

**Statement of
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Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Committee Members, for the unique opportunity to be here to address all of you on an important subject very near and dear to my heart -- the psycho-spiritual effects on men and women who have participated in and witnessed first-hand the horrors of war on the battlefield.

Let me first of all preface my remarks by giving you a small picture of what qualifies me to speak to the subject. At the age of 20, I was drafted into the United States Army and served as a combat infantryman from 1969-1970. As a result of leading a rescue mission on March 1, 1970, I was awarded the Silver Star. I also served 12 years in the United States Army Reserves as a Chaplain in hospital units; my last assignment was with the 883rd Medical Company (Combat Stress Control). In addition, I have worked for the last 15 years as a Chaplain in the VA Boston Healthcare System with a special focus on PTSD and spiritual healing.

Having gone through an extensive journey of healing myself, and the journey is not over, I can speak as a witness to the fact that when one has been exposed to war up close and personal, that person is forever changed, scarred and spiritually wounded. Even with the best of foreknowledge and training available, there is absolutely nothing that can prepare a young man or woman for the horrors that war will embed in one's mind, heart and soul. That being said, it is important to learn from lessons from the past, particularly the war in Vietnam and the devastating effects it has had on thousands of men and women. We share the experiences and the wisdom we have gained for our young men and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The February 15th issue of the New York Times Magazine featured a lengthy article entitled "The Permanent Scars of Iraq" by Sara Corbett. It relates the story of a

few returning soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division who were wounded both physically and psychologically. Reading this article transported me back some 30-plus years as something that could have been written in the 70's – only the characters and geography have changed. Sleepless nights...nightmares...flashbacks...self-medicating with alcohol and drugs.....not communicating with the spouse.....thousand yard stare, and the saga rages on. The psychosocial-spiritual effects of war are universal as I learned when I met war veterans from all over the world at the First International Conference of Psycho-Social Consequences of War in Dubrovnik, Croatia in April 1998. There is a common denominator among persons who have engaged in hostile fire in time of war, and that common denominator is deep-seated wounds at every human level. The memory is forever branded into the fabric of one's life.

How do we meet the challenge of reaching out to our brother and sister veterans who have been to hell and come back to talk about it? It is often said in the circle of ministers I associate with that, *“Religion is for those afraid of hell...and spirituality is for those who have been there and don't want to go back!”*

Veterans Affairs Chaplains are certified and clinically trained to serve the spiritual needs of the returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. It is of paramount importance that VA Chaplains play an integral role on the mental health inter-disciplinary teams in our medical facilities. They continue to provide excellent one-on-one spiritual and pastoral counseling to our veteran patients. They also facilitate spirituality groups for those suffering from PTSD and substance abuse. In fact, there are two 12-step models that have been drafted with a special focus on PTSD modeled after the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In 1989, I founded the National Conference of Viet Nam Veteran Ministers, an organization comprised of people like myself who served in Vietnam as enlisted men and women and later answered the call to ordained ministry. We also invited Vietnam Chaplains to join. The purpose was to share our trauma stories with one another on the level of faith and spirituality so that we could receive affirmation and healing of our souls. It truly was and still is a clinic for wounded PTSD-ridden ministers. As an outgrowth of this organization, which is better referred to as a community, we began to explore ways of sharing our stories with combat veterans. Combat veterans, by the very

nature of their exposure to battle, i.e. killing and witnessing death, develop a poisonous world-view causing a wounded “Imago Dei.” This phrase, “Imago Dei”, or Image of God refers to the belief that all persons are created in God’s image. That wounded “Imago Dei” is characterized by secret-keeping, loss of voice and self-enforced separation. Secret-keeping – how can I ever talk about what I witnessed and participated in on the battlefield to my spouse, my children, my friends? As a result this causes us to lose our voice. If we are keeping secrets, then we stop communicating, which then forces the third factor – self-enforced separation, isolation or more commonly referred to as “*bunkering in.*” Our combat veterans experience deep guilt, which comes in many forms: guilt from killing or maiming civilians, children who may be booby-trapped or enemies disguised as friendlies. It could be guilt over a mistake, which caused the mutilation or death of a comrade. It could be guilt over being a survivor when buddies were killed. The list goes on.

One way the National Conference of Viet Nam Veteran Ministers found to be helpful was to develop a Spiritual Healing Weekend Retreat Program for combat veterans and their spouses or significant others. In the past seven years we have offered 15 of these retreats throughout the country. Although it is a mere drop in the bucket, veterans and their families have been greatly comforted and assisted spiritually in these retreats. Many couples have come back to these retreats and brought other couples with them. We felt it was important to try to get the veteran to bring their spouse or significant other to these retreats, because our goal was to help heal the family and not just the veteran – to re-open those doors of communication, the lack of which can destroy a relationship.

The main point I want to make before this committee is the importance of making the combat veteran, particularly those who are now coming home from overseas deployment, begin the process of telling their story to someone who can encourage them and guide them in a healing, loving and accepting manner. They may feel they are “damaged goods.” The role of the Chaplain is to help them recognize that their experience offers them a unique perspective on the meaning of life and that their suffering is not meaningless but can be redemptive. The Chaplain can help the veteran learn what it means to be a “*wounded healer*” – which the veteran in his or her woundedness can help heal another wounded veteran. That is the gift of life one person

can give to another. The theory of the Sacred Story we teach them is the use of their personal story as a vehicle of healing. The development of one's unique story through eyes of faith and ultimately the redemptive value of their Sacred Story can move them from a state of being "scared," recognizing that they are "scarred," and ultimately seeing themselves as "sacred." It is a far greater task for the minister to guide the veteran in this direction than moving letters around in a word-play but it gets the point across. We tell our veterans that there is no one else on earth like them, just as there are not two fingerprints the same, neither is their story. It is a true gift of love when they can speak the story with all the trauma, pain, suffering, tears and emotions, and share that story with another human being who is hurting.

Over the years, I cannot count how many Vietnam veterans and veterans from World War II and Korea I have counseled but the end result of war and its impact on our psyche is the same. I, along with my colleagues, welcome the opportunity to reach out to the returning soldiers, marines, sailors and airmen and women to begin that healing process so that it does not begin to fester and grow like a cancer that eats away at the core of their being. If we knew back in the 70's and 80's what we know today, how many lives could have been saved? How many marriages could have been saved? Who knows?

Thank you once again for the opportunity to address this esteemed body.

Father Philip G. Salois, M.S.