

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

--Camillo "Mac" Bica

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."

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

“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.”

“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. Edward Tick is describing the average American pastor when he writes, “We do not treat war’s invisible wounds effectively because for many reasons we do not understand them accurately.”² One of those reasons is that 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

² Edward Tick, *Warrior’s Return: Restoring the Soul after War*. (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2014),

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 he had the heart to do so. This book is written to equip pastors who have a heart for our nation's military veterans. I am a retired pastor with 12 years parish experience and 20 years of service as a military chaplain. Although I never experienced actual combat, I did deploy to Al Assad, Iraq in 2006-2007 with the Marines and to the Persian Gulf with the Navy in 2010. I heard appalling stories from Marines who had recently returned to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina after the second battle in Fallujah. I stood at the side of my Commanding Officer in the Straits of Hormuz as he anxiously watched for Iranian fishing vessels that were potential suicide fighters that would harm the U.S. aircraft carrier should they come too close.

David Wood, civilian who accompanied the First Battalion, Sixth Marine Regiment as an embedded journalist in Afghanistan, writes, "There can be few more disorienting places for religious clergy than in the midst of war."³ This book will likely be disorienting for its primary audience, religious clergy. It will expose many things that we would like to keep hidden. It highlights the intense emotional and spiritual suffering many veterans endure. It chronicles the many ways our nation has betrayed their trust. It identifies the collective guilt we must all bear for our nation's wars. "It may be too painful for society to address what it does when it sends young men off to kill other young men in distant lands," warns Lt. Col. David Grossman.⁴ There are probably be some readers, especially combat veterans, for whom this is too painful. If

³ David Wood, *What Have We Done? The Moral Injury of our Longest Wars*. (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2016) 207.

⁴ Lt. Col. David Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1995) 95

that is the case, consider putting the book aside—for a time or forever. I have no desire to add to anyone’s trauma. But before putting this book aside because it is difficult, remind yourself of the courage it took our veterans to go to war. I would encourage the readers of this book, and especially Christian pastors, to muster up the courage to face the truth about the suffering of those who have served us so they can provide ministry in the name of the One who left the comforts of Heaven to enter our traumatized world in order to offer healing (the Greek word σωζω can be translated as either “save” or “heal”).

CONTEMPLATE A COMPOSITE PORTRAIT OF WAR’S SURVIVORS. MEET THESE WOMEN AND MEN. LISTEN TO THEIR STORIES. KEEP YOUR HEART OPEN TO THE STATISTICS WE MUST HEAR AND DO NOT LET THEM NUMB YOU; THEY REPRESENT COUNTLESS HUMAN STORIES. MANY TROOPS AND VETERANS STILL SEE DEAD CHILDREN AND SMELL BURNING FLESH. THEY STARE IN HORROR AT THE LEGIONS OF THE SLAIN. THEY ARE IN SHOCK AT THE RESULTS OF WAR AND ALSO AT LEARNING WHAT THEY, AND EVERY ONE OF US, ARE CAPABLE OF DOING. THEY ARE IN SHOCK AT BETRAYAL AND ABANDONMENT BY THE HOMELAND THEY SERVED. THEIR MINDS ARE IN CONFUSION AS TO WHO THEY ARE NOW. THEY CANNOT GET THEIR BEARINGS IN THIS CIVILIAN WORLD SO DIFFERENT FROM THE MILITARY CULTURE AND WARS IN WHICH THEY SERVED.

EDWARD TICK⁵

This book is written primarily for an American (United States) audience. I suspect it may have value for readers in other countries, such as Canada and Australia, but I don’t pretend to know those cultures well enough to speak to them directly. Any non-American readers will have to adapt what I write to their own situation.

This book 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

⁵ Ibid., 38.

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 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.

I believe 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 to 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 to 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 the military by civilians who have not 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 God’s people around the Word and Sacrament, they unite at the American Legion around war 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. Our 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, need the hope and healing that comes from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. They deserve no less.