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*War Wounds*

# Breaking a Taboo, Army Confronts Guilt After Combat

## West Point Professor Pushes Military to Talk to Troops About Battlefield Killing

### A 'Blood Curdling' Sound

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Not long ago Maj. Peter Kilner posted on an Army-sponsored Web site a short essay he had written on the morality of killing in combat.

The topic had long fascinated the West Point philosophy and ethics professor. Outside of the pacifist movement, though, no one had shown much interest in his work on the subject. This time the response from his fellow officers surprised him.

Peter Kilner

One officer emailed him about his experience after opening fire on a car fleeing a U.S. Army roadblock in Iraq. "What I'll never forget about that engagement was listening to the family react when they saw the inside of the car and their loved one without a chest," the officer wrote. "I know what I did was right. But I'll never lose the sound of that grief-stricken family." The sound was "blood curdling," he added in a later email to a reporter.

Slowly, Maj. Kilner's writings -- which encourage officers to talk to their troops about the morality of killing in combat and the guilt that often comes with taking another's life -- have begun gathering a wide audience.

**FURTHER READING**

- Read a 2002 essay[1] on killing in combat by Maj. Kilner in Combined Arms Center Military Review
- Maj. Kilner also addressed the subject in a 2005 essay[2] for a military-ethics symposium

Instructors at a military-police school in Missouri have passed them around to spur discussions on the morality of killing. At the Army's school for newly minted chaplains in South Carolina, Maj. Kilner's writings are being incorporated into a new course to be offered later this year on how to counsel soldiers on the morality of war. Recently a battalion of troops from the 101st Airborne Division gathered to discuss his theories on killing prior to deploying to Iraq later this fall.

"Until recently I have never seen anyone address a group about their feelings on killing," says Maj. Kilner. "It is just impolite conversation...like asking someone have you had an abortion?"

Four years of heavy combat, however, are slowly altering the way the Army talks about this long-taboo subject. It's a shift that Maj. Kilner, along with other Army officers and military psychiatrists, say is long overdue.

Drawing from a wide body of philosophy, Maj. Kilner argues that killing is morally acceptable when the enemy poses a threat to values worth fighting for, such as life or liberty, and there are no nonlethal options to avoid the threat. Shades

of the same argument have been used for centuries by rulers and soldiers to justify killing on the battlefield.

Maj. Kilner is pushing America's current crop of Army officers to help their soldiers confront the morality of killing on a personal level. Failure to address these issues in training, Maj. Kilner argues, can sometimes disable soldiers in combat, and leave them more prone to psychological traumas after the battle is finished.

"My goal is to break the taboo. Let's start talking and see what develops," Maj. Kilner says.

The U.S. military's views on how to equip soldiers to kill grew out of work by Brig. Gen. S.L.A. Marshall during World War II. Gen. Marshall determined that fewer than 25% of U.S. riflemen in combat fired their weapons.

"Fear of killing rather than fear of being killed was the most common cause of battle failure," he wrote. Critics have since raised questions about the reliability of Gen. Marshall's data, but the premise of the report -- that many soldiers balked at pulling the trigger -- has been widely accepted.

To overcome this resistance the Army began training soldiers on lifelike pop-up targets that more closely resembled what they would see in actual combat. Soldiers repeat the same drills until their reactions become second nature.

The training has worked. By Vietnam 90% of soldiers fired their weapons. Maj. Kilner, who went to Iraq as part of a team writing the official Army history of the war, recalls interviewing a soldier in Kirkuk who had been walking a patrol when a sniper's shot grazed his uniform.

"The soldier heard the round, turned and fired two shots into the enemy sniper's chest and kept walking just like he would have on the range. His company commander was so proud," says Maj. Kilner.

Such reflexive training is good because it keeps soldiers alive, Maj. Kilner says. But it can also cause problems. "When military training has effectively undermined soldiers' moral autonomy they morally deliberate their actions only after the fact," he wrote in a 2002 article in Military Review, a U.S. Army military journal.

Soldiers who can't justify their actions will be more likely to suffer crippling guilt, nightmares and post-traumatic stress, he suggested.

To help soldiers, commanders must let soldiers who are carrying out lawful orders know that feelings of guilt after combat are natural and not "a sign of moral culpability or mental weakness," he says.

Maj. Kilner, 39 years old, became interested in killing and combat stress at a time when the Army was giving it little thought. He hasn't seen combat himself, but he served as an infantry officer in the 82nd Airborne Division. Afterward, the Army sent him to Virginia Tech in the mid-1990s to get a graduate degree in philosophy. Looking for an area of study that would be relevant when he returned to teach at West Point, he decided to explore the moral justification for killing in combat.

He immersed himself in the philosophical literature of war. "After a few months I was a good pacifist wondering if I could continue my army career," he says. Searching for answers, he decided to conduct some research and took out a small advertisement in a U.S. Army professional journal. "If you have killed in combat and you feel justified please send me your comments. I'd like to talk with you," he wrote. The responses ran the gamut. One World War II veteran sent him page after page of Biblical verses. Some veterans sent long, detailed accounts of their own experiences with killing. He also got some "absolute hate mail," he says. A retired colonel and Vietnam veteran wrote him a two-page letter, which he still has, asking: "Who are you to say that what I did was wrong?" The passionate and fevered responses convinced him he was onto something.

He finished his graduate degree in 1998 and went to West Point a few months later. Shortly after 9/11 he penned an essay for Military Review, a U.S. Army professional journal, arguing that "soldiers deserve to understand who they can kill morally and why those actions are moral." In the essay he argued that U.S. soldiers should function as "the last line of defense for the rights of life and liberty" and are "morally obliged" to use lethal force to defend the innocent. U.S. troops must also be willing to assume additional risk to themselves and their subordinates to minimize damage to civilians.

"We must remember our calling: to risk ourselves to protect the innocent," he wrote. The essay drew little attention until the Iraq war. Soldiers began returning home with post-traumatic stress disorder rates comparable to Vietnam. In July 2004 , the New England Journal of Medicine reported that some 17% of returning Iraq veterans suffered from depression, severe anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Hard evidence linking guilt from killing to post-traumatic stress is limited. One 1999 study concluded that Vietnam veterans who had killed suffered more acute post-traumatic stress symptoms than those who hadn't. The study by Rachel MacNair, a psychologist and pacifist, relied on data from the Congressionally funded National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study from the mid-1980s.

Many soldiers, though, say the connection between killing and combat stress is real. Lt. Jonathan Silk, who led a platoon of the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, says that his soldiers were particularly shaken by their first and only big daylight battle. "You could see what weapons did to people. You could see bodies destroyed and torn apart," he says.

During the fight his men were cheering. Just a few hours afterward , Lt. Silk says his gunner was shaking. Another soldier "wouldn't stop talking....There was an emotional crack in his voice," he says.

He asked his commanders to send a team of mental-health counselors to talk to his troops. "My gunner was very focused on the fact that he killed a large number of enemy," Lt. Silk says. In the session with the counselors they talked through why he had to open fire.

Eighteen months later the images from the fight still linger. "I have a constant-playing video of [the battle] in my head," Lt. Silk says. The fight convinced the 36-year-old officer that he needed to talk more with his troops about killing prior to combat. Typically soldiers playing the enemy in training exercises will pop back to life immediately after they are "shot." In the future Lt. Silk says it may be useful to have the dead remain on the ground. Soldiers at the end of the battle would have to explain why they killed and why it was justified.

He also says he will talk more with his troops after combat. "It is great to see the president telling us how just our cause is...But he is not doing the killing with us. Soldiers need to hear it from their immediate leaders, and those leaders need to understand why killing is right," he says today.

**Haunted by the Incident**

There is no established program or training for commanders who want to talk with their soldiers about killing and its aftermath, leaving soldiers and commanders to cobble together their own solutions. The captain who emailed Maj. Kilner about his reaction to the checkpoint shooting wrote he was so haunted by the incident when he got home that he couldn't fall asleep without downing a six pack of beer.

At the time of the shooting he was overseeing a checkpoint near Fallujah when a car approached and then abruptly tried to flee. He let loose a volley of 28 rounds, tearing off the passenger's chest. "The passenger I killed had a loaded AK-47 on his lap that I didn't see when I first shot," he writes in an email.

After he returned to the U.S. he saw a mental-health counselor, which helped. So did talking to friends. "But a part of it was going to confession and believing that I was placed in the situation by a higher power who knew I made the right decision. Whether I follow these beliefs out of comfort or convenience I guess I won't know the answer until the afterlife," he recently wrote in an email from Iraq, where he is in the midst of his second year-long deployment.

He asked not to be named because he hasn't told his family about his combat experiences. "I am not sure they accept the fact that I am a combat arms officer who doesn't see the sanitized side of war," he added.

**A Family's Reaction**

Other soldiers say they felt sadness only after they returned to the U.S. Sgt. Darrell Borst, a 22-year-old soldier who fought in Iraq with the 1st Armored Division, wasn't bothered by his combat experience until his aunt asked him at a homecoming party if he had killed anyone. When he answered yes the room fell silent. "My family's reaction really bothered me. There was sadness in their eyes. It still bothers me today," he says. "It is like they remember you in a certain way and now you are different."

Such reactions explain why some officers are trying to figure out how to prepare soldiers before they're ever put in a position to kill. Lt. Col. Eric Conrad, a commander from the 101st Airborne Division whose soldiers recently gathered to discuss Maj. Kilner's writings, worried how his 400-soldier battalion would react to the carnage they were likely to see. None of the soldiers in his unit are front-line combat troops. Instead the unit consists of military police, intelligence soldiers, engineers, truck-drivers and communications specialists.

Taran Z

The photo of a Vietnamese soldier and his daughter left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by the U.S. soldier who killed him. The U.S. soldier carried the photo for 22 years, seeking forgiveness.

In a conference room at the division's home in Ft. Campbell, Ky., Capt. Jerry Moon, one of Col. Conrad's unit commanders, passed out copies of Maj. Kilner's essays to all of the officers in the battalion. The next day he asked the group of officers why it was OK to kill.

"If you don't do it over there, they will come over here and do it to your family like the World Trade Center," said Lt. James Stewart. "It is our Constitution or their radical Islam." Other officers cited the brutality with which the insurgents have killed Iraqi and Western hostages, casting them as subhuman psychopaths.

As the officers talked Capt. Moon quietly pulled out a book entitled "Offerings at the Wall," a catalog of mementoes left at the Vietnam Veteran's memorial in Washington. He flipped to a page dominated by a worn photograph of a Vietnamese soldier and his young pigtailed daughter left at the memorial by a U.S. soldier. Then he read aloud the anonymous letter that accompanied it:

"Dear Sir , for 22 years I have carried your picture in my wallet. I was only 18 years old that day we faced one another...Why you didn't take my life I'll never know. You stared at me so long, armed with your AK-47, and yet you did not fire. Forgive me for taking your life. So many times over the years I have stared at your picture and your daughter, I suspect. Each time my heart and guts would burn with the pain of guilt....Forgive me, Sir."

The room fell silent. Lt. Travis Thebeau, a 31-year-old intelligence officer spoke first. "We all go in with the idea that it is us or them. I don't think that will hold up for an 18- or 19-year-old kid. Maybe it holds up when he pulls the trigger. But it won't hold up 10 years down the road," he said.

Capt. Moon suggested that he and his fellow soldiers could find comfort in the knowledge that they "fight for a cause that is morally sound. We extend liberties to people," he said. But even Capt. Moon worried that was not enough. "What if public opinion swings against this war? If the American people don't see this as a just war does that making the killing harder?" he asked. The officers shrugged. Col. Conrad urged his officers to keep the discussion going with their soldiers.

"If you raise the subject here your soldiers are going to know they can come back to you later," he suggested.

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