

## FOREWORD

*JoANNE S. BASS*

For 75 years, America's sons and daughters have volunteered to raise their right hands and defend our great nation. In a country with a population of 332 million, our service members and veterans make up less than 7 percent of all those who are eligible to serve. That service does not come without its share of challenges. There is a weight that each of us carries when we, as the embodiment of what the nation aspires to be, raise our right hand and swear an oath to the Constitution. In an all-volunteer force, each of us takes that oath freely, and each of us agrees to share in those challenges.

Make no mistake, military service can be a rewarding experience. It is a pursuit of excellence in service to something higher than self that also brings personal growth. Yet, sometimes, service to our nation exacts a toll that is physical, mental, and emotional in its breadth. The unique and sometimes troubling physiological and psychological effects of military service can be enduring and may often remain buried deep in our souls.

For some, the burdens they carry are obvious. But far too many suffer in silence, with families often paying the price. For every tragic statistic of a veteran's or service member's suicide, there are many more individuals and families who are hurting.

Encouragingly, over the past several decades, we have become much better at talking about mental health, recognizing that these invisible wounds and scars are every bit as real as their physical manifestations that may be more easily seen. Research and treatment regarding one profound psychological wound of military service, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), are now commonplace, with established healthcare services that assist sufferers toward healing. We still have much to do in treating this trauma field, but it is no longer a taboo topic of conversation or reason for shame. There has been a renewed interest from service members, commanders, and those in the healing professions, such as our chaplains and medical and mental health professionals, who are helping individuals grow beyond the initial injury and emerge stronger and more resilient, scars and all, after their military service.

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Fortunately, the focus on military-service-related mental and emotional injuries has expanded, and over the past 30 years, practitioners and academics have shown increasing interest in identifying, exploring, and mitigating another psychological effect of military service, moral injury. According to the Moral Injury Project at Syracuse University, moral injury “refers to the lasting emotional, psychological, social, behavioral, and spiritual impacts of actions that violate a service member’s core moral values and behavioral expectations of self or others.”<sup>1</sup>

As the articles in this issue demonstrate, the experience of moral injury has existed throughout our history. Yet the field of moral injury research is only recently growing, and the military and civil society will need to respond in meaningful ways to ensure our service members get the care and treatment they need.

War is messy. War takes its toll on all those impacted by it. Regardless of when and how someone serves, all military members will need to take full advantage of all the opportunities and programs designed to help them heal individually, as a military, and as a nation. This isn’t a solution that will manifest overnight. It takes time, and it takes compassion for our brothers and sisters in arms.

This special issue of *Æther: A Journal of Strategic Airpower & Spacepower* is intended to serve as a 2023 benchmark for academic research and practitioner experience concerning the phenomenon of moral injury, and to help move the conversation toward healing forward. The US Air Force has only recently begun to address moral injury from an institutional standpoint. This special issue can also serve as a starting point for discussions in the squadron, among peers, and within families. It is intended to augment and further complement work ongoing in the field.

Additionally, it serves to initiate a direct intra-military service conversation about moral injury in the aftermath of the August 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan—a shared experience of devastating images and tragedy across the US military community, whether or not one served directly on the ground or in the air in Afghanistan. The articles are intentionally diverse in their approach to the topic, covering practitioner experiences and academic perspectives from fields including psychiatry, history, psychology, ethics, international relations, and philosophy.

While researchers and practitioners work on better identifying and evolving approaches to treating this outcome of military service, military members, families, and veterans can simultaneously take actions to mitigate the effects of moral injury and work toward healing—taking care of ourselves and each other. First, this requires us to talk openly and honestly about our experiences—giving voice to the “stuff” we’ve dealt with and normalizing our unique and larger shared military experiences. Truly, the Department of Defense is overdue for an honest evaluation of the negative impact on service members and veterans resulting from 20 years of war that lacked a clear victorious outcome. Only then can real healing take place, collectively and individually.

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1. The Moral Injury Project, “What is Moral Injury?,” Syracuse University, accessed August 15, 2023, <https://moralinjuryproject.syr.edu/>.

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This important waypoint in the moral injury dialogue has been in development for close to a year. The dedicated issue is the result of ongoing academic work at Air University, the US Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine, the Air Force Academy, other service universities, the Defense Health Agency, and work in other government and nonprofit arenas. The editors and contributors are deeply invested, as am I, in continuing the multipronged approach to moving our elite, self-sacrificing Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Guardians, Coast Guard, and veterans away from moral injury toward peace and the place of healing. As one author in the issue notes: our “lifetime of fighting . . . is not an unalloyed good. For many of us, this source of strength is a source of wounds; for all of us, there was some cost to live this sort of life.” Another reminds us that “pain is inevitable; healing is optional.”

Our nation continues to owe a great debt to the men and women who volunteer to defend the homeland. We ask much of our service members, and they give even more. When it comes to caring for them, both in and out of uniform, we have to show the same level of commitment. How we care for our brothers and sisters in arms matters. They matter. Æ

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