It is the frayed and demolished life to which many Veterans return in rocket velocity, without any opportunity to transition or de-escalate from combat to the comparative lavishness of civilian life, that often shatters their once firm foundation and sends Service Members into a rapid downward spiral.

For far too many returning Veterans, disembarking on American soil often makes eating the barrel of one’s weapon seem to be the most preferable next meal.
The sobering nature of the issue is far too profound to be quantified. Whether in the wartime theater or the home front, wounds that do not bleed can still be ripped open, allowing spillage of immeasurable anguish and despair. It is the suffocating hopelessness and promises of only more of the same, the damnation of infinite burdens that can no longer be shaken off, and time and time again, coming face to face with the inevitability of one’s own demise, that makes it easy to find the belt or the barrel that will lead to desperately desired relief (Carlson, Task and Purpose, 2016). Accepting this offers the ease of sanctions that can readily lead to a simple squeeze of the trigger; “a flight from a world that just doesn’t care” and reprieve from an ugliness that cannot be put into words (Carlson, 2016).

For those of us who have ever worn the uniform, we have all been there and yearned to taste gun metal.

When there are more losses to post-war suicide than in combat, we have a serious problem on our hands. We are a long way from grasping the bona fide burdens of war that Veterans carry home. Enduring and suffering the plain awful experience of readjustment to civilian life, shackled by continuous back to back deployments, and further complicated by the 99 percent of the American populace that just “doesn’t get us,” makes for a new kind of isolated hell from everything that not so long before delivered tremendous value, meaning, and purpose to our lives.

We are ignored, misunderstood, alienated, and banished from the kingdom of life on the home front and a country that sent us off to war and forgot us when we came home from war,” says Parnell. In short, “we don’t have a policy shortfall, but a cultural shortfall.” This is hardly a recipe for the genuine cohesion and camaraderie that sustained us in war, but instead, one of desolation and alienation from a society pretends to welcome us with open arms, but remains largely untouched by war and its aftereffects.

Being hurled back into this reality sends us running for cover from a homeland that rejects us, forcing us to bear the true costs of war entirely alone.
Researchers who interviewed 72 Soldiers at Fort Carson, CO, found that among the 33 reasons given for their suicide attempts, the one that stood out among all the others was the overwhelming desire to stop the pain of intense emotional distress. According to now retired Army COL Carl Castro, the desire to harm oneself is only secondary to the longing for the anguish and despair to stop, from which there seems to be no exit or escape.

The study also revealed that Soldiers typically listed an average of ten reasons for contemplating or attempting suicide, which clearly demonstrates the highly complex nature of the problem at hand. Additional commonplace reasons given by Soldiers studied include feeling compelled to put an end to “chronic sadness,” finding the means to escape people, presumably those who fail to understand such desperation, and using suicide as the pathway to express such utter despondency, says Gregg Zoroya of USA TODAY.

The veil of purposeless and loss of camaraderie, the absence of belongingness, often lead to the confiscation of all things meaningful. The harshest consequences of war often come afterwards. We, as a culture, continue to tone down the collateral damages of war (Senior, 2011) and the fact that we “may be more dangerous to ourselves than the enemy.” What sustained us in war has been torn away, leaving behind an amputated spirit and a life devoid of significance, usefulness, worth, or purpose.

There is no good place for one’s head to rest. Darkness is the only color so many of us come to know.

The collateral damage of war is that it embezzles your entire life as you knew it. There is no old self hanging in the closet. Truthfully, there are too many of us who just want to make it stop… the anger, the unceasing threat level and the assurance that everyone around us is trying to hurt us, which is often not just supposition, and the overpowering desire to feel so alive just one more time.