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It Always Ends in a Fight: Moral Injury and the Burden of War in the Post-Vietnam Era

by

Eirian Persaeus Waldron

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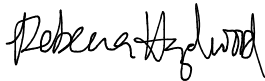
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Abstract

Combat veterans are generally labeled as “Heroes” in the United States, valiant warriors who fought to protect the liberties of their friends and family back home. During the Vietnam War, public outrage generated a new characterization of soldiers. In response to unfamiliar moral ambiguity, a significant sector of American society labeled veterans of the Vietnam War as “Villains” who had committed atrocities. The US government took the persecution further in 1971, investigating numerous war crimes allegations including the My Lai Massacre. In response, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) launched what is now known as the Winter Soldier Investigation (WSI) in order to prove that there was a much broader pattern of war crimes committed during the Vietnam War and, further, that Vietnam was not unique in this way. Ultimately, the impacts of WSI are hard to identify, but there was a societal shift leading up to the turn of the 21st century that removed the label of “Villain” from Vietnam veterans, only to neglect replacing it at all. Vietnam veterans exist in a morally grey area created by their experiences with moral injury and the broadening public awareness of those experiences. The journey of the archetypal “Vietnam Veteran” is mirrored in the journey of Bucky Barnes, a character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe also known as the Winter Soldier. Barnes's cinematic presence and contextual perception on-screen are analyzed and compared with the experiences of Richard Waldron, a late Vietnam veteran, and his family as a case study.

This is the creative nonfiction component of *It Always Ends in a Fight*, a larger project that extends beyond the scope of an undergraduate capstone. This portion is a culmination of years of work that serves as the first piece of the case study of Richard Waldron and his family.

The most important person in my life was my grandfather, Richard “Rick” Waldron. Up until a few years ago, if you were to ask me who my favorite superhero was, my response would have been him without a bit of doubt or hesitancy. I loved my parents, my grandmother was a huge part of my life, and I had a healthy fascination with Spiderman; that is, there were plenty of candidates for my hero. Inexplicably, it was not even close to my developing brain: he was the best. Period. End of sentence. Thus, it follows that one of my earliest and strongest memories is of his death.

When I was young, all I knew was that my grandfather had died. As I got older, the reasoning became more developed and the description became more specific. He died because of complications related to Agent Orange, in conjunction with other issues. He died from cirrhosis of the liver, which was a result of his alcoholism which, in turn, was a symptom of or comorbid with his PTSD. He died because of his service in Vietnam. I understood more, and then I understood nothing. I remember knowing that he had been a veteran, though I was certainly too young to think to ask him about it. But I didn’t know any details of when he’d served, or why, or where. I didn’t know the details. The details, as it turns out, are deliberately scarce.

When my grandfather, Rick, left Vietnam at the end of his tour of active duty in 1968, he did not return to a grateful public of respectful civilians. In stark contrast, he was met with protests almost immediately. When he left the airport in California, still in uniform, anti-war protesters harassed him, calling him a “baby killer” and “unAmerican.” When Wittie, my grandmother and Rick’s widow, described that specific experience as he had recounted it to her, disgust pulled her mouth into a half-snarl and her voice dropped to a whisper as if she didn’t want anyone to know that she had repeated the horrible words. For a short time, Rick stayed with his parents in California. As time went on and he tried to assimilate back into society, however, a

looming weight grew larger and increasingly unmanageable. Time passed, he got help, and I was born. I got older, he passed, and I was left with quickly fading memories. As I grew older, the version of Rick that I had in my mind, like a psychological Ship of Theseus, became less substantiated by my own memory and more so by the stories told by my family and the lingering ghost of my own pain at his loss. It was a second death of sorts, as if my mind itself were trying to distance itself from its pain by forgetting the reason for my pain in the first place. Gradually, I forgot.

On the evening of Friday, October 30, 2009, at eight years old, I rode in the passenger seat of my mom's blue Ford Ranger. It was chilly outside—normal for Hartsville, South Carolina in mid-fall—but I don't remember the cold. We had been at the annual Halloween carnival hosted at my school when something changed. My mother must have given some explanation to get me in the truck, but I only remember being inside and holding the seatbelt crossing my lap. Shortly into the drive, my mother broke the tense silence without looking away from the road.

“You know how Papa hasn't been feeling good, being in and out of the hospital?”

“Yes, ma'am,” I responded. “Is he sick again?” My mother swallowed hard and nodded.

“Yeah,” she told me, “he's not doing good.”

“Is he gonna be okay?”

My mother didn't respond for a moment. She did say something after a pause, probably something to the tune of “maybe” or “I don't know.” I didn't hear what she said.

At that point, I was aware of the concept of death. About a year and a half earlier that I visited my great grandmother in the Intensive Care Unit in the days before she passed away from an untreated staph infection. Given my age, I would not have been allowed into the unit under

normal circumstances. In the moment I felt special—like I was seeing something privileged and secret. Looking back, I don't think I really understood the gravity of the situation even as I reached up to squeeze my great grandmother's swollen fingers. It was different; in the silence of the truck when my mother hesitated to reply, I felt the weight of what was going to happen to my grandfather hit me.

The next thing I remember is walking into my grandparents' bedroom. I vaguely recall my parents trying to decide if they should let me in, and I remember deciding silently that I would try to get in, even if they disapproved. It felt, again, like standing at the door to the ICU while a nurse spoke quickly with a doctor over the phone, hand hovering over the keypad that would grant or deny entry. Ultimately, my parents did let me go in. I walked through the door, stepping off of the thin laminate floor of the pantry onto the old carpet of their bedroom. Once inside, I turned to the left and immediately stopped short. Tears flooded my eyes as I met my grandfather's gaze. He was sitting in his bed, propped up with three pillows, breathing shallowly and quickly. His eyes were a bright blue, bulging open so that I could see the entire ring of his iris. His mouth was open slightly and his tongue pushed against his lower lip.

"He can see you and hear you, he just may not be able to talk," I heard my father say, and I could hear the barely contained despair in his voice. He sounded strained, and his voice may have even cracked. My attention was focused on my grandfather's eyes. I felt strained, weak, as if I was going to collapse but my feet carried me to the bed and around to his side. I spoke without control, trying and barely managing to keep it together, telling the eyes that hadn't left mine how much I loved him over and over and over again. I put my hand over his and closed my fingers around it, but he didn't move. His breathing continued, labored and wheezing, as I leaned

up and kissed his cheek. The skin of his face was rough against mine. I settled back onto my feet, shaking, and squeezed his hand. His thumb twitched, but he didn't squeeze back.

I retreated to the living room, and it couldn't have been more than five minutes later that my father emerged from the dim little hallway leading to my grandparent's bedroom. I had—and still have—never seen him so distraught. His face was red, features twisted up, and he opened his mouth to say something that I didn't hear. He didn't have to utter a word for me to understand that he was gone.

For some time, the why was meaningless to me—for a long time. I'm not sure if I started asking questions or if my family tried to explain things of their own accord in an attempt to help me cope. The earliest and strongest reason I remember was that he was sick for a long time because he had fought in Vietnam. Of course, his actual cause of death ended up being significantly more complex than that, but my young brain just latched onto that simple, cut-and-dry explanation for the worst thing that I had ever experienced. In most scenarios, we as individuals default to favoring clear statements, even if they are grossly oversimplified. We even favor it on a psychological level; our subconscious mind uses heuristic techniques to optimize our thought processes. In short, we are hard-wired to take the path of least resistance. For a child's brain, that may mean that one factor is to blame for the loss of a loved one. For an adult's brain, that may mean that war is always a battle of heroes and villains. These shortcuts don't vanish as we age, even as we grow to understand and expect ambiguity.

As more of my family members passed away, the anguish and my subconscious fight against it compounded. During middle school, I realized that I had forgotten the sound of Rick's voice. Halfway through high school, I realized that the only memory I had of him was of the night he died and the emptiness he left behind. Up until that point, I had based most of my life

choices on what I thought would honor the memory of my grandfather: I joined and was an active participant in my high school's Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC), planned to join the Army or the Air Force as an aerospace engineer, kept a high GPA, and stayed out of trouble. I had created a one-dimensional version of Rick based on what I knew of him as a child; his death left him as a static character in a child's memory, hyper-idealized and ultimately inhuman. Though I had known him as a child, I felt that I did not *know* him. Realistically, I did not understand that until I started college and began working through this material. However, the first time I realized that the Rick in my head was not the Rick that my father or my grandmother remembered was the summer after I graduated high school. A few months after I turned eighteen, I got my first tattoo. I paid for it on my own after saving up for some time and my mother took me to get it. My father, who vehemently opposed tattoos, made a point of telling me how disappointed my grandfather would have been and how much he hated tattoos. While I understood that my father wanted me to avoid a potential mistake, I couldn't help but feel more than a little bit hurt—not by the assertion itself, but by how readily it was used, as if the memory of my grandfather was nothing more than a source for guilt-tripping.

That experience, together with my move from South Carolina to Alabama for school and the next two years spent figuring out what I wanted to study and what I wanted to do with my life, made three things clear. One, I needed to live my life for myself, not for anyone else, dead or alive. Two, memory is subjective and limited and our perspectives lead us to create versions of the people around us based only on the snapshots of their lives in which we are present. Three, Rick was a person. That last one was the most difficult to recognize. Rick was a person: he was not *only* my grandfather, *only* a Vietnam Veteran, or *only* disabled. He was a whole person, with strengths and weaknesses, good and bad qualities. Most importantly, he had an entire history, a

life filled with experience, trauma, emotion, and connection. Limiting him to the vestige in my mind was not only a disservice to myself but to him and his legacy, too. Rather than accepting my new understanding, however, I wanted to know more. Not trying to learn more about his life felt just as disparaging as pretending that he was nothing beyond what existed in my finite memory.

Determined to learn about the person my grandfather had been, I started asking questions and digging through boxes of photographs and old documents. The first substantial piece of material I found that mentioned my grandfather directly was a newspaper clipping in my parents' attic in Hartsville, South Carolina. I found the forgotten stash by happenstance while looking for a misplaced book, sweating profusely in the late-fall heat. I remember moving quickly, trying to sort through boxes and bags as fast as possible without damaging any of the contents. I do not recall why this box caught my attention, but I opened it to reveal a thick wad of folded newspapers. My haste was forgotten as I carefully unfolded each paper, stiffening every time I felt a strain or heard something tear. The collection was disjointed: a full commemorative edition of the South Carolina State released for the bicentennial in 1976, an edition of the Francis Marion University student newspaper, and a county newspaper looking back on the JFK assassination. At the centerfold of the small horde were two strips that sent my heart into a nosedive. I sat down hard on the old attic floor and stared at what I had found.

There he was. My late grandfather appeared in a photograph at the center of a wide newspaper clipping, oxidized to a warm brown with age. It was almost soft, and the words were clear on the smooth surface of the carefully folded paper. The article's title read, "Veteran Concerned For Troops' Mental Outlook" and was written by Suzanne King, credited as a "staff writer."

Veteran Concerned For Troops' Mental Outlook

By SUZANNE KING
Staff Writer

He came from Vietnam and was forgotten.

Twenty-years later Ricky Waldron got help. He was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Now, what is to become of the troops in the Middle East. This is Waldron's concern. Will they, too, suffer the same illness? And are the doctors prepared?

Waldron arrived in Vietnam Feb. 1, 1967 and returned a year later from a tour of duty.

It was a year of hell. Waldron was a combat soldier, 20-years-old. In his first month in Vietnam, Waldron and 28 others in his unit were ambushed during Operation Junction City. Nineteen were killed. The others? "I don't know what happened to them," Waldron said.

He described his feelings.

"I was defending something I grew up with and I was proud,"

said Waldron. "I was sorry others died and glad to be alive, but I felt guilty. After that incident I didn't allow anything to bother me anymore."

He put a shield in front of himself and continued, but took the "I don't care" attitude.

"I continued to play soldier, killed people and looked forward to coming home," said Waldron.

During his 12 months, Waldron advanced to the rank of sergeant.

He was wounded once. After contracting malaria, he could have returned to the states, but he chose to go back to his unit.

"I wanted to be there for them, and I felt they needed me," said Waldron. "I was dangerous. I became someone else to survive, and I wasn't scared of anything."

Waldron, originally from Hartsville, grew up in California since the age of five. When he was discharged from the Army, he returned to Hartsville.

"I couldn't face families who lost



RICKY WALDRON

their sons," said Waldron. "I didn't want to remember."

He worked with Sonoco for six months and quit.

"I couldn't handle authority," Waldron said. "I didn't want any-

one giving me orders on the job."

"For two years I traveled and partied," said Waldron. "I worked odd jobs and resorted to alcohol and drugs (amphetamines). I realized in 1971 I wasn't happy. I came back to Hartsville and married."

He began working with Marquis Boats, and in 1979 he couldn't take the pressure anymore. He had been suffering from insomnia due to nightmares.

"The nightmares and insomnia got worse," he said. "I went back to using alcohol and speed. I felt I was on the outside looking in. I felt distant."

Again, he quit his job. This time, Waldron went to the doctor. His alcohol problem was recognized. The doctor suggested Rubicon, but Waldron was against the idea.

In 1985, Waldron realized he needed help.

"I went for treatment at Bruce Hall," he said, but his nightmares worsened.

He did not mention Vietnam.

"People didn't want to hear about it," Waldron said.

He left Bruce Hall and started drinking, but two days later he returned and stayed 30 days.

"A Vietnam veteran counselor spoke with me," said Waldron. "I broke down a little."

Through the counselor's advice, Waldron contacted the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) organization, and he was sent to the VA Hospital in Columbia. Again, he was diagnosed with PTSD.

"Anger had been building and it came out physically," said Waldron. "Anybody that would give me a reason to get mad, I would begin hitting the walls or beating the ground."

He could restrain himself from actually hitting someone.

"I'd die first before I'd hit another human being," he said.

He refused medication, except for an anti-depressant prescribed by

(See Vietnam, page 15-A)

This article gave me some much-needed validation. Unfortunately, it raised as many questions as it answered. For one, the clipping didn't include any identifying information beyond the credited author, Suzanne King. Since the article referenced Hartsville specifically, I believed that it must have been published in the newspaper local to the city, the *Hartsville Messenger*. To find more information, I reached out to Donna, a staff member for the local news organization that managed the *Messenger*. Through her, I learned that they only kept copies of papers for 1-2 years. She suggested that the city's library, the Hartsville Memorial Library, might have an archive.

"Also," she wrote, "I'm sad to report that Suzanne King passed away many years ago from injuries sustained in a car accident."

Vietnam

(Cont'd. from page 1-A)

a local doctor. Medication was not the answer for Waldron.

"I wanted the problem fixed," said Waldron.

He found out about the Veterans Administration Medical Center (VAMC) in Augusta, GA through DAV.

"They were full," said Waldron. "I became suicidal."

It was his local doctor that suggested Waldron admit himself to Baptist Medical Center. They also diagnosed him with PTSD. After two weeks he contacted DAV again.

Congressman Robin Tallon was approached for assistance.

"Tallon got me a screening in Augusta," said Waldron.

After two screenings, Waldron was admitted into the center Oct. 16, 1990 under the Post Traumatic Stress Rehabilitation Program. For 14 weeks he underwent counseling.

"They worked to help me get it out and face it," said Waldron. "They carry you back and bring you home again."

Hopefully the problem is recognized today, and those who come home from the Middle East will get professional help, said Waldron. "It is because of the trauma of the war the servicemen and women suffer. I know what they're going through."

Waldron can visualize what the servicemen and women are experiencing.

"They're waiting and wondering if they'll die tomorrow," said Waldron. "I wish I could help them, but I can understand and continue treatment so the doctors can learn more from me to help others."

Waldron does not want them to suffer 20 years like he did.

"Everybody needs to realize the sacrifice the men and women are giving," he said. "War is horrible."

What is to become of the servicemen and women in the Middle East?

"If we go into an extended ground war psychiatric casualties

could be large," said professor of psychology for the University of South Carolina Dr. Frederic Medway.

But today, not like in Vietnam, there is more support for the cause.

"Coming back was as scary as being there," said Medway. It is hard to estimate how many will suffer from PTSD, but probably less than Vietnam because there were about 50,000 to 60,000 casualties."

According to Medway, if 5,000 servicemen and women are lost during the conflict, proportionally there will be less PTSD cases.

After Vietnam, there were problems with soldiers fitting back into society, into jobs and families. Servicemen and women in the Middle East will be faced with the same problems when they return.

People change when placed in a situation of authority. For instance, women left alone to continue the household functions and family business become more independent while the husband is away.

This factor needs to be considered. The military may prepare soldiers before they leave for war, but the soldiers may not be prepared to face the changes when they return.

"Each war experience teaches us more," said Dr. Paul Mazeroff, Family Support Center Director at Shaw Air Force Base. "From shell shock to combat fatigue, we learn and we are better prepared than in the past."

In past wars, those injured on the front were taken away. Studies of the past wars, indicate that the soldier should be treated and placed back into the unit.

According to Mazeroff, some work is being done relating to stress disorders.

"When it's time for them to come back, seminars, programs and support groups will assist," he said. "Chaplains stationed overseas deal with the problems there."

At Shaw, family support groups are designed to help families cope

with the present situation in the Middle East.

"Knowing the families are taken care of makes it easier for the servicemen and women overseas to do their jobs," Mazeroff said.

Well. The news was jarring, but I felt only a hollow pang as I began to draft an email to the library. Another dead end, literally, in this search for...what *was* I searching for? Answers, certainly, but to what questions, asked by whom? Why did I feel such a clawing *need* to know what my grandfather experienced? Perhaps it was morbid curiosity, interest in the gory details of what exactly had happened to my grandfather to cause his PTSD. If I could map out every minute detail, then maybe his death would make sense. Maybe I was searching for my own closure, using his story as a proxy. If I could find out what happened to the nine members of his unit whose fates were unknown, I would reveal the truth to the universe and allow him to rest in peace, thereby finding peace of my own. My motivations did not make sense, and they would only become muddier as I continued. Rather than dwell on self-analysis, I continued to work at defining some clear narrative from the words of the dead.

As I began to analyze every word choice and quotation in Suzanne's article, I tried to read between the lines, to place myself in her shoes and really see what she saw. Suzanne called him Ricky in the article. This tells me that she was probably not closely acquainted with him—everyone called him Rick.

"It was a year of hell," wrote Suzanne, perhaps taking a moment to gather her thoughts as she sipped coffee from a mug. I tried to reconstruct a picture of her crafting her article. I imagined her sitting across from my grandfather, perhaps in her office or my grandfather's home. In my mind, Suzanne wrote quickly, hoping to relay what she had been told as clearly as she could remember. She continued to work on her article, crafting in short the story of Ricky Waldron, her version of my grandfather.

Whether or not Suzanne knew that everyone called him Rick, not Ricky, she had just given me more information than the Department of Veterans Affairs had, though the bar was unsurprisingly low as far as they were concerned. I stare at the words, trying not to look at the picture in the center of the clipping, from which a haunting depiction of my grandfather stares at me with dark unseeing eyes. I try to form a recollection of his voice, to hear him say the words in my head, but I am unable to do it. It has been too long, and I have forgotten the sound of his voice. I wonder if he offered the details of his experience freely or if Suzanne had to chase them down with questions. What did she ask him? How did she word her questions? What was her tone of voice? Scenarios spiraled in my head, a dozen recreations of the scene of their conversation. Did he hesitate? How long did it take him to remember, to conjure an arrangement of words that could have adequately described how he felt? How did he feel? How did she? No matter how long I let the constructed scenarios play out, I always ended up lost in eye contact with the photo.

The picture at the center of the *Messenger* article did little to paint a scene, less so than the unchanging words on the degrading scrap of newspaper in my hands. There was no photographer credited and I had never seen the photo before. I am still unsure of its origin. The photo felt wrong, in a way; the camera was skewed to one side and the angle was a little too high. The photographer looked down on my grandfather, just enough to be noticeable, and his body slouched in a way that made it look as though he were leaning back against the wall while also being hunched forward. He looked uncomfortable. He was not smiling. His eyes were slightly unfocused, lips parted, and there was a heaviness in his gaze that still weighs on my chest when I meet it. The man pictured is Ricky. This picture and the article that surrounded it comprised a version of my grandfather whom I never met. Ricky was just one of several vestiges that I encountered over the course of my research.

When I went back home to South Carolina in May 2022, I went with the determination to find more evidence of my grandfather's service. Two weeks of searching in the closets and storage room of my grandmother's tidy little mobile home afforded me several of Rick's items: his death certificate, a copy of a DD-214 from his final discharge, an honorable discharge certificate, and several photographs. The paperwork, with the exception of the discharge certificate, was kept pristine in a folder inside a large black leather pouch emblazoned with the name and logo of the funeral home that had arranged for my grandfather to be put to rest. It was overwhelming, to see so many documents that mentioned Rick at the same time. A part of me was relieved—the printed letters were proof to the derealized faction of my



brain that Rick had indeed lived and died. The paperwork was heavy, solid. It didn't weigh me down in a debilitating way like intense emotion; instead, it was grounding.

My grandmother wasn't thrilled when I asked for permission to go rifling through her haphazard collection of things. She did not discourage me from looking; rather, she was mostly indifferent. The goal of my search was not a surprise. I had grown up within arm's reach, and she was familiar with my inquisitive habits. She was also familiar with the road that it would lead me down, and of what awaited me at its end: nothingness, tainted with bitter frustration. She, the wife of a disabled Vietnam veteran, had seen firsthand how callous reality was.



The screen read: "Honoring our heroes, today and every day."

The words were almost hard to read against the background, a stock photo of a United States flag waving in the wind. It was July 4, 2022, and the air was humid in Birmingham, Alabama. The jumbotron faded to black as the national anthem played for the second time that night and the lights in the stadium darkened. An ominous silence swept through the crowd, broken only by an occasional murmur of sound as the song marched on. It was a recording of a brass band that goes uncredited. Like the message on the big screen, the quality and nature of the delivery were not what was most important—the content was what mattered in the eyes of those who had set the stage. Or, at least, the sentiment of the content. That was why it was not a surprise to anyone in the crowd when fireworks began at the stereotypical line, "and the rockets'

red glare, the bombs bursting in air.”¹ There was no vocalist, but the words wash over the crowd anyway. It was familiar.

The anthem ended, but the fireworks continued, and there was barely a second before more music faded in—some patriotic country song. It was followed by a second, and then a third. The venue had spliced together the most iconic parts of various songs espousing the virtues of the “Land of the Free” to play in time with the intentional explosions going off, well within the city limits. The tempo was sluggish, the flashes of light and sound almost seeming to wait for each other so that they may each sound off one by one. They were mostly mortars, lit either by hand or electronically regulated to avoid too many rounds firing at once.

As one song faded, the tempo jumped and the fireworks became submachine guns. The vocals of the song that drifted overhead were yelled as much as they were sung. “Born in the USA, I was born in the USA!” The chorus played out, the rapid detonation of fireworks continued, and then the song changed and the tempo dropped again. This was the last song, and the final display was a shower of sparkling lights that faded gently off into the night air. The lights rose in the stadium and the crowd moved to go home. The lyrics that the speakers did not play echoed in my ears as I drove away from the stadium into the darkening night.

“You end up like a dog that’s been beat too much.” I turned on the radio, but all I could hear were fireworks and music. “They’re still there, he’s all gone.” The cold of the ice that swirled in my gut seeped into my bones and pierced my chest. For a moment, I was disgusted with myself. I thought about the “they” and the “he” referenced in the song on a relentless loop in my head. And I thought about my grandfather. I remembered a vivid snapshot, walking into his house to let my grandmother know that we would be lighting fireworks for the holiday. I did not know at the time, but she already knew and he was already in his bedroom, back pressed

¹ Francis Scott Key, “The Star Spangled Banner” (Poem, Doubleday, Doran & company, Garden City, N. Y., 1942).

against the headboard, wrapped in blankets, watching television. I didn't know then, and I still don't know now, what he experienced on those occasions where the present bled into the past. I never will.