FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Service. Duty. Honor. Integrity. Hero. These words can represent an enormous weight for the less than 7 percent of the US population—1/2 of 1 percent active duty and approximately 6.4 percent veteran—who have voluntarily embraced their deeper meaning and commitment through military service. From the oath of office to the various service iterations of core military values, these ideals, spoken and thus internalized and enacted, demand individuals forego an increasingly myopic inner- and self-focused world, and engage—mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually—with what it means to inflict lethal violence in pursuit of state ends.

For some, these ideals have elicited the ultimate sacrifice. But for others, the sacrifice comes by way of deep wounds, not readily visible. The earliest human warrior stories, ancient religious texts, and literature across centuries tell the tales of war's tragic mental detritus. The human psyche has not changed; the violence of war and killing in war has not changed. But global society's relatively recent ostensible embrace of the notion of universal human rights has placed warriors in many democratic nations in an impossible position: fulfill the actions required by a commitment to a noble cause and the highest ideals and risk a reciprocated mental violence that long outlives the physical violence one experiences in war.

Heroic actions, serving a cause greater than self, or fulfilling a sworn duty, can violate the transcendental ideals underlying these notions. It is not heroic to witness a terrible crime and be unable to stop it because of the rules of engagement and mission goals. Leaving innocents to certain death at the hands of the enemy because one cannot stay to defend a village is not serving a greater cause. Fulfilling a duty to support and defend the Constitution, a document founded on ideal aspirations for individuals and community, can lead to one engaging in activities that would be punishable by prison or execution at home. And humans, at least those with a moral, ethical compass, do not ask a foreigner, at mortal threat to that individual and their loved ones, to help them stay alive and further a mission, and then abandon that person to reprisal, including torture and death. War's reality is often difficult or impossible to reconcile at these levels.

The trauma suffered as a result of these violations, the exact definition of which is still being debated, continues to affect our warriors. Moral injury, a term coined in the

late 1990s based on clinical work with Vietnam War veterans, is the primary construct used to describe this trauma, which has expanded beyond the military context to reflect the moral distress seen, for example, in the healthcare field during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, unambiguous clinical definitions are important for society and bureaucratic structures with responsibilities to help those suffering make progress toward healing. Moreover, in sending our citizens to battle, we bear the responsibility to participate in their mental and emotional healing process. A moral injury suffered on behalf of the United States in war is an injury to the psyche of our nation as a whole.

In the aftermath of the abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan two years ago in August 2021, the almost immediate recapture of the government by the Taliban, and amid ongoing global efforts to help those who helped the US military leave that country for safety, the injury to veterans' moral selves as the result of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has only been exacerbated. This special issue of *Æther: A Journal of Strategic Airpower & Spacepower* intends to further the conversation that Jonathan Shay, Dave Grossman, and others began three decades ago, both scholarly and personal, on the subject of what is currently referred to as moral injury.

The special issue opens with a foreword by Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force JoAnne Bass, urging individuals, leaders, units, and families to engage on the subject. *Battlefield Perspectives* begins with a conversation between two veterans of US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Dave "Lewdog" Lewis, a retired Air Force colonel, and Paul "VooDoo" Nelson, a retired Air Force colonel and physician, both of whom now work in veterans' service and support. They discuss moral injury and their perspectives on ways toward healing. Retired Air Force Chief Master Sergeant Dave Nordel reflects on his experiences as a nurse in Iraq—specifically fulfilling a procedure called *clearing the beds,* which in some cases meant poor to mortal outcomes for some patients. The forum closes with a reflection by Air Force Colonel Dave Blair on the emotional and mental preparation for war. He considers changes to the character of war, sacrifice, the military profession, and the relationship between killing and identity.

The issue then turns to a selection of current scholarship on the topic of moral injury, including views from the disciplines of history, psychology, ethics, philosophy, and psychiatry. In our forum *With Us from the Start,* Heather Venable examines the experiences of World War II bomber crews, finding clear evidence that unlike some theorize, air combat crews underwent psychological trauma akin to moral injury despite their distance from their targets. *Terms of Reference* leads with an article by Tim Hoyt arguing for the importance of distinguishing the term moral injury from sometimes comorbid but different experiences of emotional and mental trauma, including posttraumatic stress disorder. The forum concludes with a call to reconsider the term itself. Ann Jeschke questions the application of a diagnosis that engages decidedly ambiguous terminology, including questions about universal definitions of morality and the use of injury to suggest moral weakness or damage, and proposes instead a healing approach through ritual that embraces the notion of a broader injury to society that must be remedied.

Our final forum, *Implications for the Warfighter*, takes us on a philosophical journey through the views of war promulgated by amoral realism and pacifism. Dan Connelly argues both views deny the validity of war as a legitimate form of statecraft, making our warriors mere functionaries destined to commit evil on behalf of the state. In the second and final article in the forum, Mary Bartlett and Nicole Schmitz remind us suicide has a profound impact on the military and find evidence that moral injury is a risk factor for suicide. They offer recommendations for the military to better address this driver of suicidal ideation and suicide.

As always, I am exceedingly grateful for the authors and for Team *Æther*, without whom this issue would not exist. In addition, I would like to thank our guest editors: Paul Nelson, Tim Hoyt, Dan Strand, Mike Weaver, and Betty Ann Venth. These practitioners and scholars took significant time out of their busy schedules to help bring the issue to fruition.

This *Æther* issue also represents a special collaboration with the 711th Human Performance Wing and the US Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine. Their contributions of time, scholarship, and resources completed a journal effort that began a year ago, in September 2022. We appreciate their invaluable participation and partnership.

Our fall issue intends to be the opening lines in a longer-running military-driven dialogue on the subject of what is currently referred to as moral injury. We hope you find it informative, thought-provoking, and for some, even healing. **Æ**

~The Editor

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