

Eros, Thanatos, and Ares: Counseling Soldiers about Love and Death in a Combat or Hostile Fire Environment

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Abstract: This narrative describes the experiences of a social worker counseling soldiers about love and death while deployed with a combat stress unit in Iraq during the early phase of operations. The author describes the basic purposes of combat stress units, some interactions with soldiers around love, loss, and grief, and draws some conclusions about these experiences. The narrative concludes with some suggestions on how to engage veterans in treatment upon redeployment, encouraging helping professionals to consider combat stress services as part of the continuum of care.

Keywords: Iraq, combat stress unit, mental health, client engagement, stigma, grieving, Greek mythology

I was assigned to a combat stress unit for my deployment to Iraq. The mission of the combat stress unit, like other medical units, is to preserve the fighting force. This mission totally affects how we approach our work with soldiers. Operating in a combat stress unit gives a whole new meaning to “brief therapy.” It was rare that I saw a soldier more than once. Knowing this, I worked to keep our conversation as focused as possible. Back home, the goals of therapy may be to improve relationships, decrease depression, come to terms with one’s past, or improve self-esteem. In a combat stress unit, operating within a combat, or hostile fire arena, these are secondary, or inconsequential goals. In a combat zone or hostile fire environment, it’s all about keeping the mind, heart, and body in the game. Focus.

Introduction

The two themes I will explore in this narrative are counseling soldiers on their relationships back home, or love, represented by Eros, and their experiences with death, represented by Thanatos. I place these themes in a world influenced by Ares, the Greek God of war. Being associated with Ares makes places dangerous or militarized. Seen as a dangerous force, he often represents the physical, violent and untamed aspects of armed conflict, needed for successful outcomes in war. His approach stood in contrast to Athena who represented military strategy. In early mythology, Eros represented the creativity principle of attraction who brought humans together to form permanent relationships. In later sources, Eros embodied lust and erotic attraction (Weigel, 1973).

Thanatos was a minor Greek God and brother to Hypnos, or sleep. Euripedes described Thanatos as the lord of the dead (Greene & Lattimore, 1956). Thanatos has been associated with doom, deception, suffering, and separation.

Eros, the first theme, explores counseling situations with soldiers about their wives and girlfriends. I say wives and girlfriends, as that was the scope of cases presented to me. The few female soldiers who were at our camp and who came to combat stress tended to focus on relationships at camp rather than at home. Rather than considering this as a gender difference, it may be that my experience reflects the soldiers I saw and should not be used to draw conclusions about how male and female soldiers used combat stress services differentially. It should also be noted that I was deployed before the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy was lifted when P.L. 110-331 was enacted in 2010. Knowing that anything shared with me was confidential but could, if needed, be shared with their command, I would have been surprised if a soldier had talked with me about homosexuality or homosexual relationships. With the new policy in place, soldiers may now feel more comfortable talking with combat stress social workers about sexual orientation. But in 2004, it was all hush-hush. The final caveat is that this narrative describes the perspective of the deployed soldier, and of my experiences deployed in a combat stress unit. While family members are mentioned, their experience and perspective are not explored.

The second theme of Thanatos describes situations where our combat stress team talked with soldiers

about death. Death, in contrast to Eros, does not discriminate. In this section, I discuss the conversations we had with soldiers about their feelings of grief related to the loss of a soldier as well as the loss of loved ones back home. All of these interactions, regarding love, loss, death and grief, took place in Iraq, a world which for us was a world influenced by Ares, god of war. Following the discussions of Eros and Thanatos I will briefly describe some of the hostilities near or at our camp, reminding us that Ares was ever-present. I will then draw some conclusions and discuss implications for establishing therapeutic relationships with service members and veterans who have been deployed to a combat or hostile fire arena.

EROS

In my experience, there were four main types of deployment-relationship concerns: ones stemming from confusing, or emotional phone calls or emails; learning of a confession of the wife being involved, or having an affair with someone else; or a “Dear John” communication. Headings for each of these sections are a song title or reference to a documentary or comic that seems to reflect the sentiment of that relationship situation. Listening to music was part of the overall coping strategy for a lot of deployed soldiers, myself included. Thus, it seemed fitting to use popular music and culture to illustrate these scenarios.

“I couldn't call you because I was on a mission”

The first type, confusing or emotional phone calls or emails, was in my experience the most common. As others have pointed out, this is the first time soldiers have been deployed where the telephone and email were fairly accessible. This fact of life was illustrated by the experience of a “Doonesbury” character, Ray Hightower, who tele-links with his wife (Wikipedia, 2014). In one scenario, Ray's wife is upset with him because he didn't call her when he said he would, and he was trying to explain how he couldn't because he was in a firefight. Just after the firefight, Ray was fretting to his buddy how his wife was going to be upset. He already knew how the conversation would go.

This Doonesbury scenario was pretty accurate. Sometimes soldiers would stop by to talk right after they got off the phone or had left the internet-café and were either confused or upset. The main

question I would be asked went something like this: “Ma'am, what do you think she's thinking?” This question would come up after at least one, if not several emails and phone calls with their significant other. The soldier would find himself flummoxed on what to say, or how to respond following an argument or a heated discussion via the telephone and/or email. The times this really got to the soldier had to do with their wives' feelings of frustration or unhappiness with the relationship. When presented with these situations, I wanted to say, “I am here in Iraq, same as you, and have no clue what your wife/girlfriend is feeling or thinking about your relationship.” But I put that aside, and decided that my main objective, in keeping with preserving the fighting force, was to provide whatever assurance I could that things would work out, that he should listen and be supportive as much as he was able from half-way across the world. The outcome of the relationship mattered less to me than the emotional well being of that soldier in the here and now. Since there was little either of us could actually do, best that the soldier think positively; better that he offer assurance and support, rather than confrontation. Besides, staying positive had a greater chance of helping the relationship than confrontation from afar.

It's the “End of the Road,” But I Can't Let Go

In the Boyz II Men lyrics (1992), the singer declares that he knew his girlfriend was cheating on him but he didn't care, that he still loved her and wanted them to be together. Similar types of conversations occurred with soldiers and their significant others, via the telephone or email, where she would confess that she had been with somebody else. On occasion, a soldier would stop by Combat Stress to talk about it. What should he do? How should he respond? In these situations, I assumed that because he was asking me, he did not want to end the relationship. I would try to work with the soldier on how best to respond to preserve and even strengthen the relationship. We would talk about how the deployment was hard on both ends; how she was experiencing her own stress and difficulties; how she was missing him and was maybe feeling a bit vulnerable. I suggested that her confession was an indication she still wanted to be with him. I questioned her timing, but kept these thoughts to myself. I offered that he could tell her that he still wanted to be with her; that they could work it out. I

would try to create a space where he could share his hurt, and serve as something of a safety valve for the relationship – letting the steam out. Most times this seemed to work out, as during a deployment, soldiers would generally prefer a less than perfect relationship to no relationship.

“Cry Me a River”

In the song “Cry Me a River,” Justin Timberlake (2002) sings that after all the heartbreak, he no longer cared; she could cry him a river, and he wouldn't change his mind – the relationship was over. Similarly, soldiers on occasion would be insistent that the confessed transgression was a deal breaker. The soldiers did not want to listen to what I would suggest, point out, or ask – it was over as far as they were concerned. In these instances, I wondered why the soldier came by the Combat Stress office if their mind was already made up. Perhaps they wanted someone to hear their side, someone who would just listen to what was really on their mind, without a lecture or ribbing that they would likely receive from NCOs and soldiers in their unit. Once, a soldier came in and said that this affair was the worst kind of betrayal. By his expression, and the way he said the words, I could tell he was experiencing this in a very deep way, like a soul-wound that would take a long time to heal.

Looking at him, he was the last person you'd suspect of being openly emotional, but on that day, he sat in my office and cried for quite a while. Still, for his sake, I tried to stay positive. “You love her; she means a lot to you. You feel this way now, but maybe in time you can find a way to work it out.” But he just said no, and, after collecting himself, departed. From the perspective of his ability to stay mission-focused and for his own survival I was left wondering if it were preferable to just close that door and wall off his emotions. Confronting the difficulties and complexities that come with a rocky relationship could be distracting, and maybe he'd wind up thinking about his love troubles at the wrong time. That could be costly – even deadly.

“Seeing my sweetheart again is all that matters”

From what I observed, most soldiers, like this one, could endure just about anything except the loss of affection of that special person. This is true now, and probably has always been the case when

soldiers went off to war. For example, in the documentary (Huston & U.S. Army, 1946), “Let There Be Light,” a veteran, just returned from fighting in Europe in World War II, breaks down uncontrollably in tears when trying to explain to the Army psychiatrist what his relationship with his sweetheart meant to him during his long sojourn in combat. She was what kept him going; the thought of seeing her again was what he lived for throughout the entire war.

“I'll Find Someone Like You”

In her song “I'll Find Someone Like You,” Adele (2011) speaks of her own heartache, now that the one she loves has ended the relationship. Crooning that she'd look for someone just like the one who left her only speaks to her deep affection. For those in relationships with soldiers, news of a pending deployment in itself can be a relationship ender. While some relationships end during the deployment, others end before the deployment begins. Even with this, soldiers might question what led the person to break up with them just as they were leaving. To myself, I wondered if the significant other already had doubts about the relationship. News of the pending deployment provided the impetus she needed for ending it. From the perspective of the significant other, this probably makes sense, but from the soldier's perspective, this can be pretty devastating. Not only is there the loss of this relationship, but there is no time to develop another relationship before departure. One soldier who talked with me about his pre-deployment break-up wanted me to tell him why she did it. More importantly, he wanted to know what he could do better so his next relationship would not end in the same way. Soldiers tend to be goal-focused, and this soldier exemplified this trait in his approach to relationships. Not only was he focusing on self-improvement, he was also beginning to think about his next deployment, which very likely would occur.

“Time of our Lives”

In “Time of our Lives,” Tyrone Wells (2010) sings of a relationship whose time is up; “...a chapter has ended,” and “...it's time to walk away.” Listening to the song, I wondered about military couples who cope with the deployment by using their own version of the “don't ask, don't tell” approach. For these couples, separated for at least a year, there was

an implicit understanding to just not talk about any extra-curricular involvement or affairs that may have taken place during their time apart. In these situations, there was no need to declare that “I was faithful” in your absence, as such a declaration would also be problematic. What if the other partner had not been faithful? Either that person would feel compelled to lie, say nothing, or divulge that in fact they had been less than faithful to their spouse or significant other. Unless the couple was very comfortable with their partners' involvement with others, such situations could be awkward. Thus for most couples who adopt this strategy, “don't ask don't tell” means just that.

“Dear John”

“I was overseas in battle when the postman came to me

He handed me a letter and I was just as happy as I could be

Cause the fighting was all over and the battles have all been won

But then I opened up the letter and it started.....dear John.”

(Barton, Owen, & Talley, 1953)

The phrase “Dear John” is thought to have originated during World War II, when many wives and girlfriends decided to give up waiting for the soldier's return and started a new relationship. Skeeter Davis and Bobby Bare reflect this sentiment when they sang “Dear John,” written about the Korean War. Though the phrase may have been coined in World War II and used during the Korean War, it's been said that the Vietnam War saw more “Dear John” letters than any other conflict to date. In contrast, there were probably fewer “Dear John” letters in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was probably more of a “Dear John” email. Or worse, the soldier would hear about it from another soldier in the unit who had heard about it from their wife or girlfriend. Sometimes I'd learn about a soldier receiving such communication from other soldiers, and, as in other circumstances when soldiers were concerned about a buddy, would encourage them to tell their buddy to stop by. No one ever did. Perhaps this was one of those situations where it was best to pack the

feelings away and drive on.

Talking about “My Girl”

Smokey Robinson's inspiration for writing the song “My Girl” was his wife (Robinson & White, 1964). In the lyrics, the singer proclaims that he doesn't “...need money, fortune, or fame,” because he has “...all the riches baby one man can claim.” Even in stable relationships, many soldiers would talk with me about their wife or their girlfriend. What she liked, what she was doing back home, the gifts she had sent him, the vacations and special things they planned to do when he got home. These were happy conversations.

THANATOS

Beyond grief when a relationship ends, soldiers came to Combat Stress when a loved one back home died. A grandfather died; a mother died; and one soldier lost his adult son. Talking with these soldiers about their personal losses generally caused me to reflect on my own father, who was living in a nursing home. My father had suffered several strokes, could not walk or talk much, and got all his nutrition from a feeding tube. Because I was only given four days before I had to report to my unit and because my dad lived in another state, I was not able to see him before I deployed. I called the nursing home, and the aides wheeled him to the phone. I told him I'd see him as soon as I got back. Okay, he said, which, with the effects of his stroke, was all he could muster. I prayed that would be true, and I like to think my father had a will to live, not just for his own sake but for me and my brothers and sisters as well. My father did live, and I saw him when I returned, but others were not as fortunate. For starters, my oldest son, deployed shortly after me to Baghdad, lost his grandfather unexpectedly, when he was hit by a car. My son was very close to his grandfather. I was able to call him and we talked briefly about the accident and how he was doing. But more importantly, we talked about how it was hard to explain to the family, especially to his grandmother, that he could not come home for the funeral. Army policy is that soldiers can go home for the funeral when parents or children die, and they can only go home for grandparents if that grandparent had had primary responsibility for raising them. Though I agree that this is a good

policy, it can be hard for family members to understand it, especially if they have little exposure to the military. I told him I'd call the family as well, to reinforce what he had already said. I like to think that this was helpful all the way around, to assure his grandmother and others that he really could not come home for the funeral. This was one way I was able to support my son during our overlapping deployments, all the while recognizing that few soldiers had family members deployed at the same time who could perform similar roles.

Unit Tour Extension

The first time I consoled a grieving soldier over the loss of a friend happened shortly after we arrived at our camp and it wasn't in the office. This turned out to be a unit-tour extension related event. Some may think that a six- or twelve-month tour of duty is just that, but this is not always the case. On occasion, the Department of Defense may extend units' tours to "...maintain the force structure that commanders determine are needed" (DoD, 2007). Service members and their families know that this policy has everything to do with the mission, and little, or nothing to do with service member or family well-being. And for the most part, they are okay with that. But sometimes it gets to you, especially when emotions are running high. Here is what happened.

One afternoon I was walking to the dining facility and came across a soldier, down on his knees, crying and shouting, obviously in unabashed and abject grief for the death of his friend, a fellow soldier. Everyone was walking by, not looking at him, and acting as if they weren't hearing or seeing him. Maybe that's the way I should have behaved as well, but I didn't. Instinctually, I got on my knees beside him and threw my arm around him. He was so overcome with grief that I started crying too. But he was also angry. Extremely angry and just then, he didn't care who knew it. "He wasn't even supposed to be here! None of us are supposed to be here! We finished our tour. But because we were extended they made us get off the plane and do convoys again. We didn't even f----- have our own equipment because it had been shipped home. He had just come back from visiting his father who is dying. They gave him special permission to see him, and he told his dad he'd be back home in a couple weeks. We were extended for two weeks! Only two more weeks and we would be going

home. He should have stayed home and now he's dead! We shouldn't even be here! I hate the f----- Army!"

I kept my arm around him, all the while he was shouting, crying as well, and watching, as he did, everyone who was walking past us. Soon, he was spent, and stood up. I did too, and we left, both of us heading in different directions. The next day a senior officer told me, "I SAW you with that soldier yesterday." I wondered what this officer thought about it – me being there all the while the grieving soldier was cursing the Army in such a public way. I like to think he thought it was a good thing. I didn't care though. There was no way that I was going to leave that soldier alone in his grief. Besides, what were they going to do? Send me to Iraq?

Several years have gone by since my redeployment. Looking back, I can honestly say I doubt I'd be able to recognize most of the soldiers I counseled face to face. But I remember this soldier's face, and feel I could pick him out in a crowd. Such is the power of raw emotion.

Death and Grieving during Deployment

My camp was essentially a fueling point, and a rest stop for convoys. Most convoys came through our camp, and when they did, our combat stress team supported them as well as the soldiers permanently assigned to our camp. At night I would often stop off at movement control, or the TOC to see how things were going, if the roads were quiet, or if there was activity. Mostly things were quiet, and it was easier to hit the sack after getting this news. But of course this was never a sure thing. On more than one occasion I was awakened with news that an IED had hit a convoy – that there were injuries and they would arrive at our camp soon.

In one such instance, a company commander learned that one of his soldiers who had been medically evacuated had died en route. It was his unit's first (and I hoped last) casualty. Before their convoy arrived, I was introduced to him. The news was hitting him pretty hard. I asked him to come to my office where we could talk privately. All the time I was talking with him, my team was touching base with the First Sergeant, Chaplain, and anyone else who knew about the incident. Once the office

door was closed, the tears started to flow. I'd already been through this with at least one other unit so I had a good sense of what I needed to tell him. Understandably, the first thing he wanted to do was call his unit's headquarters back in the states so that he could personally deliver the news. I told him that wasn't possible. Whenever there is an incident, they shut down the camp's phones and Internet. This assures that the family is notified through official channels rather than hearing second hand from someone in the unit. It also decreases the possibility for the spread of rumor and speculation among other unit members and family networks. I assured the Captain that he could call home as soon as official notification was made, and that the army was pretty efficient in doing so. "Your focus has to be on your unit here. I suggest you and your First Sergeant call them all together in our chapel so they can all hear it at the same time. The chaplain and our combat stress team can be there in case anyone wants to talk." We talked a bit about what he would say so that he'd be ready. I hoped this would be the only time he'd have to make such a speech but also knew that if he ever needed to do it again that he likely wouldn't need my assistance. His brief moment of private grieving over, he collected his composure and his gear. I gave him directions to the chapel and told him I'd meet him there. When I arrived, I stood in the back of the chapel – my team, a combat stress NCO and mental health specialist, already present. The Captain entered, and went to the front. Standing with the chaplain and his First Sergeant by his side, he delivered the sad news. He asked if anyone had any questions or wanted to say anything and that the chaplain and combat stress were here. As I anticipated, no one commented, though several heads were bowed. Silently, they emptied the chapel and headed for their tents.

The Hazard of Being a Gunner (and a Gun Truck Driver)

We were fortunate in that none of our combat stress unit members were killed during this deployment, though several of us traveled in convoys and visited Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) and Radio Relay Points (RRPs) as part of our work, myself included. However there was at least one death that affected me personally, as well as many of the soldiers on our small camp. It was when SGT B died. In a place where everyone blends in, SGT B stood out – he stood out because he had a genuine concern for

the soldiers that he expressed every single day. He went out of his way to make life a little better for everyone. He knew I had a husband and two sons and never failed to ask me, the camp's combat stress social work officer, how I was doing, and how my family was doing. He was a gunner and was killed in an accident on the road. This is how I was told it happened. In the black of night, after going through a checkpoint, their driver sped up before totally clearing the barriers, which he probably could hardly see, and when he ran into one of them, SGT B went flying out the truck like a projectile. He died instantly. It was an accident. Traffic accidents happened there just like they do in the states. I understand gunners are encouraged to strap themselves to the truck, just for such circumstances but I knew of none who did. Too cumbersome, and they wanted to be able to get out of the truck quick – like if it caught fire. No one, including me, blamed the driver and we all told him so. Drivers have their own stressors and challenges, driving in the most unimaginable conditions. Today, I hope he is okay and does not carry guilt. We made a point to check in on him and talk with him about staying focused. I also encouraged him to seek counseling when he got home. It was not the time to examine any feelings of misplaced guilt in a deep way while still having to drive missions. There would be time when he got home, to process it. I hope he did.

Retrieval of Soldiers' Remains

Soldiers, all of us, have "other duties as assigned." There are general expectations of things we are required to do, regardless of our position or rank. One of these is the recovery of remains and body parts. It's a part of the military creed of leaving no one behind. The army issued a laminated training card on the subject, among other topics, and it was one of the trainings we, as a combat stress unit, could provide. Soldiers who officially had this responsibility were the ambulance units. We had one such unit at our camp, and as they were assigned, faithfully drove out on the roads when there was an accident, or an IED explosion – seemingly with little concern for their own safety. Some of the soldiers assigned to the ambulance unit were Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) back home and several reported that they had seen plenty. They were accustomed to retrieving body parts, they informed me, but they were concerned about the uninitiated unit members – the younger ones who

had never been called to the scene of an accident. These were the ones they asked us to speak with. When I did it, I dutifully reviewed the points listed on the laminated card, feeling confident all along that these soldiers would perform admirably if called upon. All of us would, if we had to. Most soldiers who talked about it said it wouldn't be a hard duty as the body parts were no longer a person – the person was gone – that the retrieved flesh was not a person or the soldier they knew – it was just flesh. This is essentially what is taught in training, that the body is not the person. I wondered if I would feel that way if I ever had to do it. It's one thing to talk about it and train for it – quite another thing to actually do it. Fortunately I never had to find out, but I did counsel a soldier who did.

He came to the office to talk with me about it, after having recently retrieved the body parts of a female truck driver who was killed after her truck was hit by an IED. He wasn't part of that unit, but had been given the requisite body bag and was called upon for casualty collection duty. She was a total stranger to him. I feel that I will never forget how he described it. His description was touching and I could tell he wanted to do the best for her, even in death, even when her body was now a collection of parts. The worst part he said was when he picked up her face. The way he described it, it sounded as if the face was no longer attached to the skull but that the face itself was intact so that he could see all her features.

Sitting in a chair across from me, he lifted his arm, holding his hand up as if he were holding her face before he placed it in the bag. It was a small gesture and a brief moment, but as he held his hand out, I envisioned a young female soldier's face – him holding on to a piece of her hair or scalp – her face looking at me. Then he set his hand down, as if once more he was placing her face into the bag. I wanted to ask him how it could be that her face was intact like that, or if it were even true that he picked up an intact face, but didn't dare. Besides it didn't matter. What mattered for us in that moment was that he had connected with her because he saw her face. And this was his question to me. He felt a desire to look up her parents and tell them what he had done. He asked me if he should. What to say? I tried to imagine that this was my daughter, or even if this had happened to my son – would I as a parent

want to hear from the soldier who had picked up my child's body parts and who had held her disembodied face in his hands? Even in the moment I was thinking about it, I realized I was experiencing counter-transference and I used this information to respond to the soldier. Gently, I responded that if this were my daughter, I would want to hear from those who knew her when she was alive, what she was like, stories about her before she died; how she laughed; how she trained; who her friends were in the unit. I would not want to talk with someone who performed this last rite. Maybe other parents would feel differently but this is how I felt and I told him so. You have a need to do this, I said, but it is your need, and would not help her parents. We can talk about it, honor her in our conversation and wonder what she was like. He didn't argue with me, and soon left after he asked me this question. I like to think that in a way he was relieved, knowing that he had fulfilled his duty as a soldier, and that he had done all that he could and should, now that she was gone. But like the others I counseled, I will not know the end to this story.

Several years after I returned, I met a veteran who had been assigned to mortuary affairs. Theirs is noble, silent work. It could also be isolating, as mortuary affairs is often to the side of a base, on its own. We talked briefly about the difficulties in this work, and how, over time, soldiers assigned to this duty could be vulnerable to emotional trauma – all those body bags – all those bodies, and all those body parts. The veteran talked about getting counseling for the unit, and that it helped tremendously. I heard about how one soldier who, after being in the unit for some time, had related that one of the bodies in the bag was talking to him. For a moment, I recalled my conversation with the soldier who told me he had retrieved the face of the young female soldier and how she had seemed “alive” to him. For a moment I thought, “oh – they made a mistake,” and this soldier who they thought was dead was only sleeping and was actually alive. Like Lazarus. But no, they were all quite dead. It was apparent that mortuary affairs had finally gotten under this soldier's skin.

Relating this story, this veteran was happy to report that the counseling he received had made a big difference. What I did, what we do in combat stress units and what others do who counsel soldiers in the

VA, Vet Centers, and other settings, matters.

ARES

Though there was hardly any hint of hostilities at our camp, it was all around us. Further, soldiers assigned to our camps came back, after experiencing conflict, bombs, and ambushes in surrounding areas. Of note were the first and second battles of Fallujah, a period of excessive bombings and ambushes on a nearby supply route, a unit's clash with militants outside Baghdad, and a friendly fire incident that resulted in the death of a coalition soldier at a nearby radio relay point we supported. Finally, I myself experienced one friendly-fire incident – a drive-by shooting with another coalition unit that resulted in no casualties, and a mortar attack on our camp, also casualty-free.

April 2004, the month before we arrived, was also the month when the first Battle of Fallujah occurred. This was the deadliest month of the conflict to date, spiking from 52 coalition casualties in March to 140 in April, as well as 1,215 wounded. Similar figures would be seen again, when the second Battle of Fallujah took place in November and December 2004. The second Battle of Fallujah was the bloodiest battle to involve U.S. troops since the Vietnam War. Some soldiers from our camp participated. Overall, there were 217 casualties in November and December, and 1,972 total wounded. These are the highest totals when compared to all other monthly casualties and wounded, from 2003 to 2012.

During the period of the second Battle of Fallujah, the nearby supply routes were experiencing a great deal of bombings and ambushes as well. We supported several transportation and quartermaster units, those who drove the trucks carrying essential water and fuel as they came to our camp for more fuel. Many of these vehicles were in poor condition, and were not sufficiently armored for adequate protection. In November 2004, one Reserve unit we supported made the news when they refused to go out on any more convoys where much of the bombings and ambushes was occurring (Jensen, 2004). Soldiers driving fuel trucks refused to go out on the roads again as not all their trucks were armored. We had several interactions with members of this unit. Though keeping my own opinion in check, it was easy to be empathetic, as a

poorly armored fuel truck is a great target for a roadside bomb or ambush. They received a great deal of support from family members in the States and from some soldiers stationed in Iraq. Though they could have faced court-martial for disobeying orders, these soldiers received the lesser non-judicial punishment of Article 15s (Jensen, 2004).

On March 2nd, a U.S. soldier stationed at a radio relay point south of our camp, killed a Bulgarian soldier in a friendly-fire incident. According to news reports the incident occurred in the evening when a civilian Iraqi car approached a Bulgarian patrol. When the vehicle did not stop after the patrol gave the signal, the Bulgarian soldier fired warning shots into the air. The U.S. radio relay point (RRP) was about 150 yards away, and soldiers, hearing the shots, began firing, resulting in a Bulgarian soldier's death (Toshkov, 2005). After the incident, our combat stress team visited these soldiers at the RRP, accompanied by members of their headquarters. We were there to assess the climate, and to provide stress and anger management classes, if needed. Though that was our purpose, soldiers stationed at the RRP were more than willing to show us a bullet hole in their trailer, which they said had been fired at them by the Bulgarians before they fired back. Since the Bulgarians had not identified themselves, they thought they were under attack. We listened empathetically, nodding our heads, without comment. Our role was to assist in de-stressing, not to investigate. In the meantime, our combat stress specialist dutifully provided the soldiers with anger and stress management classes, and, once finished, we headed back to our camp.

My own friendly fire incident was in the spring. A few times during my tour, I accompanied soldiers on their security tours in the area surrounding our camp, to get a sense of what they were experiencing. On one of these occasions, the soldiers had gotten out of the vehicle, to take a look around. I also got out. A few moments later, we were being fired on, but from a great distance away. The soldiers instantly told me to get back in the vehicle, and they quickly followed suit. They told me that the shots were coming from the main road, a drive-by shooting from a coalition unit. They also told me they had fired on this unit earlier, and now they were firing back at them. Tit for tat, I hoped

that would be the end of that. If it wasn't, at least it didn't end in another friendly-fire casualty.

Mortars are another story. A mortar is a weapon that fires explosive projectiles, or mortars, at low velocities and short ranges. The security forces at our camp would, about once a week, fire outgoing mortars, they said to let everyone know we were here, and were ready to defend ourselves. When they did fire one off, it could be heard across the camp. But I did wonder how I would be able to distinguish between outgoing (ours) and incoming (theirs). When I asked them, they said, "don't worry, you'll be able to tell the difference." Mortars make kind of a thump sound when fired, which you generally will not hear from incoming. If you hear the incoming mortar, you'll soon hear the explosion, and then it's time to take cover." One night I was on the phone talking with my husband, from our combat stress trailer. During the conversation, I heard the mortar followed by the explosion. It stopped our conversation, and, I immediately knew it was an incoming mortar from its sound. I knew I needed to head to a bunker, but didn't want to startle my husband. Of all times to be on the phone! "Did you hear that?" I asked. "Yes," he said. Then, "I gotta go" was all I said, and hung up the phone. Grabbing my helmet and my protective vest I headed for the bunker. My 9-mil was already strapped to my thigh as I only removed it to sleep and shower. We stayed in the bunker for about 45 minutes, before we heard the all clear. It was another 24 hours before telephone communication was restored and I could let my husband know I was okay.

Gratitude

A few months before I left Iraq, a unit was heading home and getting ready to leave our camp. Redeployments were staggered so that an entire camp would not redeploy at the same time. This makes perfect operational sense, but it was hard to see people go to whom you had become attached, and to be left behind. They flew out in helicopters under cover of darkness. I was thankful they were able to fly out, rather than convoy. In the morning, I got up at my usual time and got ready to start my day. When I checked out the door to the trailer where our combat stress unit was located, I found a card taped to the door addressed to me. It was a thank you card. Beyond the pre-printed note of

thanks, this soldier had written that during his deployment, he always counted on my smile and seeing it made him feel good. Even though we never talked, he knew that he had a friend in me, and knowing that got him through. And once again I cried. I knew several soldiers in this unit but this soldier was a stranger to me. During my deployment I would ask myself if what I did mattered. And I would, on occasion, be overwhelmed with an inexplicable sense of abject failure – something I had never felt before in my entire life. Reading this card, in spite of my uncertainties, my fumbles, I told myself yes, what we did – what I did – mattered, and thanked him in my heart for telling me so.

Conclusions

Transference and counter-transference theory may be relevant in understanding these brief interactions. Regarding transference I wonder whether the gender of the combat stress social worker affects how soldiers respond to the counseling situation. Though the military is to be gender-neutral in that we are all soldiers first, male leaders can be looked upon as father-type figures. It follows that women in leadership positions could also be viewed in the parental role. In regards to my own service with a combat stress unit, I wonder if my gender mattered or impacted interactions in any way. When I got home, I shared these thoughts with another combat veteran, who served with an infantry unit, and his response was that most definitely – you were something of a mom-figure for them. Regarding counter-transference, I certainly viewed many of the soldiers as sons, brothers, daughters, and sisters, and I was aware of how my own thoughts and feelings toward my loved ones influenced how I interacted with soldiers who sought out counseling from combat stress. During my deployment my thoughts were often with my sons, who both were active duty, my husband, who was pretty much on his own, and my father, in a nursing home and who got his news about me from my brother.

Looking back, I think soldiers valued my opinion as a woman at least as much, if not more, than my professional point of view. This was especially true when the subject was Eros, or relationships with their wives and girlfriends. Had we all been stateside, I think it's unlikely that these soldiers would have consulted a social worker about

relationship concerns. It was that we were all there together, and we received filtered views of what was actually happening back home. At the same time, our families back home got filtered views of our lives in Iraq. Both sides were, in their own ways, trying to protect the other, and in some cases, shielding themselves as well.

In talking with soldiers about their grief, their encounters with Thanatos, or death, I found that our combat stress office became for some, a place where they could grieve, a private place where they could cry. And of course, the world created by Ares was inescapable, coloring all of these interactions.

I don't believe I was more or less effective than my male counterparts. I do wonder how our respective genders impacted how we functioned and were perceived while serving in combat stress units. Perhaps this narrative will further our dialogue and research for enhancing combat stress operations in combat or hostile fire arenas.

Implications for Practice

In working with service members and veterans from the recent conflicts, it would be helpful to understand the basics of combat stress units, as this is how today's soldiers may have first experienced the helping relationship. In this regard, combat stress units may be considered an integral part of the continuum of care. In my experience of combat stress operations, the helping relationship is brief, generally one or two encounters, and scheduling is flexible, more focused on the soldiers' or unit's priorities than a fixed calendar. While deployed, combat stress social workers teach soldiers to "normalize the abnormal," and in so doing, teach coping mechanisms for normal functioning in an abnormal setting. As illustrated in these case examples, I encouraged soldiers to "pack-up" or put aside conflicted or confusing, and deep-seated emotions now, suggesting that they "unpack" these feelings in a more long term counseling relationship when they got home. While not expressed in these scenarios, it was not unusual for soldiers to share stories of past hurts and loss while they described what was happening in the present. There were stories of childhood abuse and neglect, chaotic upbringings, prior relationships gone wrong, loss of other loved ones, and previous deployment and combat experiences. Listening to these stories, I

would quickly realize that the current incident had triggered these past events many of which were unresolved, with the soldiers experiencing a range of conflicted thoughts and feelings. I also realized that any attempt on my part to provide psychotherapy in this environment could only make things worse. Psychotherapy requires time, and a context where a stable, ongoing therapeutic relationship can be established. In this environment, sticking with the combat stress model of brief interactions, developing coping skills, and assisting soldiers to stay focused on the present, was the best strategy. And of course, a suggestion to seek additional help when they got home.

Social workers could enhance their success in developing a therapeutic relationship by being able to bridge the gap between traditional approaches to therapy and the combat stress model. They should also be able to explain the difference to their client, and the rationale for the different approaches. They will consider options for increasing flexibility in their approach, and will be able to educate service members on the value of unpacking feelings they had previously put aside. However, when grief and trauma are cumulative, such as when soldiers experience multiple traumas and/or deployments, unpacking one's feelings, or even acknowledging one has feelings, can become harder and harder. For example, soldiers' indifference toward their feelings and perhaps anything beyond the world of Ares is reflected in this phrase, which became the mantra for many Vietnam veterans: "don't mean nothin'" (Shay, 1994, p. 38).

The emerging models for integrated behavioral health practice may be a useful approach for engaging veterans in a therapeutic relationship (Curtis & Christian, 2012). The integrated behavior health model is focused, time-limited, and incorporates constructive feedback and advice into the helping process. Similarly, social workers working with veterans and service members could judiciously incorporate guidance and advice into their practice, and avoid strategies that are completely open-ended. Once service members and veterans are engaged in treatment, and a trusting relationship is established, they may be willing to commit to a structured, manualized approach to treatment, for long-term concerns.

Finally, social workers and other helping professionals should be knowledgeable about resources available for veterans, family members, and active duty service members. One such important resource is the Vet Center, whose mission is to provide readjustment counseling to veterans. They can assist veterans in navigating the big VA and in linking them with needed services and clinicians. Vet Centers are now gearing up to provide services to active duty service members, as well as to those who served with mortuary affairs in the United States. I understand that they may also be able to provide services to drone pilots. Call 1-877-WAR-VETS, or email Vetcenteroutreach@va.gov.

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