watching the door, the window, then back to the door. I get up at least five times to walk my perimeter, sometimes it's ten or fifteen times. There's always something within reach, maybe a baseball bat or a knife, at every door. I used to sleep with a gun under my pillow, another under my mattress, and another in the drawer next to the bed. You made me get rid of them when I came into the program here. They're over at my mother's, so I know I can get them any time, but I don't. Sometimes I think about them—I want to have a gun in my hands so bad at night it makes my arms ache.
>
> So it's like that until the sun begins to come up, then I can sleep for an hour or two.
>
> It wasn't any different when I was working for _____ before I lost it and they put me in the psych hospital. I remember the company doctor putting Valiums in my mouth, and they strapped me to a stretcher. I was screaming, and I thought the Gooks had overrun us and were pouring though the place. Everyone I looked at looked like a Gook.
>
> I worked a lot of overtime and also went to school and had a second job. I didn't sleep any more then than now. Maybe two hours a night. But I sure made a lot of money. Workaholic. That's me—no, that *was* me. I was real lucky they kept me so long. They understood that sometimes I just had to leave work. And they never laughed at me when I hit the floor if there was a loud bang or something. I know guys here [in the treatment program] who work other places who had firecrackers lit off just to see them dive over a conveyer belt or something like that. Or their supervisors pushing them, mind-fucking them, pushing them till they lost it, so they could get rid of them. That never happened to me. Once a lamp in the ceiling exploded with a loud bang, and I dove into a tank of lubricant for the cutting machines. Oof! It was awful. But nobody laughed at me. They were real good to me, and they respected what I could do. They made me the head of the Emergency Response Team, like for explosions and injuries.

INTRODUCTION

Once a guy was burned real bad when some hydraulic fluid caught fire. I was the only one who didn't freeze. I got in there with the fire blanket—see, I still got the scars here on my leg where I got hit too with the burning hydraulics. I got through Vietnam without a scratch and get a Purple Heart for the _____ Company. [Laughs, then silence.] The smell of burning flesh fucked me up real bad afterward, though. I didn't notice it at the time the guy caught fire, but for the next few weeks I kept having flashbacks of the time the fast-mover [jet] laid a canister of napalm on my company. I couldn't get the smell out of my nose, out of my mouth.

I don't deserve my wife. What kind of life is it for her married to me? She says, "Let's take the kids out for dinner." And I say, "Sure, let's go." So we get to the restaurant and we walk in the door and I say, "Whoa!" when I look around and see all those people. So the hostess shows us to a table right in the middle, and I say, "How about there in the corner?" and she says, "There's people there," and I say, "We'll wait." Meantime my wife is looking at me and there's sweat running down my face. I can't sit with my back uncovered. If I know you're back there covering me, it's okay, but a bunch of strangers, and some of them Gooks—no way. I sit in the corner where I can see everyone who comes in and everyone who leaves. So after we wait thirty minutes for the table in the corner we start walking through the restaurant to it and my heart's pounding, pounding and the sweat's rolling off me and I say, "I gotta go." So they sit down and eat and I stand up in the parking garage, the second floor overlooking the entrance to the restaurant where I have a real good line on everything going on.

Or another thing, y'know my wife's real social, and of course I'm not. She understands now because of the couples therapy _____ did with her and me together. So we don't fight anymore about a lot of those things, and she even helps me now with the embarrassment. Like at my in-laws' she'll even make up something she forgot in the car when she sees that there's getting [to be] too many people in the room, so I can get out of there. But one thing she still don't understand is the mail. She gets so mad at me because I'll drive into town to buy cigarettes but I don't pick the mail up—it's right next to the 7-Eleven. What she doesn't understand is that every time I think it's _____'s kid sister writing me to find out how he died. She wrote to him every day—and I mean *every day*. Sometimes we wouldn't get our mail for six weeks, and when we'd get it there'd be more letters for him than for the rest of the platoon

put together. It's better she don't know. If it was my big brother I wouldn't want to know the truth about the way *he* died.

Of course in another way I'm real good to her [laughs], compared to what I was like to other women before. [Pauses.] Whew! I was one mean motherfucker. She didn't want to know me. You didn't want to know me. You don't want to *know* the number of people I fucked up [pauses], or how I fucked them up.

I don't have very long to live. No, Doc, no, no, I'm not suicidal, it's just that sometimes I don't give a fuck. I don't care if I live or die. I've been waiting to die ever since I got back from Vietnam. When I get that way, my wife, my kids—and I really love them—it's "Get the fuck away from me!" Once when my daughter was younger and I was that way, she came up behind me and before I knew it I had her by the throat up against the wall. I can still see her eyes. I put her down and just walked out of the house without saying anything to anybody and didn't come back for a week. I felt lower than dogshit. I hate it that my kids behave so *careful* around me. I made them that way, and I hate it. Every time I see them being so careful I think of that look in her eyes and I get this feeling here [puts his palm on his belly] like a big stone sitting there.

I think I don't have long to live because I have these dreams of guys in my unit standing at the end of the sofa and blood coming down off them and up the sofa. I wake up screaming and the sofa soaked with sweat. It seems like if the blood reaches me I'm going to die when it does. Other nights I dream of the guys calling to me from the graveyard. They're calling to me, "Come on, come on. Time to rest. You paid your dues. Time to rest."

I never tried to kill myself, but a lot of the time I just don't care. For years I used to go down to the Combat Zone [the Boston red-light district] after midnight and just walk the alleys. If I saw someone down an alley in the dark, I wouldn't go the other way, I'd go down there thinking, "Maybe I'll get lucky." I'm amazed I wasn't killed. I guess I wanted to be killed. Once I came on a guy raping a hooker. She was screaming and screaming, and it was easy to tell he was hurting her bad. I yelled at him, and he turned around and started reaching behind his back. He was carrying. I ran on him so fast and had his elbow before he could pull out the piece [gun], and I pounded the shit out of him. That felt so-o go-o-od. I don't know what happened to the woman. I guess she screwed [ran away] while I was doing him. After that I started bringing a meat fork to the Combat Zone. You know like from a carving set with two—what do

they call them—tines. I sharpened them real good. I didn't want to kill anybody, and I figured you could only stick that into somebody just so far before it stopped. When I went to the Combat Zone I never went with a gun. And there was a time I was really crazy and driving around town with a shotgun on the seat next to me.

I haven't spent a complete night in bed with my wife for at least ten years. I always end up on the sofa. It's safer for her, and I don't have to worry about waking her when I get up to walk the perimeter. When I was working sixteen hours a day I'd come home; she'd already be in bed. I'd do a couple hours of things around the house and meanwhile put away a case of beer and a fifth so I'd be able to sleep. Then I'd get in bed with her for two, three hours until it was time for work again. But after I couldn't work anymore, and really bad after I stopped drinking, I'd do this crazy shit at night. I once threw her out of bed so hard it broke her shoulder. I thought there was an NVA potato-masher [a grenade] come in on us. Another time I thought *she* was a Gook, and I had my hands around her throat before I woke up. So since I stopped drinking I never let myself fall asleep in bed with her. I lie there quiet until she's asleep and then get up, check the perimeter, and lie down on the sofa where I can see the door.

It's not much of a life for her, I guess. We haven't had sex in four years. She deserves better.

She says I always mess up a good thing—like I don't deserve it. At Christmas I try to make it perfect for the kids with a big, fresh tree trimmed just right and lots of presents, but it's like I'm watching them through a dirty window. I'm not really there and they're not really there, I don't know which is which. Maybe none of us is real. It's like I'm wrapped up in some kind of transparent cocoon and everything gets to me kind of muffled—oh fuck, I don't know how to explain it.

My son asks me if I'll come to his Little League game and I can't ever promise. He wants me to promise, but I can't. It's not that I don't want to go. I was in Little League myself, and I go sometime just at the last minute and watch from the tree line in the outfield. He has a great arm, and once he hit a home run into the trees where I was standing. I had to pull back real quick. You can't have somebody knowing where you'll be.

I'm so envious of all the normal people who can just go to the mall and hold hands with their wife and walk around. You see, I could never do that, because I'd be looking everywhere. Fuck! I

even envy you. I see you walking up the street to the clinic and you're not checking the rooftops for snipers or looking between cars as you pass to make sure there's nobody going to jump you, and I'll bet you have *no idea* who's on the street with you. I can tell you every person two blocks ahead of me and two blocks behind me every second. I see you coming down the street, but you don't see me, because you're in your own world not looking for ambush. How come you're like that? I envy you.

You know, when I go into the men's room here at the clinic I have to pop open the door of each stall with my fist to make sure there's nobody waiting there for me. Sometimes there's guys in there taking a shit and they look at me like I'm a queer or something, but I got to do it or I'm too nervous to pee. Once I was in there and I was washing my hands and you walked in and just said, "Hi," and walked over to the urinal and peed without checking the stalls. How can you do that?

You know, people ask me if I work out. I look very healthy, athletic and stuff. I don't work out. I don't do anything. Maybe it's muscle tension that keeps me this way. But you know, I'm not really healthy. I went to the _____ Fair a bunch of years ago and they had a Take Your Blood Pressure for Free table, and they made me lie down and wanted to call an ambulance it was so high. They were afraid I was going to die on them right there. They worked me up at the hospital for a feo-something, a tumor that makes your blood pressure go through the roof, but they never found anything. Then when I told them that I had stomach pains a lot and vomit every morning, they told me I had ulcers and worked me up for something else, I can't remember the name, but again they thought it was another kind of tumor that makes your stomach pump out acid all the time by the bucketfull. They didn't find anything, but they gave me those pills to stop the acid, and now I don't vomit every day, only around my anniversaries. My skin is still all black in my groin from the jungle rot and Agent Orange, but my hands are better—see? It's only cracked a little here between the fingers and only kicks up during the summer. For years it was all around my waist cracked and oozing blood. My undershirt'd get caked to my skin and I'd have to change it three times a day or the smell would get to you. I was sprayed with Agent Orange during my second tour when we were working the Cambodian border. I thought they were spraying for mosquitoes, but it was Agent Orange, I found out afterward. This big plane came over putting out this big cloud behind it,

and it came down on us like a mist, and I thought, "Ain't this amazing, they're spraying the mosquitoes all the way out here." But maybe it's all nerves, and not Agent Orange. That's what Dr. _____ told me. I don't know what to believe.

I know it all kicks up around the time of year we went into _____. I can't tell you what we were doing there, it's still secret and I've never been too comfortable with these dropped ceilings here in the clinic. It's just too easy to hide a microphone here. Maybe someday I'll be able to talk about it, but for now you never know who might be listening, and I'm not allowed to say anything about it. I shouldn't even have said we were in _____. I guess they need to keep tabs, because you know we still have our people over there who'd be dead in a minute if the wrong thing was said. There've been times I took every stick of furniture out of my house, took all the plates off the plugs in the walls and replaced every light fixture, and I had a guy sweep my house for bugs—cost me $600, but I still had the feeling I was being watched. I don't know if it was the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] or a CIT [U.S. Marine counterintelligence], or maybe both. You *know* the NVA has people over here disguised as refugees. Maybe that sounds paranoid, but I can't help thinking it. Here I did three fucking combat tours serving my country and I feel like a fucking fugitive.

It still makes me mad the way nobody understands what we did over there. When I first came back it was like I was living under a toilet and every five minutes somebody had diarrhea on me. There's nothing I can do. I feel like a complete freak, maybe like the Elephant Man—that's me. Nobody can understand, 'cept maybe another 'Nam vet. If only I could cry like I cried the day _____ had his face shot off. I haven't cried since then. Never.

Well, I guess it's something that I can even talk to you like this, and you not even a 'Nam vet and all. Remember how long it took me to say *anything*? I just had to watch until I could trust _____ and _____ and you. It was almost three years till I started to open up.

The people who read this book ain't going to believe any of this shit. And *you* better look out. Nobody's going to believe you when you tell them, and you'll end up an outcast like us.

These are voices of men as they are today, more than twenty years after their war service. About three-quarters of a million heavy combat veterans from Vietnam are still alive today, of whom a quarter million are still suffering in this manner.[2] I shall

give a full explanation of combat post-traumatic stress disorder in chapter 10, but here is a summary of the key symptoms of PTSD and of the personality changes that mark its severe forms. All may be understood as the persistence of past traumatic experience in the present physiology, psychology, and social relatedness of the survivor. The symptoms can range in severity from mild to devastating, and not everyone will have all of the symptoms at the same time:

- Loss of authority over mental function—particularly memory and trustworthy perception
- Persistent mobilization of the body and the mind for lethal danger, with the potential for explosive violence
- Persistence and activation of combat survival skills in civilian life
- Chronic health problems stemming from chronic mobilization of the body for danger
- Persistent expectation of betrayal and exploitation; destruction of the capacity for social trust
- Persistent preoccupation with both the enemy and the veteran's own military/governmental authorities
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Suicidality, despair, isolation, and meaninglessness

Such unhealed PTSD can devastate life and incapacitate its victims from participation in the domestic, economic, and political life of the nation. The painful paradox is that fighting for one's country can render one unfit to be its citizen.

I shall present the *Iliad* as the tragedy of Achilles. I will not glorify Vietnam combat veterans by linking them to a prestigious "classic" nor attempt to justify study of the *Iliad* by making it sexy, exciting, modern, or "relevant." I respect the work of classical scholars and could not have done my work without them. Homer's poem does not mean whatever I want it to mean. However, having honored the boundaries of meaning that scholars have pointed out, I can confidently tell you that my reading of the *Iliad* as an account of men in war is not a "meditation" that is only tenuously rooted in the text. The first five chapters track Homer's story of Achilles very closely: Agamémnon, Achilles' commander, betrays "what's right" by wrongfully seizing his prize of honor; indignant rage shrinks Achilles' social and moral horizon until he cares about no one but a small group of combat-

proven comrades; his closest friend in that circle, his second-in-command and foster brother, Pátroklos, dies in battle; profound grief and suicidal longing take hold of Achilles; he feels that he is already dead; he is tortured by guilt and the conviction that he should have died rather than his friend; he renounces all desire to return home alive; he goes berserk and commits atrocities against the living and the dead. This *is* the story of Achilles in the *Iliad*, not some metaphoric translation of it.

This was also the story of many combat veterans, both from Vietnam and from other long wars. The reader will find some of the veterans' narratives disturbing. I have brought them together with the *Iliad* not to tame, appropriate, or co-opt them but to promote a deeper understanding of both, increasing the reader's capacity to be disturbed by the *Iliad* rather than softening the blow of the veterans' stories.

Names, specific units, and locations in Vietnam have been omitted or disguised to protect the privacy of my patients. I intend to go on working with these men—some of whom will read this book—so I have asked every veteran to review and approve his words and stories that I have used here, even though this is not legally required.

The clarity and eloquence with which the veterans tell their stories prove the truth of what Paul Fussell has written about the First World War:

> One of the cruxes of war . . . is the collision between events and the language available—or thought appropriate—to describe them . . . Logically, there is no reason why the English language could not perfectly well render the actuality of . . . warfare: it is rich in terms like *blood, terror, agony, madness, shit, cruelty, murder, sell-out* and *hoax*, as well as phrases like *legs blown off, intestines gushing out over his hands, screaming all night, bleeding to death from the rectum*, and the like. . . . The problem was less one of "language" than of gentility and optimism. . . . The real reason [that soldiers fall silent] is that soldiers have discovered that no one is very interested in the bad news they have to report. What listener wants to be torn and shaken when he doesn't have to be? We have made *unspeakable* mean indescribable: it really means *nasty*.[3]

One Vietnam combat veteran describes this social process of silencing the survivor:

> I had just come back [from Vietnam], and my first wife's parents gave a dinner for me and my parents and her brothers and their wives. And after dinner we were all sitting in the living room and her father said, "So, tell us what it was like." And I started to tell them, and I told them. And do you know within five minutes the room was empty. They was all gone, except my wife. After that I didn't tell anybody I had been in Vietnam.

However, the fact that these veterans can speak at all of their experience is a major sign of healing. Unhealed war trauma can leave men as speechless as victims of prolonged political torture.

I have made no concessions to the stereotype of the veteran as uneducated Joe Six-pack. The men who have taught me have great intelligence, although some have had negligible formal schooling. I have learned that many veterans who dropped out of high school are now voracious readers who will be offended by talking down to them in any way. Some, who are among the most eloquent and terrifyingly intelligent, will not read this book, because they cannot read. Their wish has been that I write the best book I am able to write, not a Dick-and-Jane text that they might eventually be able to struggle through. The explanatory square brackets in quotations from the *Iliad* text (e.g., "windy Ilion [Troy]") are added for all readers who are not classicists, just as definitions of military terms (e.g., "RPG [rocket-propelled grenade]") are given for all those who are not Vietnam vets.

When I quote a veteran's words, I have done my best to preserve his voice—his sound and rhythms. Direct quotations are my own transcript of recorded interviews each generously given to help with this project, or are taken from my notes or from a veteran's written narrative. Transcripts have been lightly edited to remove "uh" and "you know" where these did not seem important to the tone. I have personally transcribed the tapes to preserve the exact words, not only as a mark of respect but also because of the poetry that flows through them.

By now there is a large body of Vietnam soldiers' memoirs, oral history, and testimony. The veterans' narratives in this book are an addition to this corpus. No disrespect for other veterans' published experiences is implied by the fact that I have used only unpublished material from men I know personally.

Nothing in this book is entirely new to mental health disciplines, in the sense that it has not been previously published in

professional journals such as the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. However, some of it is quite recent and by no means universally accepted in the field, such as the importance of the berserk state or of betrayal of "what's right" in the etiology of a chronic post-traumatic stress disorder after combat. I hope this book will educate and motivate mental health professionals who are just starting to work with combat veterans or are considering doing so. Those who are already in the field may be influenced by Homer's attention to the moral dimension of combat trauma, to the berserk state, to respect for the enemy, and to communalization of grief.

To *all* readers I say: Learn the psychological damage that war does, and work to prevent war. There is no contradiction between hating war and honoring the soldier. Learn *how* war damages the mind and spirit, and work to change those things in military institutions and culture that needlessly create or worsen these injuries. We don't have to go on repeating the same mistakes. Just as the flak jacket has prevented many physical injuries, we can prevent many psychological injuries.

I welcome feedback from readers
at the following E-mail address:

JSHAY@WORLD.STD.COM

PART I