

**AN ANTHEM OF THE
LONG WAR
RECOLLECTION,
LEARNING, AND LOOKING
AHEAD**

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Over the last two decades, Airmen have fought in many wars and learned many things. There is an arc to these campaigns that starts in the Middle East, extends to the proxy campaigns of today, and points toward larger wars looming on the horizon. By capturing the lessons our force has learned, we can steel ourselves, and those who lead, for what is to come. In particular, warfighters must consider the way the character of war changes, the nature of sacrifice, the foundations of the military profession, and the relationship between killing and identity, in order to emotionally and mentally prepare for the next fight.

Modern warfare is a human story written in the language of technology. Clausewitz tells us that the nature of war remains constant, but its character evolves based on changes in technology and culture. Our generation had more than its fair share of those changes. Over the last two decades, we have grappled with war from half a world away, sensors that brought us closer than ever to our targets, and a full range of information-age technologies that altered the way we think about time and space. And yet, over the course of that story, we relearned some timeless truths about human nature and the nature of war—perhaps just in time to prepare ourselves for the daunting task that is on the strategic horizon.

To that end, this article will approach the topic of moral injury through three lenses. First, a recollection of the wars of our times will help us understand what we owe to our comrades who made sacrifices alongside us, as well as how we changed in the course of these events. Second, the toolkits we built along the way will illuminate what we need to get ourselves where we need to be for what may be coming. Finally, this article will consider what we must provide to the next generation who may face these threats without the advantage of our experiences. Altogether, these lenses are designed to capture what we have learned and leverage it toward the strategic task at hand.

There and Back Again

My generation of Airmen never really knew a day of peace in our careers. There was always an active war zone, somewhere where we were taking lives, somewhere where there was a clear and present threat to innocent people at home and abroad. There is an arc to the story of our careers—our nation was focusing on strategic competition with China prior to the events of September 11, 2001, as evinced by the

largely forgotten drama of the collision between a Chinese J-8 fighter and a US Navy EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft in April of that year.

September 11th was the first great inflection point and the first indication of the changing character of war, which had come to us from human threat networks rooted halfway across the world. Our response in Afghanistan demonstrated our increasing grasp of the new rules of networked warfare, with cavalry charges of Special Forces soldiers enmeshed in indigenous networks calling down precision ordnance from jet bombers to defeat Soviet-made armor.

After a picture-perfect conventional victory in the initial phase of the Iraq conflict, the fight turned deeply personal, in the sense that we were fighting human networks with targets whose names we knew well. We transposed the reconnaissance-strike complex that ravaged the Iraqi command and control into a manhunting engine and directed it at individuals who embodied malice and the will to do harm: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Uday and Qusay Hussein, and Abu Ayyub al-Masri.

Ever since the Industrial Revolution, technology has drawn humans farther from the humanity of their targets, but now, advances in sensor technology were bringing us closer to our targets. This was a jarringly intimate form of air warfare, backlit against the tide of faceless improvised explosive device (IED) attacks that we were desperately trying to stem. We knew our targets well, but we also knew what they were doing and why they needed to be stopped. All these things deserved contemplation, but there was little time for that.

In a brief respite around 2010, it almost looked like it might all turn out well. Iraq was more or less calm, and Afghanistan seemed to be on the mend. But even as terror networks went to ground, they sprawled across the region and continued their evil work, attacking shopping malls and taking young women hostage for the crime of learning—so we pursued them, as the global war on terror became the Long War.

In a campaign that seemed to belong to some bygone era, chasing pirates or slavers or some other sort of *hostis humanis generis* (enemy of all mankind), we navigated the strange rules of that murky war, striving to frustrate our enemy's pursuit of their execrable ends without turning the world into a war zone.¹ We also learned what it was to fight a handful of our own compatriots who had murderous designs on our homeland. All these things, too, deserved contemplation, but there were lives to be saved and little time to spend counting the cost.

Meanwhile, in Iraq and Syria, the remnants of Zarqawi's malice metastasized into Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's Daesh. As huge swaths of the region fell to their murderous empire, we were once again desperately trying to stem the tide, but this time, it was against an enemy who fought in the open, using shock and fury. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was yet another inflection point—we had to apply all the things we learned over the preceding decade, but at a breakneck pace against fielded forces.

1. Jenny S. Martinez, *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights*, repr. ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

It started at Kobane, where Kurdish fighters were standing against death to stave off a genocide, with ISIS to their front and the Turkish border to their rear. As the Joint team winched one striker after another, American airpower conjured a wall of fire between the Peshmerga and their assailants, and over the course of days, walked it road by road through the town as Daesh withered under the onslaught.

From that point forward, the dark ISIS smudge on the map started shrinking. The fight, like the broader war, had its own character: on one day, we provided overwatch for improvised armored vehicles that appeared straight from the set of *Mad Max*; on the next, we hunted sociopathic, self-styled executioners from miles above the ISIS capital of Raqqa. This fight was the shape of things to come—civilians picking up weapons and organizing themselves to repel an invader, combatants rapidly adapting improvised weapons, and unexpected networks linking low-tech fighters to high-tech capabilities. It was also where we started pushing up against great power adversaries once again. It was fast—far too fast to glean all the operational lessons that could have been learned, much less to pause and try to fully reflect as humans on everything that had happened.

The time for reflection eventually came after the withdrawal from Afghanistan. How can one express the emotions of frustration and helplessness as everything we'd fought for unraveled with heartrending speed? Seared into our memory was the picture of a C-17—its crew bravely saving as many as they could, but not as many as needed to be saved—as was the sense of shame for the moral obligation to all those who believed in us, fought alongside us, trusted us.

But even in this dark moment we found a glimmer of hope. In a moment of desperation, we learned that some things that couldn't be fixed at work could be fixed at home, and a new volunteer underground was born. Using open versions of the skills we built over the long fight, a few heroes figured out how to get more of our friends to safety. This, too, was an important lesson, one propelled by the human drama of this long story arc, and one that would be quickly put to great use.

Six months later, in the first confused hours of Russian troops flooding into Ukraine, it seemed likely we would have to watch another friendly government crumble in the face of an enemy assault. And then, half-miraculously, the Russian attack began to falter as the Ukrainians rallied to fight an enemy that outmatched them technologically and outnumbered them 10-to-1. The Russians staggered under the weight of their own corruption, and in a moment that would have been utterly foreign to our Cold War predecessors, we were cheering for Ukrainian Fulcrums, S-300s, and T-64s.

From that *mélange* of hope and vengeance, we built on what the "Pineapple Express" started—from crowdfunding Molotov cocktails, to open-source analytics, to many other things, we worked out our frustration on a fight that mattered. In shades of Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers, some of our friends did far more, risking life and limb to make a difference. Soon enough, the casual war crimes of the Russian forces came to resemble those of the terrorists that we spent our adult lives fighting, and we remembered the fire that called us to the fight in the first place. Taiwan seems to

have caught the same fighting spirit, with their aviators bodychecking their belligerent neighbors.

Things are more dangerous than any time in recent memory, but hope runs high nevertheless. We are sharpened and scarred from a lifetime of the Long War, staring down fights beyond what we've known but upon us nonetheless. We have one thing our enemies lack—a lifetime of fighting. Our lifetime of fighting is not an unalloyed good, however. 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. If we can come to terms with the things we carry, then we will have a tremendous advantage in conflict.

The “Stone Soup” Briefing: Thoughts on Combat

To that end, this article presents results of about two dozen seminars with Air Force Special Operations Command squadrons between 2019 and 2021 on the topic of moral injury, and more broadly, human and moral factors in war. The *Humans Hunting Humans* brief that served as the focal point of these seminars started as a 2017 *Lawfare* paper discussing experiences years prior.² I did not understand my own story or allow myself to feel the complex emotions that come with this life, until I saw that story through the eyes of the Airmen I was leading. As a flight commander many years ago, I learned I needed to talk through some of the stark realities of this line of work with younger crews. In the course of doing so, I realized much of what I was sharing with them was medicine I needed to take myself—“heal thyself,” as the proverb goes.

Our command needed to have a conversation about the serious business of killing, and these seminars opened that conversation. From young audiences going to war the first time, to 20-year veterans trying to find meaning from their experiences, these intimate and honest conversations always brought some new perspective or insight about the broader issue of being human while taking human lives. Each brief was followed by a long discussion afterward, and the strongest points of the discussion became new slides that informed the next brief. By the time most of the command had been briefed, the brief itself became a stone soup, its authorship comprising more or less all participants.

This collected wisdom is not scientifically rigorous, and the article does not make causal claims. That said, causal inference typically generalizes to a population, and in the course of our briefings, we talked with a majority of the squadrons of the command, and that command was carrying much of the weight of the fighting and killing over the Long War. Accordingly, these findings are rigorous in the sense that the relevant population is well represented, and that population provides the best sample available to explore the phenomenon in question—the moral and human effects of sustained combat and killing.

2. David Blair and Karen House, “Avengers in Wrath: Moral Agency and Trauma Prevention for Remote Warriors,” *Lawfare* (blog), November 12, 2017, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/>.

Several key insights emerged from these seminars including war's social, moral, and physiological elements and effects through the lenses of change, sacrifice, profession, physiology, killing, combat intimacy, and risk.

Generational: Change is the Constant

Regardless of the generation, war rarely shows up on the terms military planners and strategists expect. The leaders of World War I grew up on Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade," but they got a war of mustard gas, trenches, and machine gun. A commander who led his people on an ill-considered charge in ignorance or indifference to these new tactical realities would not be a hero, but a fool. Leaders who learned from the texts of World War II and Korea found themselves in an ugly hybrid war in Vietnam and had to adapt. The generation that served from 2001 to 2021 was raised on the stealth and smart bombs of Desert Storm, but the Long War was about hunting social networks in the shadows.

The next generation will hear Long War stories, but their fight will almost certainly be different. The imperative remains to use whatever tactics and technologies are available, effective, and morally acceptable to transfer risk to the enemy. First and foremost: get the mission done, and get your friends home in one piece.

Sacrifice: Risk and Loss

One defining feature of contemporary wars is their historically low casualty rates. The Soviets lost an order of magnitude more people than the United States did in Afghanistan in half the time. If the Ukrainian estimates are accurate, the Russians are currently losing more troops every two weeks than America lost in all of Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

This unprecedented effectiveness in reducing mortality did not happen by accident. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates' Golden Hour policy, where wounded warfighters would receive treatment within one hour, likely saved hundreds of lives. No less important to saving lives was the ground warfighter's access to a reservoir of reconnaissance and close-air-support assets. So long as a friendly force could hold, time was almost always on its side. Conversely, adversaries struggled to mass forces or plan large-scale attacks due to constant high-value target strikes against threat leadership networks.

This aerial umbrella was the result of a breakneck operations tempo for years at a time. The United States and its Allies and partners offset much risk into the air through casualty evacuation (CASEVAC), close air support, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, so that acute risk was distributed across many capabilities and transposed into cost, much like a radiator on a spacecraft ejects heat into space by spreading it across a large surface. The force was like Nomex flight suits—the whole formation charred around the edges so that very few individuals were burned.

And in the light of the ultimate sacrifices made by some, it was hard to name the costs that seemed so insignificant in comparison. A particularly vicious World War II assault might take 10 percent casualties—a 10 percent risk of losing 100 percent of the

rest of your life. Battlefield Airmen and our Joint partners faced these sorts of odds in the Long War. But the math for most of those who fought OIF and OEF from the air was more like a 100 percent chance of losing 10 percent of the rest of your life.

Previous generations said it well: “All gave some, some gave all.” But those “some” costs meant something nonetheless, and it was good to name them—the broken relationships, the moments lost while members were away from home, the pictures that can never be unseen, the lives that might have been lived had there been no war. Then it is time to move forward.

A note of caution is in order. The foundations for the transformative tactics and technologies that enabled Gates’ Golden Hour vision will likely be challenged in a peer fight. Without air supremacy or guaranteed access to large, fixed facilities near the front lines, rapid CASEVAC to exquisite medical capabilities would be much more difficult. So, as our force considers resiliency for the next fight, we should take into account how to deal with both those who “gave some” and those who “gave all.”

The Profession: Distinctive Skill versus Purpose

The military profession contains tension between what members do and why they do it—between their distinctive skill and their purpose. The surgical profession’s purpose is healing people, and a surgeon’s distinctive skill toward that end is cutting people. Cutting on people outside of that purpose is evil, but when used in support of medical purposes, society celebrates surgeons’ abilities to perform their craft. A tool of the surgeon’s craft, the scalpel, is not for the squeamish, but the surgeon’s ability to use it well and to good ends is laudable.

The US military profession’s purpose is to protect people. Military members’ distinctive skill is killing, or at least standing ready to kill. This requires tools, too, that are not for the faint of heart. But so long as they are used well and for good purposes, then military professionals should hold their heads high. This difference between distinctive skill and purpose is key to rightly ordering and understanding experiences in combat.

The purpose can be celebrated without any constraints—it is always a good thing to try to protect one’s comrades, one’s compatriots, and those needing protection from wicked acts. The employment of the distinctive skill is where it gets complicated. Those who would turn away from the distinctive skill, those who would soft-pedal the reality of the profession, do no favors for those who will actually have to kill the enemies of our nation. If society considers the distinctive skill as something unsuited to polite company, society consigns those who do the work to bear the weight of their actions in isolated silence.

Conversely, unmoored from its purpose of protection, celebrating killing itself is soul-rotting. The necessity of taking lives is a regrettable feature of a broken world and should not be a source of joy. But it is right to celebrate craftsmanship, even if the craft is killing. A well-performed shot, a clever tactic, and a well-designed lethal operation should all be sources of pride. Focusing on craftsmanship binds the distinctive skill to the purpose. Killing done well gets the mission done while protecting as many people

as possible—both friendlies by stopping the threat, and innocents by employing weapons with precision.

Importantly, the will to act decisively should not spring from an indifference to human suffering, rather from a deep understanding of human suffering and a recognition of the ways in which the enemy is contributing to that suffering. In facing the harsh reality of such a situation, there is a fiery imperative to drive the course of events toward the best remaining conclusion as soon as possible. The purpose of the profession is to do just that, both by standing ready to act, defying those who would do harm, and by acting decisively should they carry out that dark intent.

Physiology: The Brain and Killing

One of the recurring breakthroughs in the seminars involved realizing the brain is an organ and should be seen as such. Instead of seeing the mind as a black box, understanding that different physical parts of the brain code events differently provided a foundation to grapple with these experiences.

Consider a counter-high-value-target missile shot from an MQ-9. The pilot reasons and makes decisions utilizing the frontal lobe and prefrontal cortex, processes sensory information critical to navigation and flying in the parietal lobe, and then pulls the trigger. Next, the sensor operator uses their temporal and parietal lobes to process visual and auditory information and their motor cortex to drive the missile into the target. Both crew members get feedback on the impact of their actions with their occipital and parietal lobes, while their temporal lobes encode the memories of what just occurred.³

The insight that different crew members might experience a shot differently allows aircraft commanders to lead and take care of their crews more effectively. Consider an unexpected civilian casualty event driven by an unobserved civilian suddenly running toward the target. The pilot, who took the shot based on good judgment, can reason with themselves the shot was still necessary, and the civilian could not have reasonably been accounted for. The moral math balances in the front part of the brain, and the remedy meets up with the wound there. But for the sensor operator, whose hands were driving the missile all the way into the target, the wound is farther back in the brain. A logical explanation that nothing could have been done lands in the front part of the brain, and it will take time and a lot of talking and thinking to migrate the remedy to the wound.

Similarly, we found that crews have less difficulty with shots during troops-in-contact situations where friendlies were present on the screen. The picture of good guys getting shot at contextualized the purpose for the act of killing on a much more visceral level. Explaining to one's self that a bomb maker was going to kill many innocents satisfied the logical part of the brain, but felt disconnected from the emotionally laden pictures of body parts and blood pools cooling in infrared.

3. Lieutenant Colonel Lea Johansen, USAF, personal correspondence, July 2023.

More than anything else, civilian casualties create moral trauma in the minds of the crews. Just as there is a golden hour for a physical wound, there is probably a golden day for these moral wounds. If these thoughts and images fester, they take root and become much harder to deal with later. Immediate intervention from friends and leaders generally sets people on a better track, and healthy rituals allow the crews to bear the gravity of these actions together. The key to these sorts of rituals is to not celebrate the act of killing nor to make the killing a competition, as shot leaderboards tend to do. Rather, the best rituals allow the crews to understand why they were killing their targets, to communicate the narrative and human drama that led up to the strike, and to commemorate the significance of the completed strike as a community event.

In the Long War, some enemy tactics took advantage of the humanity of crews in grotesque ways—chaining innocents to vehicle-based IEDs, for instance. Perhaps crews would hesitate to shoot and the enemy's attack would be successful, but once the shot was taken, the crew members had to live with it, leading to moral injury and potential long-term degradation or incapacitation. These were mental IEDs, and the fact that they worked as intended is no less surprising than finding out human skin does not repel mortar shrapnel. The most important thing they did was to come alongside friends as soon as possible and provide any help they needed, making sure these mental IEDs didn't achieve high-order detonation.

Killing: Empathy and Identity

One of the most powerful concepts that came from seminar discussions about the mechanics of the brain was the relationship between empathy, killing, and identity.

As someone gets to know a friend, they learn their friend's mannerisms and subtle cues. Over time, they know their friend well enough to be able to hazard a guess as to how this friend would behave in a given circumstance or respond to stimuli. Imagine shopping for new foods at a grocery store for a spouse or partner—someone known very well. In healthy relationships, faculties for empathy allow one to buy things for the other person that bring them joy or pleasure. A person that uses their close knowledge of another to bring that person harm would be manipulative or even sociopathic.

Yet, Sun Tzu reminds us that a good battlefield commander must know their enemy and know themselves. The language he uses invokes a sense of intimacy: this is not just about knowing facts about the adversary, but something more along the lines of protagonist Ender Wiggin's complex feelings about the alien race he destroys in the novel *Ender's Game*.

At a tactical level, we might call this hunter's empathy, in the same sense that a hunter has a sense of how a deer might act in a given environment in order to hunt them better. Experienced high-value target shooters have a sense for how their target walks, their habit patterns, and even what they will likely do during a missile's end-game. To do the job well, some warfighters had to habitually weaponize their faculties for intimacy and empathy—this was one of the stranger parts of this war. In order to do this safely, an individual must be embedded in a fabric of healthy relationships.

The seminars conceptualized different identities pertinent to the experience. In the protector identity, a warfighter weaponizes their faculties for intimacy against a specific target but uses those faculties as intended for close relationships with friends and family. This is the safest identity, and the one that we should constantly strive for, as it is least likely to cause moral injury and least likely to lose one's soul.

Yet one might lose a friend or fail someone who counted on them. If this loss happens in the course of combat, a warfighter may take on the avenger identity, which is characterized by mourning through vengeance. The story of Kayla Mueller, an aid worker who was murdered by ISIS, brought this out in many US military members. In fact, the raid to kill Baghdadi was named after her. The avenger identity takes time to work through, but once again, warfighters should strive to return to the protector identity whenever possible.

One identity to beware of is that of merely a killer, unmoored from healthy relationships. While killing is part of all of these identities, for the killer identity, the attachment to the mission and the fight is all that is left. This is a dangerous moment, both for the individual and for the tactical liabilities they may incur on the mission. If one can identify it in themselves, they need to seek help; if it emerges in a teammate, it's time to get them back home.

Combat Intimacy: Avengers in Wrath, Reprised

The most foundational seminar series element concerned the idea of combat intimacy, the way in which warfighters come to understand their enemies as humans and simultaneously inflict violence upon them.

First, for the vast majority of aerial combatants in these wars, cognitive distance—where the mind is in relation to the target—was more salient than physical distance when it came to understanding the enemy. Cognitive distance is an individual's sensory proximity to an adversary, or how real that adversary is through the lens of the five senses. This is a function of sensor resolution and of dwell time, or the duration of that sensing. Physical distance is crucially important in questions of risk and valor, since an enemy cannot climb into a sensor feed to physically harm the operator, but when it comes to killing, most experiences confirmed cognitive distance was the key variable.

Consider the experience of a mortar crew, physically proximate but cognitively abstracted from their target, firing on grid coordinates generated by a counter-battery radar. In contrast, a ground force commander in a distant operations center approving a strike over high-definition full motion video would be physically distant but cognitively proximate. A soldier engaged in close quarters combat would be both physically and cognitively highly proximate, with all sensors engaged rather than just the visual.

We found that multiple ways of sensing a target can close the cognitive distance. Prior to the seminar discussions, an accepted understanding of cognitive distance seemed more about visual sensing, but discussions revealed many ways to interact with a target using a range of sensors. The brain is nimble enough in connecting to other humans that any of those means of sensing can create the risk of moral injury.

For instance, the legendary codebreaker William Friedman was so impacted by his work hacking Japanese ciphers in World War II that he had a nervous breakdown.

The nature of the enemy matters, too. As Dave Grossman argues, the closer one is to a target, the harder it is to kill them.⁴ This is most likely true in the aggregate, and especially so in wars where one could understand and empathize with someone on the other side, such as in World War I's Christmas Truce, a series of unofficial ceasefires around Christmas 1914 in which British, French, and German troops exchanged holiday pleasantries, food, and gifts, and even caroled together.

These are tragic combatants, people who would prefer to get along if circumstances were different. But not all enemies are tragic. The people we fought were largely malicious enemies, and justice demands that an individual who uses drills to torture innocent people must pay for their evil deeds. The more one learns about that kind of a person, the easier it is to agree with a decision to take their life: distinctive skill meets purpose. By and large, the more air crews learned about the reasons for hunting the targets, the more eager they were to execute the mission and the lower the likelihood of moral injury.

Importantly, air crews strongly desired to understand the *why*—they were looking for an opportunity to ratify the logic of the shot. If they were able to make that logic their own, it would help in understanding their experiences later. The seminars also highlighted the tremendous importance of leaders narrating the story of the fight to the crews. Lots of shots could stack up quickly, and if crews did not understand where they were in the overall arc of a campaign, it was easier to become lost in the killing. The seminar members also debated what would happen if they were to fight a true tragic enemy, perhaps North Korean conscripts or something of the sort. Until recently, it seemed it would be a hard shift for the US military. After watching the Ukraine conflict, it may not be, if given just cause.

Risk: Proportionality and Mistaken Identification

Some of the harder questions raised by crews in these seminars centered on risk. In the textbook just war case study, a student has to consider proportionality while deciding whether or not to hit a surface-to-air missile (SAM) site on a hospital's roof. This hypothetical does not capture most of the proportionality considerations baked into real-world tactical problems faced by aerial combatants in recent wars. A strong crew could "tactics their way out" of a scenario like that by fine-tuning weaponeering, waiting for the SAM crew to leave and then striking them, or conducting some other *Kobayashi Maru*-like solution. Air crews are clever and cunning, so much so that the drama-inducing moments in films that try to depict that world often seem silly: Why wouldn't you just offset the shot? Or change fusing? Or hit them somewhere else?

4. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009).

This was not to say that assessments of risk are always accurate. But the ways in which the engagement goes wrong are rarely the eyes-wide-open collateral damage acceptance sorts of shots. There are those moments, and when they happen, they are hard. More likely, though, is a shot going bad in some unexpected way after weapons release. The most common is dynamic collateral damage, the unfortunate ways in which the world changes during the time of flight of the weapon. For instance, the target takes a left turn when they should have gone right, or a light turns red and cars stack up while the missile is still in the air. With dynamic collateral damage, many crews second-guess the timing—if only 10 seconds earlier, if they had shot a minute later, and so on.

The second risk is mistaken identification. What if the person identified as the target actually wasn't? There are a number of ways to get this wrong, and it is to the credit of the whole team that mistaken identification is as rare as it was, especially when the adversary in the Long War went out of their way to look like innocent bystanders.

These risks—proportionality as it related to collateral damage and mistaken identity—had to be weighed against the human cost of the continued survival of, in the case of ISIS, an evil enemy regime that murdered civilians as a matter of policy. Each day ISIS controlled territory, civilians were murdered, tortured, or subjected to some other form of depravity. This expected value of evil weighed down one side of the moral scales, and all the risk of getting a shot wrong or accepting unavoidable and proportional noncombatant losses was the counterweight. Actually doing this math was helpful in the seminars, as the manifest cruelty of ISIS and Al-Qaeda easily outweighed the cost and risk of US weapons employment.

The challenge is learning to count the negative: how many people didn't die because the air crews took these shots. But once they learned to do that, it was much easier to process shots that went badly for reasons outside their control. This is the classic principle of proportionality, but in living it, they perhaps had to build the arguments themselves in order to feel comfortable in them.

Letting Go and Looking Forward

The last seminar where this brief was given was for friends on our major command's staff as we watched the withdrawal from Afghanistan. We were all roughly the same age, all approaching retirement eligibility, all worn and wiser in our own ways. Initially, we thought we were learning the material to teach others. By the end of this final seminar, we realized these stories were about understanding our own experiences. We had decades invested in these fights which had little closure, and we were trying to come to terms with the hardest of questions: What was it all for?

On one hand, there was a sense of loss, and a mix of frustration and acceptance about what we weren't able to do in Afghanistan for all the years of trying. On the other hand, this whole story started when Al-Qaeda attacked our homeland, and we prevented any further spectacular attacks while thoroughly eviscerating their organization. There weren't really clean answers to our questions. But there was a sense that we were all in that place together, and perhaps that was answer enough.

That 2021 brief almost seems an eternity ago, in light of a hot war in Ukraine and an increasingly aggressive China. The international gameboard has shifted to the point that many things which once seemed especially important have faded into the background. Yet, there are echoes from the last two decades' fights that can be heard in these current fights, if we listen closely enough: innovations in tactical unmanned aerial systems, creative communications networks with diverse combat forces, personalized wars with ubiquitous information operations. Even if our generation won't find clean answers for ourselves, one of the best things we can do is to offer some of our solutions to the next generation that will face these daunting challenges. If we can increase their chances of surviving and prevailing, then our efforts are not in vain.

Since these seminars, policies have been implemented broadly to ensure air crews understand the reasons for killing and also have the chance to spend time away from this killing long enough to reflect. The Air Force has certainly come a long way for our deployed-in-garrison forces, who for years had no boundary between war and peace—for many, never more than double-digit hours from potentially taking a life for years on end. With deploy-to-dwell cycles, where crews cycle between peacetime training and combat duties over the course of months, that world is no more.⁵

We have a seasoned fighting force. But as this Long War winds down, we will have a generational shift in this experience base. Those of us who joined when the Long War started are retirement eligible, and it is unlikely we will serve as tactical operators in a fight that may be a few years out. So we offer what we learned.

Culture is a lagging indicator of a community's learned experience of what works in war. Reflecting on the Battle of Hampton Roads during the US Civil War, no less than Herman Melville decried the USS *Monitor* ironclad as an inglorious machine that was somehow diminishing his ideal of war: "Hail to victory without the gaud of glory . . . war's made less grand than peace."⁶ With all due respect to Melville's literary prowess, if I had been a sailor on the USS *Minnesota*, having just seen my sister frigates *Congress* and *Cumberland* sunk by the ironclad CSS *Virginia*, I would care far less about the USS *Monitor*'s ungainly appearance and far more about the fact that the *Union* ironclad placed itself between my ship and the *Virginia* and saved my crew.

Sentimentality about winning with a certain aesthetic is a luxury for those for whom war is an abstraction; it is a malady that is instantly cured the moment you hear a radio go silent during a firefight or see on infrared a good guy go down. The only thing that remains is to protect your buddies and get the mission done without losing your soul in the process.

Indeed, the military profession leaves little room for sentimentality, even about our own hard-learned lessons. Let future military historians decide whether or not we did

5. Johnny Duray, "Forever Deployed: Why 'Combat-to-Dwell' Reform for MQ-9 Crews Is Beyond Overdue," War on the Rocks, January 23, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

6. Herman Melville, "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight," lines 7-8, 29, as qtd. in David A. Mindell, *Iron Coffin: War, Technology, and Experience Aboard the USS Monitor*, updated ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 129.

it right. But for now, there is the task at hand. To the next generation, standing watch from the posts we once held, I deeply hope that some of what we've found will be of use to you. Keep anything useful, and throw the rest away. But maybe this will give you a head start. We might need it.

Post Scriptum: A Call to Action

It seems appropriate to end—as it was to begin—with a call to action. First, the veterans of the global war on terrorism will carry these things with them for the rest of their careers and after. The Air Force's efforts to embed mental health professionals in its units provide much-needed resources for those who are still in uniform, but we must consider those who have left the service as well. Retirement or separation provides time to contemplate those things we never had time to think about. Doing so without the sense of purpose and belonging provided by the military community might be an unsettling prospect for some of our friends. Providing continuing institutional support to these veterans, and connection if desired, is a way to keep faith.

Second, we have a brief window to gather lessons learned on resiliency, coping strategies, best practices, and pathologies from those who fought these wars. In the face of an existential threat, our military members are rightly refocusing on the challenge ahead of them, which means that many of these hard-won lessons will quickly fade in our institutional memory if not captured now. These lessons may be exactly what we need to prevail in future challenges; we must identify which lessons are likely to carry over into the next fight, which lessons must be adapted, and which lessons will probably not apply in a large-scale fight. One hard-earned lesson was that when we can fight from anywhere, the fight is everywhere, and this presents new challenges for crews and their families. In the next fight, we will likely fight as a distributed battle network, where displaced and collectivized killing may be the norm rather than the exception. We should prepare accordingly.

Finally, the war in Ukraine bears witness to the human realities of a large-scale fight. Many of these same veterans found a renewed sense of purpose fighting alongside the Ukrainians, and they likely have much to teach us. Our force would gain from learning about the Ukrainians' resiliency strategies—especially the interplay between troops, leaders, chaplains, and counselors over the course of the conflict. We might offer in return effective strategies for reintegrating veterans into society. There is much to do yet, but there is no choice other than to get it done. To slightly paraphrase the poet Robert Frost, we have promises to keep, and miles to go before we sleep. Æ

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