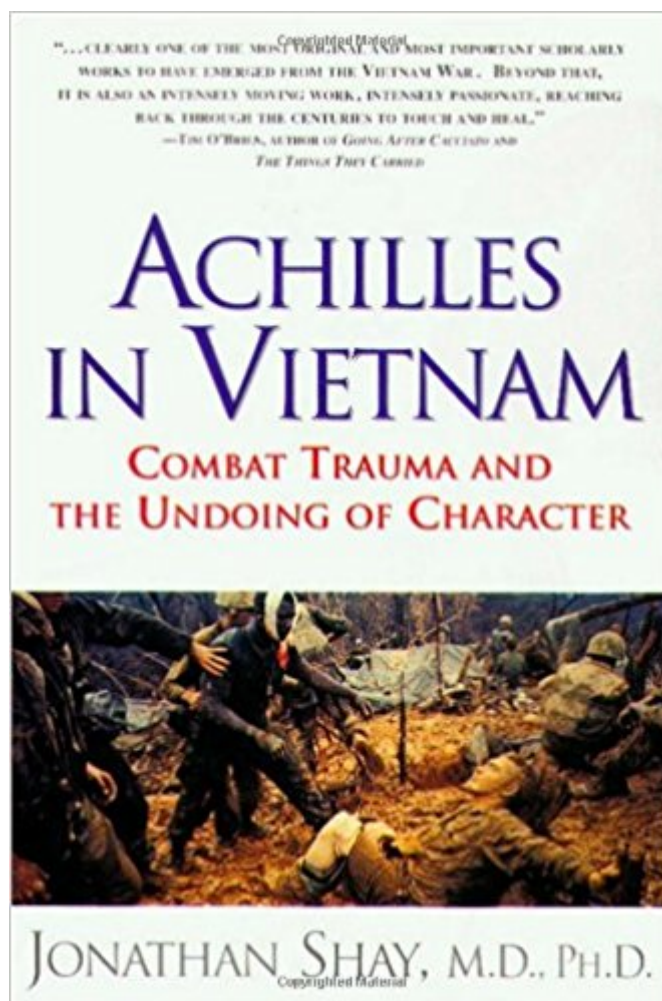


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# Achilles In Vietnam: Combat Trauma And The Undoing Of Character



## Synopsis

An original and groundbreaking book that examines the psychological devastation of war by comparing the soldiers of Homer's Iliad with Vietnam veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. In this strikingly original and groundbreaking book, Dr. Shay examines the psychological devastation of war by comparing the soldiers of Homer's Iliad with Vietnam veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Although the Iliad was written twenty-seven centuries ago it has much to teach about combat trauma, as do the more recent, compelling voices and experiences of Vietnam vets.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Shay works from an intriguing premise: that the study of the great Homeric epic of war, The Iliad, can illuminate our understanding of Vietnam, and vice versa. Along the way, he compares the battlefield experiences of men like Agamemnon and Patroclus with those of frontline grunts, analyzes the berserker rage that overcame Achilles and so many American soldiers alike, and considers the ways in which societies ancient and modern have accounted for and dealt with post-traumatic stress disorder---a malady only recently recognized in the medical literature, but well attested in Homer's pages. The novelist Tim O'Brien, who has written so affectingly about his experiences in combat, calls Shay's book "one of the most original and most important scholarly works to have emerged from the Vietnam war." He's right.

Shay is a psychiatrist specializing in treating Vietnam veterans with chronic post-traumatic stress

syndrome. In this provocative monograph, he relates their experiences to Homer's portrait of Achilles in *The Iliad*. War, he argues, generates rage because of its intrinsic unfairness. Only one's special comrades can be trusted. The death of Patroklos drove Achilles first into passionate grief, then into berserk wrath. Shay establishes convincing parallels to combat in Vietnam, where the war was considered meaningless and mourning for dead friends was thwarted by an indifferent command structure. He convincingly recommends policies of unit rotation and unit "griefwork"--official recognition of combat losses--as keys to sustaining what he calls a moral existence during war's human encounters. The alternatives are unrestrained revenge-driven behavior, endless reliving of the guilt such behavior causes and the ruin of good character. Shay's ideas merit attention by soldiers and scholars alike. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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Outstanding insight into the issues of combat trauma. The link with Achilles is superb in terms of discussing the similarities and differences between modern and ancient warfare and the individual consequences of shaping civilized human beings into killers of other human beings. Looking forward to obtaining *Odysseus in America*. As an ongoing student of the Stanley Lombardo translations of these epic poems, I find that Dr. Shay's manner of presenting the invisibly-wounded in our society who go to war and come home again is as compassionate as it is harrowing to read.

An early approach to the realization how little war has changed since BCE and today. More recent books available and all worth the read where other Greek tragedies are used to illustrate the damages done to our precious young people in wars where we have no business getting involved. Presentations are now used before "wounded warriors" by actors illustrating the insanity of all war. At least, in the Greek tragedies, wars were fought with the officers in the field, not in an air conditioned classy building in Florida!

John Shay may be the most sophisticated--along with Edward Tick and Dave Grossman--of those studying the dramatic inner life of our soldiers suffering from PTSD and, even worse, moral injury. What Shay along with Tick can do is connect the experience of today's soldier with that of Achilles and the Greeks in the Trojan war. Each war is the Trojan war, once again, so to speak. What I deem to be so important to American soldiers caught in the turmoil of Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the next one that Washington will inflict on us is moral injury--that is, the collapse of the moral universe which values human life, human dignity, and human justice. Without this moral universe, the soldier

suffers anomie, the loss of law and order within the soul. Without an ordered soul, we devolve into mania. Shay gets it. Shay exposes it. Shay understands it. I only wish our nation's leaders could understand what Shay helps us to understand.

While in law enforcement in 2002, I developed PTSD from the investigation of many fatal scenes. When I searched for information on PTSD, all I could find was a few studies of Vietnam veterans; scientific journal articles. They didn't seem to have the slightest relevance to what I was going through. When I read Achilles in Vietnam, I began to see the parallels to my own experiences. I have several close friends that are war veterans. The two I know who are Vietnam veterans, although they were profoundly affected by what they experienced in the war, did not develop PTSD. I now have a friend who is an Iraq veteran, who is 100% disabled from PTSD. I don't think that what Shay was saying is that everyone who goes to war will develop PTSD. But amongst those who do experience PTSD, this is not anything new. We do share common symptoms, triggers, and ways of viewing our critical incidents. I had no clue in 2002, that the highest incidence of PTSD was among women who had suffered sexual or physical trauma; they are still a largely invisible portion of our society. I also had no clue that PTSD was about to grow in magnitude in our society. With the multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, in many cases in excess of five years for an individual soldier (who might have been a Reservist or a National Guard member), they will be coming home deeply affected by their experiences. In many cases, they will have lost their families, their jobs, and their homes when they return, PTSD is a wound that most can hide for a while. But just because you don't see it in an artificial limb, doesn't mean that the injury doesn't exist. Right now, the fastest growing segment of the US homeless population is returning female Iraq/Afghanistan veterans. So no, society hasn't really learned or understood the lessons of our Vietnam Veterans with PTSD. We would benefit from reading or re-reading what Jonathan Shay has to say about that injury. Because this is no longer an academic exercise about whether we can learn from the past about the traumas visited upon veterans. This is alive and happening today, and how we choose to honor and help those soldiers with less visible scars, is a measure of who we are as a society.

Combat historians have been comparing their experiences to Homer since, well, Homer. The Iliad is so well written, so genuine, that it has that "you are there" feel to it that resonates with the combat vet. Dr. Shay's an excellent author who is able to break down PTSD and other psychological disorders down so laypeople can understand them. He is very thorough, very caring, and he is on

the right track that EVERY combat veteran is a casualty, at least psychologically, and deserves better treatment than what we are giving them presently, although we are better than we were. His linking this combat trauma to the Iliad is a little sketchy in parts, but is mostly valid. Well worth reading if you know someone who has been in combat or want to find out more about it.

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