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Stagnation of the American Perception of PTSD as Shown in the Portrayals of Selected Modern, Post-Modern, and Contemporary Fictional and Non-Fictional Veterans

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Title: Stagnation of the American Perception of PTSD as Shown in the Portrayals of Selected Modern, Post-Modern, and Contemporary Fictional and Non-Fictional Veterans

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Project Description & Timeline:

The stigma surrounding mental health is neither foreign to the United States, nor is it a recent development. A new focus on mental wellbeing has risen over the past few decades, but the perception of those dealing with mental illnesses has remained largely the same, and mostly negative. This is especially true for Veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The VA reported in 2021 that suicide rates for Veterans was over 50% higher than for civilians in 2019 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021, p. 5). Yet, we as a society still glorify war and romanticize the story of the combat veteran while simultaneously vilifying visible struggles with mental health.

Take the 2014 film *American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood, for example. Chris Kyle, the titular character, is the most deadly American sniper in history. Despite the reference to his PTSD in the synopsis for the film, it is barely used as a plot point and doesn't accurately reflect the level to which it affected Kyle's life. He is hailed as an American hero for the acts that haunted him to his death. On the other end of the scope is John Walker, a fictional veteran of the war in Afghanistan portrayed by Wyatt Russell in Marvel's mini-series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*. Walker is the recipient of three Medals of Honor, which commemorate what Walker refers to as the worst day of his life. In the show, Walker is painted as a negative role model chosen by the government to replace the perfect hero of Captain America. Walker is a perfect soldier who is cast out by society and the government after falling back on his training to kill an enemy combatant following a traumatic event. Kyle is hailed for his string of murders at the direction of the US Army. Walker is hailed for his string of murders at the direction of the US Army. Kyle is killed in his pursuit of normality, and still honored in death. Walker is dishonorably discharged and branded a failed hero. The thing separating them? One fell victim to their own mind. The other died before he could. Kyle and Walker aren't the only examples. Two pairings from two other wars have similar dynamics: Audie Murphy and Fredrick Zoller in World War II, and Adelbert Waldron and James Barnes in the Vietnam War. Each pairing is unique in terms of morality, portrayal, and perception, all of which I intend to explore in my thesis. Work of this nature and focus is in short supply. This project will be unlike anything produced thus far and will raise awareness of PTSD and the common stereotypes therein.

If accepted, the project would take place from May 16, 2022 to August 5, 2022. I anticipate the finished project to be completed in the following academic year, but the twelve-week period would be used for the dedication of time to gathering information. I would use the summer to first become familiar with the historical context of World War II, the Vietnam and Cold Wars, and the post-9/11 conflicts in the Middle East through consumption of secondary sources such as journal articles, books, and documentaries, as well as primary sources such as news articles and documented interviews from survivors.

With an established factual context, I would then focus on the narratives of each individual in particular to gain an understanding of their stories and backgrounds—the inspiration behind the fictional characters and the early lives of the historical figures. This would involve watching their respective films, reading any available autobiographical materials, and watching interviews with or about them, including the actors who play the fictional characters. I also plan

to reach out to various people involved in the films' production to potentially set up interviews or gather statements specifically related to the thought processes behind the role of PTSD in the story of each individual as portrayed through several production elements. In particular, I want to reach out to Wyatt Russell, Sebastian Stan, Daniel Brühl, and Bradley Cooper, the actors who portrayed John Walker, James Barnes, Frederick Zoller, and Chris Kyle, respectively, in addition to a number of writers and/or producers for their films and shows, as I am able.

I have a basic understanding of PTSD from personal experience and the experience of close family members, but I am aware of the inconsistencies between individual cases, so I will be studying current literature on the disorder, as well as current diagnostic practices and portrayals of PTSD that are considered accurate by psychologists and/or individuals suffering from PTSD. I also intend to reach out to a few psychologists whom I know personally to have clinical experience with patients suffering from this disorder for their views on accurate portrayals, common misconceptions, symptoms, and so on.

This project is particularly dense, which is why it necessitates a dedicated capstone grant, but it is flexible in terms of shifting to remote work. I own most of the physical print sources I intend to use, and the majority of remaining sources will be open-access or otherwise available online. Any contact I am able to initiate with any of the listed parties can and will be done remotely, per relevant mandates. The majority of the workload involves information gathering, writing, and editing, all of which can be done in compliance with changing CDC guidelines.

References:

U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs/Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. (2021). *2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report*. Author.

Mentor Verification:

I certify that this is an accurate and practical proposal for an Honors Capstone Research project.

Dr. Rebecca Hazelwood, UAH English Department Date