Coming Home Hard

by Charles "Chuck" Collins [1]

Developed and edited by Edward Tick

Growing up as an American boy, and later as a warrior, I have a lot of conflicting American mythological beliefs ingrained into my mind.

Since my return from Afghanistan, I have had moments in which I've been lost self-pity, depression, guilt, and live in the shadow of failures in war and life that I never actually outrun. At times I've felt broken, damaged, and inferior to others. On contrast, like the two-faced Roman god Janus, I've had moments in which lost myself in pride, arrogance, and ego that feeds my hero complex that I can never actually achieve. At times I've felt invincible, unstoppable, and superior to others.

This is what happens in my mind with almost every post-war discussion or decision. War and life experiences have taught me many core beliefs. These may be American mythology or just life's harsh reality. Here are some examples:

*Murphy first Law applies everywhere: Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong.

*Life is a giant Catch 22. It is a dilemma full of difficult circumstance from which there is no escape because of mutually conflicting or dependent conditions, "a catch-22 situation."

I held the belief that I was doing the hard right things that others wouldn't do. The belief that what we were doing was moral, justified, and for the greater good of humanity. I believed at times that America was the hero fighting wars against evil to bring safety, stability, and freedom to the world.

I did not have a cool reason for joining the service. It was not patriotism or love of country. I joined because I was 19 and had a young daughter. I was a power hungry dirtbag, high school dropout with a drug addiction and a troubled youth. I had no other

---

[1] Retired Army SFC Charles "Chuck" Collins served 14 years from 2000-2014 as an infantryman in multiple positions. He had four deployments overseas: 2001 Kosovo, 2003 Iraq, 2006 Iraq, and 2009 Afghanistan.

real options. I hated the government, authority, and structure, but the Army gave me an opportunity to be part of something I perceived as the most powerful thing on earth.

Those core hero beliefs sustained me through all my ups and downs and allowed me to do some hard things which have since haunted me. Without that belief that I was the hero I would have mentally collapsed under the reality of some of my actions while at war. I later did anyway.

I first started to see the reality of my actions during my second deployment while serving as a Bradley Gunner[2] on the invasion of Iraq with 3ID in 2003.[3] The amount of weapon capabilities and power I possessed on the Bradley was astonishing and the damage and destruction I caused was enormous. I leveled entire sections of buildings from which we took enemy fire. I wasted multiple vehicles. There was that has never left my mind. I engaged one white Opel that continued to progress towards our location after warnings shots and eventually put HE (high explosive) rounds into the cab area. Our convoy passed by the location of that vehicle later. It allowed me to see up close that it was a woman and two children in that vehicle. The reality of me taking the lives of a women and children later shattered my reality to my core and took a part of my soul. It still brings self-hatred that I cannot fully grasp. I have a hard time admitting it, but I felt nothing in that moment except excitement from destroying more potential threats. I have told myself so many times that I was the good guy. That situation opened my eyes to the possibility that I was the evil invader killing civilians who were probably just scared and trying to run for safety. The harshest reality is that in those moments I was part of that machine and didn't feel any real emotions.

That one situation has been haunting me for almost twenty years and I'm still not able to process or confront it. I've had many moments of weakness when I've lost control of my emotions since, and I'm not sure if I'll ever fully processed it all.

My original conception of the Enemy was anyone in the way of completing the mission. Now I understand it's much more complex than that. Sometimes the perceived enemy is just a mirror of myself trying to complete their mission -- the same as me.

I've learned the personal shadow of war becomes as present and consistent as your own shadow. I've learned you can't outrun or outwork a shadow. I've learned that if you look away or hide inside the shadow can be bearable, but just as assuredly as the

---

[2]   M2 Bradley is an American infantry fighting vehicle.
[3]   Third Infantry Division.

sun rising that shadow will still be following you. I've learned you can't stop casting a shadow unless you hide in the dark.

On the flip side I've embraced the shadow at times because it also cast a vision of the sacrifices I made. At times I feel proud of my shadow because it can be a badge of honor that I did what most would not. I've learned the collective shadow cast basically the same shadow as the personal shadow, just on an America -sized level. It also holds the same duality in my mind.

Not all war was savagery or carnage. Some was humanitarian aid, spreading love and saving lives, not always wasting them. All my deployments were drastically different -- from peace keeping in Kosovo, invading Iraq, rebuilding post-invasion Ramadi Iraq, and the complexities of winning hearts and minds in Afghanistan.

My understanding of America and humanity is founded on the realities war has taught me and the extreme duality of life on almost all levels. Nothing is simply right vs. wrong, moral vs. immoral, or good vs. evil.

Some aspects of war took a chunk out of my soul, while other aspects healed parts of my soul. I get angry even thinking about my soul. I think I'm afraid the good I've done cannot heal all the holes in my soul from the death I've caused. I'm not sure my soul will ever be the same and I now just try to heal what I can. Now I simply think about my soul as a microcosm of the American warrior's soul. I don't know how war expresses the average American soul.

I don't believe war has a winner or loser. All the participants of war lose in the end. Maybe the country that gains whatever end state they desired and that is called winning. But nobody who participates in actual conflict wins.

Each environment I was in was extremely different and I feel different about them all. From my first deployment, my instincts say Kosovo peacekeeping was a success and ended appropriately. The Invasion of Iraq, my time in Ramadi, and Afghanistan, all felt like winless wars. Did we take out Saddam on the invasion? Yes, but the destruction and devastation we left in our wake was not a win in my mind. Is that better then leaving those people to be tortured by his dictatorship? I don't know. In Ramadi it always felt like we were a massive band aid that held Iraq together while people appointed above us tried to rebuild what we destroyed. Afghanistan felt a lot like Ramadi, but with a much more complex environment and social structure. It always felt like the more we helped the more it hurt those people. The same people we helped,

blew us up at first opportunity. I always felt like Afghanistan was winless from the beginning.

We Americans always leave because to win we would have to change a culture and that isn't realistically achievable. Complete changing of the enemies' cultures is some people's perspective of winning. We want them to be more American and less themselves.

Ignorance is bliss? and cultural denial is a part of the lessons we learned as a society. People don't want to know the atrocities of war. They want their war packaged in pretty propaganda boxes that only give them what paints America and us warriors in their preconceived cultural correctness. Both while serving and now, I have left civilian cultural denial to be what it is. I believe cultural denial is our collective defense mechanism to avoid the reality that most can't handle. I'd be a hypocrite if I said I don't practice my own denial of the realities of war, so who am I to judge cultural denial.

My Icons are not who one might think. I really followed a poor, urban, hood, drug culture. I looked at anyone who gave the system the bird as iconic - guys like Eminem, Tupac, and Ice Cube. I always wanted to be the gangster, criminal, rebel without a cause. I was a weak little boy who often got beat up and was starving for respect and power.

I think these rebel role models served me as inspiration and helped give me the ability to verbalize my opinions, sometimes to a fault. I wasn't a real tough guy, but in that world, I acted like one. I carried that with me into my service. I was always the guy trying to prove myself to everyone. That drive has pushed me to great heights at great costs.

I still find pleasure in being the guy who will share his raw thoughts. I don't idolize that culture like I did when I was a troubled teenager, but I still carry arrogance that is counterproductive at times. I still have an extreme desire to prove myself in everything I do.

I am still conflicted on what is specifically mythology and what is reality. I fit into American warrior mythology as an example of what prolonged exposure to war can do both positively and negatively.

Now I feel extremely torn, conflicted, and confused. All I see is duality. I feel pride, shame, love, hate, hope, despair, anger, peace. My mind goes in viscous circles when something sparks deep thoughts. This is my testimony to my post-war condition. I still hope to emerge from this darkness to find the light.