

A TRAINED KILLER IN CHURCH

INTRODUCTION:

*Warriors exist in a world totally incomprehensible to those who have never had the misfortune of experiencing the horrors of the battlefield.*¹

The pastor of First Baptist Church sat across from me at the local diner. His eyes were heavy, reflecting the pain in his heart. His concern was for his youth director, a Marine veteran who had served in the war on terrorism and was now attending a local Bible College, courtesy of the G.I. Bill. The pastor explained to me that his church ran a combined youth group with the Congregational Church in the New England town where he served. The previous Wednesday evening the youth director had brought a gun to the youth group meeting at the Congregational Church. The community was in an uproar. The Congregational pastor wanted the youth director fired immediately. The Baptist pastor sitting across from me was less reactive.

“What’s going on with this young man? Why would he do such a thing?” he asked. Would you be willing, as a retired Navy chaplain, to meet with this young man and talk with him? Could you help me understand his motives in taking a weapon into church?”

I agreed to meet with the young man, the pastor made a phone call, and four hours later I was sitting in the same diner across from the youth director. “Why would you take a gun into a church?” I asked. “Guns are not even allowed in military chapels. The church is intended to be a sanctuary, a safe place for all, and the presence of a gun threatens that sense of safety.”

“I have my Second Amendment Rights,” the Marine replied. “They are violating my Second Amendment Rights by not allowing me to bring my gun into the church.”

¹ Camillo Mac Bica, *Beyond PTSD: The Moral Casualties of War*. (Commack, NY: Gnosis Press, 2016), 12.

“The Second Amendment is part of the Constitution,” I replied. “There is no Second Amendment Right in the Bible.”

The young men looked at me, unable to respond to my Biblical claim. “You’re right,” he said with downcast eyes.

“I think I understand why you brought the gun to church. You are a Marine. While you were in Afghanistan your rifle was your security. You don’t go anywhere while you are in theater without your rifle.”

My words were a paraphrase of the *Rifleman’s Creed*, which every Marine learns by heart in bootcamp:

This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine.

My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life.

My rifle, without me, is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me. I will.

My rifle and myself know that what counts in this war is not the rounds we fire, the noise of our burst, nor the smoke we make. We know that it is the hits that count. We will hit.

My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strength, its parts, its accessories, its sights and its barrel. I will ever guard it against the ravages of weather and damage as I will ever

guard my legs, my arms, my eyes and my heart against damage. I will keep my rifle clean and ready. We will become part of each other. We will.

God, I swear this creed. My rifle and myself are the defenders of my country. We are the masters of our enemy. We are the saviors of my life.

So be it, until victory is America's and there is no enemy, but peace!

This young man may have been a student at the local Bible College, but he was also an alumnus of Marine Corps bootcamp. He was experiencing an intense spiritual struggle. He had memorized a *Creed*, as important to him as the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds were to the pastors. His Rifle was his Christ figure: *"My rifle is my best friend. It is my life."* *"Without my rifle, I am useless."* *"We will become part of each other."* *"We are the saviors of my life."* This is certainly not theological orthodoxy. But it is Marine Corps orthodoxy. It is the way to survive in battle.

My youth director friend was no longer in Afghanistan. He was in New England, a much different environment. But he had brought his bootcamp diploma with him back to the Granite State. He was a Marine, trained to survive the hell of the battlefield. His doctrine was simple: kill or be killed. *"I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me."* *"what counts in this war is not the rounds we fire, the noise of our burst, nor the smoke we make. . . it is the hits that count."*

These lessons were written on his very soul. He had been literally brainwashed to believe that his salvation was found in his rifle, that killing was the path to survival. He brings his savior with him everywhere, even to this Holy Place in New Hampshire. In his confused thinking, the Constitution is a Bible that includes the Second Amendment which allows, even instructs him to do so.

What the two New England pastors did not understand was that this man was a trained killer. They are in good company. Most pastors looking out over their congregation on Sunday morning have trained killers in their church. These worshippers are not criminals; they are not hit men. They have been trained to kill by the United States government, not the mob. They were trained well. They have traveled to places like Korea and Vietnam, Kabul and Baghdad. During these “tours,” they may have killed another human being—or more than one. These trained killers in church are military veterans.

My Baptist colleague was right: he did not know how to minister to this returning veteran. It has been fifty years since the United States ended the draft. Few pastors today are veterans. They have no idea what it means to be trained to kill, go off to battle, and return with experiences they don't feel comfortable talking about with anyone other than fellow veterans. They don't understand the spiritual struggles that go on in the souls of military veterans. If they did, they would be better equipped to help this population deal with the intense spiritual struggles that they face on a daily basis.

The Baptist pastor didn't know how to minister to this Marine veteran, but unlike his Congregational colleague he had a heart to do so. This book is written to equip pastors who have a heart for our nation's military veterans. It was not an easy book for me, a retired military chaplain, to write, and it will not be an easy book to read. It is sober reflection on the work of

our nation's military, and the scars this work leaves on the souls of its veterans. It seeks to walk a narrow path between the "God and country" Christian nationalism of so many Evangelicals and the suspicion or outright hostility displayed by many in the Mainline churches. The military exists for one reason only: to fight and win the nation's wars. War is the worst form of evil human beings can ever experience. But sometimes it is necessary. Aggressors must be stopped. Justice must sometimes be re-established. Peace must be restored and maintained. The paradox of war is that sometimes violence must be used in the pursuit of justice and peace. It is the same paradox found at the Calvary's cross. Evil must be engaged with on its own terms in order to be destroyed.

Military service is an honorable calling. It requires self-sacrifice. Christians understand that a godly life is one lived in sacrificial service to others. We belong in the military, like we belong in every other arena of society. This book stands firmly in the Just War tradition.

But evil leaves its mark on those it touches. The youth director had a good heart. He had served his country, and now wanted to serve God and the church. But he needed help. His two pastors more than likely had the skills necessary to minister to his troubled soul. The average parish pastor with a Seminary education is well equipped to minister effectively with the many veterans struggling spiritually in our country. They just didn't know how to use their skills with the veteran population.

The statistic is well-known: Twenty-two veterans take their own lives every day in America. This behavior is a symptom of a deeper, spiritual problem. A struggle in the veteran's soul. Historically the work of the pastor has included the care of souls, *cura animarum*. Ministers are uniquely qualified to help veterans who are engaged in this kind of soul struggle.

There is no doubt veterans desperately need the ministry local parish pastors are able to give. The Veterans Administration (VA) offers a great deal of help to treat veteran's physical wounds. They prescribe prostheses to replace lost limbs. They write prescriptions for medicine that alleviates a great deal of pain, both physical and emotional. The VA also provides excellent counseling and therapy to those who have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). But, with the exception of providing chaplains in their hospitals and in some of their clinics, the Veterans Administration is not treating the deepest wounds caused by war, the wounds that scar the soul of returning veterans. This requires the "care of the soul," and is the work of church as a whole and her leaders.

But both the church and her leaders, for reasons that will become clear throughout this book, have too often failed our veterans. We need humbly confess that we have fallen far short of the model of our Leader, who was known as a friend of tax collectors (who did the dirty work of the government) and sinners (Matthew 11:19). We need to understand that servicemen and women have become a part of a different culture than civilians, and they must be understood as such. Ministry to those who have served in military by civilians is cross-cultural ministry.

Unfortunately, many veterans do not feel welcome and comfortable in our churches, and begin to seek help elsewhere. Instead of reuniting with the God's people around the Word and Sacrament, they unite at the American Legion around stories and alcohol. Even as a Chaplain, I have to confess that I have often felt more accepted among my fellow veterans than I have among fellow believers.

We can do better. I write as a pastor who has served in both the parish as a pastor and in the military as a chaplain. My goal is to help equip pastors and their congregations to reach out with a greater level of understanding to veterans, whether they are Vietnam War veterans that

have been in their midst for over 50 years now or the young veterans of the War on Terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our veterans need the hope and healing that comes from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. They deserve no less.