Review of Achilles in Vietnam

Author: Shay, Jonathan.
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"What We Haven't Learned About War We Have Repeated: Warriors As Victims"

In *Achilles in Vietnam*, Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who works with a group of Vietnam War veterans with severe, chronic post-traumatic stress disorder and who was struck by their similar experiences to Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, highlights these parallels, feeling that this will lead to a greater understanding of combat stress. His major thrust is that Homer's epic highlights war time experiences not often privy to behavioral scientists. He is most struck by Homer's emphasis on two "common" continuous heavy combat occurrences: betrayal of moral or ethical standards by combat leaders and the onset of a "berserk state." The author also was happy to discover in a serendipitous fashion that the understanding of Vietnam War combatants would lead to a better understanding by scholars of the *Iliad*.

The author's principal goal for this book, however, is to educate people to what the results of catastrophic experiences in war are on the individuals who physically survive them; in particular, chronic psychological disorder as well as the destruction of character. His hope is this will promote a raised consciousness in the public at large that will lead to a strong desire on their part to do something about the cause of these post-traumatic stress disorders; in short, prevention.

Shay, upon experiencing sustained dialogues with Vietnam veterans, unearthed profound effects of the war over twenty years later. Of the three quarters of a million present day Vietnam War heavy combat survivors, the author believes a quarter of a million are casualties with such symptoms as impaired mental function, potential for explosive violence, chronic health problems from sustained mobilization of responses to danger, lack of social trust, preoccupation with both Vietnamese and U.S. military activities, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as depression, isolation and a general malaise or feeling of meaningless. He concludes that chronic post-traumatic stress disorder leaves its victims unable to participate in domestic, economic or political life, or as Shay dramatically states, "fighting for one's country can render me unfit to be its citizen."

In *Achilles in Vietnam* Shay presents the *Iliad* as the tale of Achilles' tragedy and as a description of men at war. Shay in the first five chapters of his book looks carefully at Achilles' tribulations. Achilles is found to have been betrayed by his commander, Agamemnon, who usurps his prize of honor. The betrayal is described as shirking "Achilles' social and moral horizon." As a result of this, Achilles is portrayed as driven by rage, caring only about a small group of combat proven cohorts. This is followed by the loss of his foster brother, Patroklos, in battle. Patroklos was also his second in command and closest friend. This leads to grief and suicidal ruminations. Achilles is portrayed as guilt ridden with survivor's syndrome, as bereft of his will to live and as feeling dead already. Ultimately, Achilles is found to go berserk, committing atrocities to both living and dead. This, for Shay, is the story of the *Iliad* and also as Shay goes on to demonstrate, the story of many Vietnam combat veterans. Shay provides numerous veterans' narratives which he uses to illustrate the parallel he draws, believing it will provide a greater understanding of the Vietnam veterans, the *Iliad* and, most usefully, the public's capacity to be disturbed by the result of war on its participants.

Shay also believes that heavy combat survivors are discouraged from ever telling their stories since no one is interested in such gut wrenching tales. They are hard to hear and live with even secondhand, but he feels this is part of the healing process for veterans and the ability to ventilate is a sign that some healing has taken place. It can also, Shay believes, be a useful preventative if people will listen to them and hear what war can lead to in actuality.

Shay has endeavored to capture truly the Vietnam veteran experiences in their own voices with many direct quotations and the preservation of their "sound and rhythms." While Shay's views, as he acknowledges, are neither new or novel, they are presented forcefully with documentation from the veteran's own words and Homer's narrative of an earlier prolonged war. He brings the importance of the berserk state and the abandonment of moral values in some war stress survivors to the forefront as features of post-traumatic stress disorder after heavy combat. Shay and, as Shay demonstrates, Homer bring to scholars' attention the moral results of combat to personality, the berserk state, attention to respect for enemies and the *Iliad* the importance of the "communilizations of grief."

Shay, in *Achilles in Vietnam*, made a painstaking and noble attempt to teach the psychologically damaging results of war in a desire to prevent future war. He most certainly succeeded in the former. It will, of course, take more than the book to prevent war, but every informed citizen is one more potential convert to the cause of peace. By learning how war destroys mind and character, a step is taken toward changing those things in the military and the culture which create or exacerbate war and its trauma to the psyche. This is an important and necessary book and gives some positive outcome to a sad experience. Learning from history and those who were part of it is invaluable. As historians have long promulgated, he who does not learn from history is bound to repeat it.

The goals of this book are largely successfully met, and the book could usefully be read by behavioral scientists, historians, *Iliad* scholars and the public at large.