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Combat, desecrating the dead, and our surprise

Tom Roberts | Jan. 16, 2012 NCR Today

My initial reaction, upon reading of the Marines who urinated on dead Taliban fighters, was of course to be repulsed by one more graphic display of the barbarism of war being conducted on our behalf. But that initial reaction was quickly followed by an almost automatic question: What do we expect?

What can we expect, indeed, of young men trained to dehumanize others to a degree that they can methodically and clinically kill complete strangers? Presumably, that is what these young soldiers did to the dead fighters not long before the video was taken. Do we expect young men who have pulled the trigger one moment to conduct somber, religious graveside services the next?

It is good to note that somewhere between Texas Gov. Rick Perry?s rush to politicize the matter (he says the Obama administration?s expression that the act is deplorable shows the president has ?disdain? for the military) and those who wish swift and harsh punishment for the young Marines, we?ve found some space to acknowledge that the real issue can be found in the horrors of combat and what they can do to a young person?s mind and perspective.

A number of generals and others have weighed in on the matter, but one of the most insightful pieces I?ve read was by journalist and filmmaker Sebastian Junger in Sunday?s Washington Post.

Midway through his piece (read the whole thing here [1]) he writes:

?The U.S. military should be held to a higher standard, certainly, but it is important to understand the context of the behavior in the video. Clearly, the impulse to desecrate the enemy comes from a very dark and primal place in the human psyche. Once in a while, those impulses are going to break through.

?There is another context for that behavior, though ? a more contemporary one. As a society, we may be disgusted by seeing U.S. Marines urinating on dead Taliban fighters, but we remain oddly unfazed by the fact that, presumably, those same Marines just put high-caliber rounds through the fighters? chests. American troops are not blind to this irony. They are very clear about the fact that society trains them to kill, orders them to kill and then balks at anything that suggests they have dehumanized the enemy they have killed.

?But of course they have dehumanized the enemy ? otherwise they would have to face the enormous guilt and anguish of killing other human beings. Rather than demonstrate a callous disregard for the enemy, this awful incident might reveal something else: a desperate attempt by confused young men to convince themselves that they haven?t just committed their first murder ? that they have simply shot some coyotes on the back 40.

?It doesn?t work, of course, but it gets them through the moment; it gets them through the rest of the patrol.?

It seems we keep discovering how difficult it is to compartmentalize war in a way that allows us to separate its glories and its crimes.

Read the entire column here [1].

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/were-all-guilty-of-dehumanizing-the-enemy/2012/01/13/gIQAtRduwP_story.html