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Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character by Jonathan Shay [Review]

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compulsory service has since been condemned as a needless and oppressive, such charges are largely the product of hindsight. Indeed, had the war continued until 1920, as the Allies anticipated, the necessity of conscription would have been quite evident. Morton follows the soldiers of the CEF in their preparations for war, arguing that much of their training in the first years of the conflict was of limited value. He recounts the experience of one Canadian corporal on manoeuvres in England, who, after ordering his section to crawl forward to capture a machine-gun post, was informed by a reproachful staff officer that "No British soldier crawls into battle on his belly!" [p.90] Both in Canada and England, the training regimen proved woefully inadequate for the grim conditions that the soldiers would encounter at the front.

While insufficient training coupled with inexperience often led to disastrous losses early in the war, Morton argues that as the conflict progressed, the CEF was able to develop effective tactics. After the devastating experience of the Somme, a battle characterized by Canadian soldier Frank Maheux as "worse than hell," the author contends that a tactical "revolution" took place as the Canadian Corps regrouped in front of Vimy Ridge. With the refocussing of tactics at the platoon level, Morton suggests that "Canadian infantry would be organized and trained to fight their own battles and not be patriotic automata." [p.164] As the war progressed, Canadian success increased as the infantry improved upon its new tactics of fire and movement. At the same time, the artillery "mastered a practical science," with devastating effects.

In addition to tactics, Morton explores some of the bleaker realities facing Canadian soldiers. Perhaps the most graphic section of the book addresses the nature of wounds and diseases at the front. Relying on the accounts of soldiers, surgeons and nurses, complemented by several rather chilling photographs, Morton relates clearly the grisly assortment of fates that befell many men. Prisoners of war suffered under dreadful conditions as well. While in theory they were protected by the dictates of the Geneva Convention, the author demonstrates that captured Canadian soldiers were often mistreated and malnourished by their captors.

Morton concludes his study on a bitter note, with a discussion of the reintegration of the members of the CEF into Canadian society at the end of the war. The author is critical of the response to the needs of veterans, noting that while programs were devised for the rehabilitation of many soldiers, such plans soon fell by the wayside as Canadians found more pressing problems. With the depression of 1921, funds for disabled veterans' jobs all but disappeared. As Morton notes caustically: "Employing them had turned out to be more patriotic than profitable." [p.271]

In addition to providing a vivid portrayal of the experiences of the soldiers who comprised the CEF, Desmond Morton has captured the changing nature of the war in which they fought. Throughout the book, the author emphasizes the evolution in the conditions faced by soldiers at the front, in the tactics they employed in battle, and in the nature of the Canadian society from which they emerged. It should be noted that the study relies heavily on the author's previous work in this

area. Readers familiar with Morton's many studies of the CEF and Bill Rawling's recent book on tactics will find that *When Your Number's Up* contains few new revelations regarding the Canadian experience in the war. Nonetheless, the book provides intriguing glimpses of many aspects of the struggle through the eyes of Canadians who participated, at the same time helping to dispel the misleading image of the First World War as a static and meaningless conflict.

Nick Gardner
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Achilles in Vietnam **Combat Trauma and the** **Undoing of Character**

Jonathan Shay, MD, Ph.D. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. (New York: Atheneum, 1994) 236 pages, \$20.00 US

Jonathan Shay has written a remarkable book. This book is at once erudite, eloquent and outspoken. Even though Canada was not involved in the prosecution of the Vietnam War, it is a book which should be read by every officer or non-commissioned officer who commands, will command, or intends to command, troops in battle. For them, this is a very important type to which they are not normally exposed by their training.

This is also a text that will have great value to officers and NCOs who are expected to be employed in peacekeeping duty, a duty for which Canada is justly famous worldwide. This observation is made not because of Dr. Shay's

military acumen, which has grown great through his patients, but simply because the book points out and underlines the evil and horror which men are capable of inflicting on each other. This is apparent in Yugoslavia, Somalia and Rwanda today.

Dr. Shay is a practising psychiatrist who, as a member of the Veteran's Improvement Program in Cambridge, Massachusetts, treats American combat veterans of the Vietnam War who are afflicted with severe chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He points out in the introduction to the book how, several years ago, he was struck by the similarity of the war experience of Vietnam combat veterans to Homer's account of Achilles in *The Iliad*, although *The Iliad* was written about 2,700 years ago. Written with the encouragement of Professor Gregory Nagy of Harvard University, a leading scholar of classical Greek literature, this is a very important and timely book.

No one should shy away from reading this book for fear that it is a psychiatric textbook, too complex to be understood. Though providing insights into the human character and its workings not easily found elsewhere, it is also an extremely well-written, clear, concise and accurate description of the trauma created in formerly rational human beings, through their continual involvement in deadly combat. In a sense, by juxtaposing the experiences of his patients with those of Achilles in *The Iliad*, Dr. Shay has demonstrated that "there is nothing really new under the sun." What is new, however, is the intensity, magnitude and seeming interminability of the conflict as well as the severity and longevity of the subsequent psychological illness which can

cripple the soldier who finds himself embroiled in it as easily and as permanently as a round from a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Dr. Shay's great contribution, however, is his emphasis on, and description of, the failure of leadership and the development of the "berserk" state. Both of these facets seem to be particularly endemic in the Vietnam war, and both are confirmed by the statement and/or actions of his patients over and over again. The nature of the combat in which these men found themselves engaged has, of course, occurred in war before; one immediately thinks of the siege and horror of Verdun, of Stalingrad, of the battles of Kursk and Kohima. All of these had their particular horrors, as did Vietnam.

Dr. Shay makes many penetrating observations with regard to the leadership of the Vietnam soldier, and perhaps the most important of these in relation to the failure of command is the lack of time to mourn. He points out that, after the death of a close friend in action that "thwarted, uncommunalized grief is a major reason why there are so many severe, long-term psychological injuries from the Vietnam war," and he ably demonstrates this with the observance of their respect for their own and enemy dead. He also contrasts the lack of contempt for the enemy displayed in *The Iliad* with the active contempt, rooted in racism, that occurred among American soldiers in Vietnam.

It is difficult to review a book from the galley-proofs; however, if the published editor is cognizant of the corrections made and revises accordingly, the technical quality of this text will be high. Dr. Shay's writing style is superb,

and he has a talent to grip and hold the reader from the beginning of his text until the very end. Liberally interspersed with anonymous but appropriate quotations from his tape recordings of treatment sessions with his patients, and incorporating wisely chosen and appropriate solutions from *The Iliad* in illustration of his points, this book is less of a text and more a work of literature that cannot help but be of benefit to all those who take the time and trouble to read it. It is one which reminds me very much of Guy Sajer's *The Forgotten Soldier* about the Russian front in World War II, and it certainly can proudly stand alongside John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*.

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Painting the Map Red Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902

Carman Miller. *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902*. (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993) 540 pages, \$44.95.

Here it is, at last; the definitive book about Canada's role in the Boer War. Such a long delay is almost inexplicable, considering what a tremendous social, military and political effect that far-off African conflict had on Canada. However, as Carman