

Episcopal priest and Army Reserve Chaplain

## Never Call Them Heroes

Never call them heroes, because they are not. In all my years as an [enlisted](#) Marine and an Army chaplain, I never once heard a combat veteran call another service member a hero, unless it was a joke. A hero, in Greek mythology, is a demi-god. Half-man, half-god, they were the product of a divine human union. Heroes are superheroes and as such, they do not experience war and death as a human being. Heroes do not bleed, grieve, or feel alone. They exist only in video games.

The Vietnam legacy of calling our warriors "baby-killers" has resulted in a false hero worship that confuses, and even infuriates combat [veterans](#) from this war. While I am glad we are erring on the side of hero, I still believe it distorts the truth about war, killing and the long journey home. The truth is that our warriors are somewhere in between the baby-killer and the hero.

The men and women who fight our wars carry the wounds of war in their bodies and in their souls. They go to war as children and come home old beyond their years. They walk among us and pretend to be normal, until they remember what they did or didn't do in their little slice of the war. I know this because I am one of them, and as their chaplain, I carry their stories.

When soldiers come home from war they are often counseled to be careful about what they tell family and friends about their experience. I told soldiers to say, when asked about Iraq, "I don't want to talk about it." Offended, the family member will usually say, "Why?" I told them to say, "You wouldn't understand." I am only recently beginning to understand why this was good advice.

The stories that haunt soldiers are the stories of their own failures. The failure to protect their friends and subordinates from injury or death haunts soldiers, especially leaders. In combat, things happen so fast and with such force and violence that the memory of the event is burned in the mind. As that event is rehearsed in slow motion again and again, the soldier sees his failure to save his friend in slow motion. He will never tell this story of failure to his family. When this story plays on the secret youtube of the mind, he doesn't feel like a hero. Calling him one just sounds strange.

The men and women of our armed forces are very brave. When the explosion goes off and everyone runs away, our warriors turn and move towards the blast. At a very young age they cross the line of death, the line where they know how they will die. They wake up in the dark, prepare their equipment, and gather in a circle to smoke, pray, and go over the mission. Then they roll out in armored vehicles, outside the wire, to face the grim [lottery](#) of combat. After they come home, most of them have moments when they wish they could be back in Iraq or Afghanistan. Life was tough, but simple, and they have never felt the kind of camaraderie since their plane landed in Dallas or Atlanta. They are very brave, but don't call them heroes, or you

will never help them. What you will do is demonstrate to combat veterans that the world they call home does not understand them anymore.

What can we do? How can we welcome them home from war, even if they have been home for years? They went to war on our behalf, in our name, even if we were opposed to the war. The Veterans Administration is doing an excellent [job of](#) caring for our returning warriors. I have received healthcare and counseling from the VA, and I am very glad they have the resources to help me and my brothers and sisters. But when we honor veterans publicly, when the patriotic music plays, when we call on them to stand while we clap, they are thinking of their dead friends. If you know one, ask about her dead friends. Help her remember them rightly. You will show them you love her, which is all you can ever do.

We also need to offer cleansing rituals to our returning warriors, just as Native American communities did after battle. They have moral injuries that require moral restoration, and we are beginning to recognize this as a nation and offer this moral cleansing to combat veterans in sweat lodges, *mikvas*, baptismal fonts, pilgrimages, yoga mats, confession rails, and other places where sins are washed away.

So don't call them heroes, call them warriors, because that is what they are. They have done things in our name that haunt them. They have witnessed the crude indifference of war and death on our behalf. We need these warriors to tackle problems here at home, and before they can do this they need cleansing, forgiveness and reconciliation.