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The weight of violence

by Brandon Frazier



ESSAY

No act is more violent than taking another's life. Four years of my life were defined by training to commit, attempting to commit or committing these very acts of violence. During this period I was one of the unfortunate Marines put into situations where murder seemed to be my only option. For me, this taking of lives was only half of the sad and violent story that was my life from ages 18 to 22.

The other half of the story is one that most people do not consider when they sign the military contract that gives away the right to their own lives.

It is the story of friends that you lose in war that is left untold in recruiting films.

It is the story of the friends who are so badly wounded that they will never live a full life again after being heroes in a war that means nothing. These types of stories are what shaped my life in the aftermath of the violent confusion that defined my years in the Marine Corps infantry.

What made me realize the true severity and true weight of the act of murder was a series of incidents on

Nov. 26, 2004. It was a sunny and warm Thanksgiving Day in Fallujah, Iraq. It was my unit's third straight week without a shower, hot meal or change of clothes. The day started normally, mortars and rockets exploding outside the walls of the house we had made into our temporary central command. I remember thinking as I put my boots on that this day felt different.

The first task of this Thanksgiving was to retrace our steps of the last 21 days and show a "body snatcher" team where we had killed people so they could dispose of the remains. This mission, which I thought would get me out of the daily patrol and maybe save my life, was supposed to be simple: Just walk with this team and show them where we had killed people.

The physical aspects of such a task were comparable to a vacation at this point in my life. What I did not expect, however, was the emotional toll this would take on me. The things I saw can only be described as something from a terrible nightmare or a gruesome war movie. The bodies were barely human. They had few human characteristics remaining. This was the first time I had seen the results of my violence up close. It made me feel disgusted with myself, that I was able to do such things to another living being. I was not quite sure what this meant, because being a Marine means that you make no mistakes and you are always justified.

Unfortunately, I was unable to avoid the daily patrol that day. In fact, my platoon had waited for me to get back so I would not be left out. On this patrol I watched my close friend get killed by a machine gun. He, two others and I went into a house where there were six men in a room with the door closed and mattresses on the ground so they could not be heard moving around. Brad walked in front of the closed door and was shot seven times in his body and twice in his armor. He died before he hit the ground.

In the confusion that occurs after such an event, I -- who was directly behind Brad -- fell onto the stairs behind. Everything around me was moving in slow motion. Once I regained my composure I realized what had happened and was so enraged that what I did next was the complete opposite of every human instinct in my body. Instead of trying to help my friend, as most would have, I went to the door that Brad had died in front of and kicked it in and shot wildly into the room.

The story of this day is important because it is an accurate account of the ways in which I have handled violence in the past and illustrates the reasons why I handle violence now. The act of killing, in these years, was as simple as three pounds of pressure on a trigger, and that's how we were trained. What I realize now, astonishingly for the first time, is that I should have questioned my orders at every instance when I was told go somewhere to take another's life and that killing another living being is far more complicated than three pounds of pressure on a trigger.

There is no contract with any government in any country that can justify murder of any kind. By the same token, I cannot justify my actions by claiming that I was simply being obedient. Those were my decisions. I made them, and now I must live with them forever.

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Today I feel terrible for what I have done and I have been haunted by nightmares every night since my return home. These experiences, my education and the reevaluation of my past have brought me to where I am today when it comes to violence. I have seen firsthand what the most gruesome violence looks like and I know that I was capable of committing it. I am actively trying to learn about being a nonviolent person and have worked hard to avoid violence. So far I have been successful.

What I am most afraid of is not the person with the guns, it is how I will react to the violence they bring into my life. Will I revert to the instincts that were drilled into my head while in the military -- the same instincts that sent me through the door shooting wildly? Or will I remember what it felt like to see the dead bodies that my friends and I had killed, and be sickened with the thought of taking another's life?

It has and will continue to be a learning process for me and I hope very much that I can be the caring and compassionate person I believe I am.

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