

Through the analysis of veterans describing their memories of killing people, there were various themes throughout their stories. The themes that were present were no emotional connections, secrecy, morals and ethics, and nationalism. Many of these themes play a huge part in how veterans described their stories and how they dealt or still dealing with their emotions.

Throughout the accounts of veterans, they have said they couldn't have any emotional connection to what they were doing because it was their job to use self-defense to protect America and U.S citizens. Another reason people mentioned they couldn't think about what they were doing was because of the mentality "to kill or be killed" which is a heavy statement in itself. The theme of no emotions in these stories could be associated with pride, having to stay safe, always being ready for anything, and that you were trained to have an automatic response.

Veteran Dan Rosenthal said "It was a largely mechanical, defensive process, and it occurred in a very clear-cut scenario with no real questions of "am I doing the right thing". Through the descriptions of the stories, a reader can get a sense of how people, veterans especially, deal with their emotions after a traumatic event and that soldiers are being trained to subside their emotions for the sake of their job.

Another theme of no emotional response would be addiction. Many soldiers described that some people felt guilt or regret, there was another extreme that others felt an adrenaline rush and became addicted to killing people. Veteran Washington Brooker III said

"For some people, that first kill makes them almost sick. Physically ill. They really can't deal with it. At the other extreme, there are those people who get that rush. It's the supreme power act. It almost gives them a god complex. Some guys, when they do it, they like it. They get hooked on killing just like they got hooked on heroin, and they figure out a way to spend the rest of their life doing it." (Pg. 8)

An interesting point to be made is the training that forces a soldier to not think about the emotional impact killing can have on themselves. An anonymous veteran said, “You have to depersonalize the enemy and just think of him or her as a target ... a very dangerous target.” This method of “depersonalizing the enemy” is an example of the military doesn’t want you to think about it because that will lead you to question your morals about this act. Veterans come back home with a lot of mental baggage from that part of the war alone.

The second theme that was prominent in these stories was secrecy. Secrecy can also be associated with addiction but it can, also, be the reason why a lot of veterans struggle with mental health. Veteran Pete Kilner said “They [soliders] don’t like to talk about it. In general, if you’re a soldier and you’ve killed in the war, you lie and say no. It tends to be the secret we have that we’re not proud of” (p.1). One can think this hurts their state of mind when returning home because they can’t ever be the same before they went on deployment. It hurts their social and mental skills as they are used to constantly being in a certain state of being alert, having a duty to protect themselves, each other, and the U.S. every second of every day. Going through these stories, it feels like it would not be an easy transition and these transitions could take years for some.

Every human from birth to death learns about morals and ethics from the people around them, laws, and even religious influences. A person is guided throughout their life on what is right and what is wrong so when it comes to veterans and killing in the war, they are going to have some difficulty by performing this act that disrupts their entire life thinking. When it comes to the theme of morals/ethics, certain topics like regret, guilt, fearfulness, loneliness, and acknowledgment can be associated.

An anonymous veteran submitted their story, along with a feeling of regretfulness and guilt. He says:

“As the deployment dragged on, I slowly began to humanize the mangled faces of the guys we’d killed. I remembered wondering if there was a tiny little Iraqi girl crying at home because Dad didn’t come back, or if there was a wife with a husband who was now gone forever. When I realized I’d completely and utterly obliterated a human being from existence, it was absolute mental torture; it made the possibility of getting killed there very real again.”

A reader can tell this soldier had a big realization about his morals and ethics of a person from this one encounter. From his perspective, it sounds like he didn’t take into account the backgrounds and relationships of each person he killed. However, a person in that type of environment doesn’t have time to think about that as they are fighting for their lives. From the stories, it sounds like a soldier has, not even, two seconds to react and protect themselves and their fellow military friends. Also, it seems as if a person fighting cares too much about that aspect, they’re going to be dead or it’s going to affect them way more than a soldier intends on. There’s no way to prevent the trauma unless a person doesn’t enlist.

Enlisting in the military is something all soldiers should be proud of because you are helping your country fight against their enemies and make a change in the world. Nationalism is another huge theme I saw throughout all of the veteran’s encounters. Nationalism is the pride of one’s country and doing what one can to protect it. Many accounts claim both the good and bad sides of nationalism when it comes to the military.

The good part of nationalism is the pride you have when fighting against the bad guys. The soldiers take into account that they felt like they were taking a stand for America in the wars

they fought. Many acknowledge that killing was a part of defeating the enemy and to feel that proudness, they couldn't think of their morals and just automatically respond when it came to aggressive situations. Veteran Charles Whittington said

“It feels so good to me, and I feel addicted to seeing and acting out this act of hate and violence against the ragheads that hurt our country. Terrorists will have nowhere to hide because there are hundreds of thousands of soldiers who feel like me, who want their revenge as well” (p. 5).

The bad part of nationalism is no one acknowledging the hard work, the energy - physical and mental a soldier has put into protecting the U.S citizens. Veteran Washington Brooker III described the negative side of nationalism by saying:

“We had seen combat and killed folks and watched our friends die. Nobody wanted to hear about what we had been through. They just wanted us to sit down, be quiet, and go away. Nobody said, ‘thank you.’ Nobody even acknowledged us. The only thing we’ve had for 40 years was each other.”

This can be mentally damaging to the people who have served as it gives them the idea of what did they sacrifice everything for? They disregarded their morals and ethics to protect the public and the public has disregarded them for their service. This shows themes of loneliness and being ignored. This theme can be tied back to the theme of secrecy as it shows veterans who were struggling had no one to talk to about what they went through so they didn't offer any information to others.

Going through the veteran's stories made me realize how damaging killing someone can be to their mental state. From the perspective of a civilian, it was definitely hard to go through these stories as they were emotionally heavy and I can't imagine what it would be like for

someone that was actually in that environment. These themes of no emotional connection, secrecy, morals, ethics, and nationalism are important because it allows civilians to understand more about the struggles veterans go through when they come home from war.

The main thing we can take from these themes is to be more open-minded and compassionate towards others and veterans because we don't know what each person has gone through. These, also, give veterans more of a chance to open up and work on the issues they have from experiences they have endured. It gives a chance for people to work on their mental health and allows outsiders to be respectful towards veterans.

It's difficult to go from having your morals and ethics being torn down and having no emotional connection to anything especially death to now coming back to society and trying to be your old self. While a person is trying to get back to themselves before deployment, they struggle because they have killed people, witness things that people shouldn't witness. They can't go back to themselves nor do they feel like they can open up, so they turn to secrecy which can destroy their close relationships as others don't know how to help. Veterans have sacrificed a lot to protect our rights and freedoms and what we can learn from them is to fight for what we believe in and fight through the negatives.