

QUESTION OF WAR A TOUGH ONE FOR PARENTS OF SOLDIERS



GARY VISKUPIC

BY TOM MERRICK

I didn't want to write this, it has been a long time coming to terms with the fact that my son is in harm's way. In many ways this experience is like any other trauma one goes through where a range of emotions come into play. Fear, frustration, helplessness, apprehension and love all come together in an emotional soup to shake up your life.

Back in the '60s and '70s it was easy to rage against the Vietnam War — it was unjust, killing thousands of American kids in a country far removed from our own part of the world. We were wrong to go there, wrong to stay as long as we did, and made too many mistakes along the way.

Today, it is difficult to rage against this war — it is unjust and it's killing thousands of Americans in a country far removed from our own part of the world. We were wrong to go there, wrong to stay as long as we have, and have made too many mistakes along the way.

What is the difference? Today's military soldiers volunteered to serve their country. I believe it is because of the fact that we have not seen thousands protesting in the streets, demanding we get out of Iraq. Change the rules and remove that line between an all-volunteer military and interject the possibility that the only thing between your son and daughter going to Iraq is a lottery number and you would see a very different response to this war from most Americans.

As a parent we are all responsible for keeping our children safe and steering them towards a healthy, happy and productive life as adults. So you can imagine my immediate reaction when at 19 my son decided to join the Army. It was an easy choice for him as he is a natural leader. But for me it was every parent's nightmare. In the middle of a war with no end in sight, my son wanted to join in the fight. He completed basic training, went to medic school, completed airborne, asked for and was assigned to ranger training and was then assigned to a ranger battalion at Fort Lewis. Not only was I proud of him for all his accomplishments, but relieved that all this training was keeping him stateside and relatively safe. Then the inevitable happened, his battalion was slated to deploy.

I knew it would happen. The state of denial I'd been in was shattered in a flash as he said goodbye. Because he is part of the military's Special Forces, he could not tell me when he was leaving, where he was going or exactly when he would be home. I was given a cryptic APO address and asked to send mail and packages to him there.

Once he was in Iraq he occasionally had access to a telephone. From the day he left the house after his last leave before deploying, until the day he came home last month I kept my cell phone near my side. All our conversations were very generic and completely devoid of any details about what he was doing or, more importantly, how he was doing.

It is difficult to really describe how you feel as a parent knowing one of your children is in harm's way. It is one thing to know your son or daughter is going to participate in something risky, like skydive out of an airplane for fun, or even bungee jump off some bridge for the thrill. It's a whole other feeling when that sense of danger is present day after day for months.

Adding to all of this are the headlines and visuals seen on TV every day. I could not simply tune out the world and ignore what's going on. So I watched and listened and worried each day that my son was not among the dead or injured that day. It's not something that engulfs you and keeps you from your daily activities, but simply adds to the everyday stresses we all experience.

If we all had been asked to sacrifice for this "noble" war instead of paying for a huge tax break for the wealthiest 1% of our citizens and the billions our children will pay for this war, I'd have a much easier time supporting our President. But he didn't ask for sacrifices. Instead we were told to just go about our daily lives like nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

And what of my son and the thousands of sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, wives and husbands who have been killed, injured and emotionally scarred by this war, or simply forced to grow old too quickly? How can we repair the scars left by an unjust war? I ask each of you reading this to discuss it with your kids, your spouse or significant other, or friends, and then ask yourself how you can do one thing, just one thing, to bring an end to this awful war. Then go do that one thing.

In this effort we alone cannot bring change, right a wrong, create justice, or bring peace — we must act together.

Tom Merrick is a Beaverton (Oregon) resident and past-president of the Beaverton Chamber of Commerce. His article is reprinted from *The Valley Times*.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

DO DEAD SOLDIERS HAVE SOULS?

The war in Iraq is as much about democracy as it is about oil and empire simply because the soldiers who are fighting the war anxiously wish to believe it is, however aware they are of being manipulated and deceived into that belief.

The same can be said of every war. The U.S. Civil War was about slavery because that was the essential reason the soldiers on both sides fought it, for and against. (The corollary purpose of the South was to defeat a perceived invader of the confederacy.) World War 1 was to put an end to war because the soldiers who endured the worst prolonged hell on earth — which they also created for themselves — slaughtered each other by the millions for that fervent hope (which might have been a not so subjective basis for the fierce obliteration). World War 2 is eulogized as history's most titanic struggle between freedom ("democracy") and totalitarianism ("fascism"); each claimed history on its side — the Germans, however conscripted, believed in the rightness of a thousand year Reich despite their gloomy detestation of Nazidom; the Japanese despised colonial white rule in Asia and viciously supplanted it with their own arrogantly cruel version.

The wars in Korea and Vietnam were more subjective than their predecessors, so-called "brushfire wars" to promote or prevent the spread of Cold War ideologies and to skirt nuclear obliteration while simultaneously risking it. As a result, both wars were inconclusive; yet at the heart of each war, the combatants fought for beliefs latently instilled in them or fiercely demanded of them.

So Iraq. The grunts on the ground most likely cling to a tenacious faith they have liberated the Iraqi people from a monstrous dictator and now attempt to protect them from a brutal resurrection of ancient religious schism. At the very least they fervently hope their great personal risks are for the exalted principles that are claimed, that their leaders are literally keeping faith with them. Yet every day Americans and their faux allies face an equal, bitter tenacity by a hardcore resistance determined to oust the invaders whom they regard as infidel imperialists as pernicious as the earlier medieval Crusaders.

Soldiers have been lied to throughout history. They have always been coerced in one manner or another to commit and suffer humanity's most hideous acts, generally in the names of its most sanctified beliefs. That has not changed: the Americans who are fighting and dying (and grotesquely wounded) in Iraq are as deceived as to the underlying purposes of the war as were their predecessors of wars immemorial, and the rewards for such guileless intrepidity are as always unequal and usually disproportionate to the fervid sacrifice for them.

The only purpose for armies is the destruction of other human beings. Soldiering is big business, the first order of every empire since ancient times, but soldiers themselves are little more than expendable pawns, readily discarded.

Without soldiers there would be no wars. No Caesars, no Napoleons, no Hitlers. Soldiers kill, rape, pillage, burn, and if they are unlucky, stupid or badly led, they die.

Support for soldiers at war acts contrarily as a relentless goad that pushes troops into irreversible horror at the same time cheering warcries crush any who would conscientiously object. The soldiers feel compelled to carry out what they perceive as public mandate, and in the belief that any personal doubts would be met with disapproval, they do their duty at any cost.

Yet the soldiers we are exhorted to uncritically support can be turned against us, ordered to suppress dissent as well as civil rights and liberties; and to round up political activists and put them in jail. In times like these such repressive use of soldiers could have wide popular support.

Quite a few people think dissent is improper once a war is started and refuse to believe it is more necessary than ever — their point is that dissent succors an enemy and betrays soldiers on the home side, as well as erodes their morale.

Yet, as realized by the Vietnam War, dissent is the only way to stop questionable wars. Dissenters are not responsible for the misuse of the lives of soldiers. The people who start and profit from wars are.

The war parties always attempt to capture patriotism as their own, and portray dissent against their wars as sedition and disloyalty. But dissent is the true act of patriotism and a more sensible way to support soldiers than dispatching them into horror.

History essentially records the lives and affairs of kings, emperors and generals, and of course their interminable wars. The hundreds of millions of common people impressed into wars and whose homes, towns, occupations and lives were decimated by them have been ignored until only recently — the result of the rise of mass media that has chronicled global aversion toward warfare by ordinary folk who suffer it.

May, as National Military Appreciation Month, is low-scale agitprop that boilerplates the millennial President's militant ministry to decimate in the name of God other millenarians who are of different creeds, cultures and races. Its ironic yet fittingly tragic finale is commemoration of the heaps of dead on Memorial Day.




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