

FRIENDLY FIRE

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In a recent widely circulated editorial, David J. Morris, a marine veteran and author of *Storm on the Horizon* documenting the battle of Khafji in the first Gulf War, details several incidents in both the first Gulf and present Iraqi Wars in which American and coalition ground troops were killed by our own A-10 attack jets. During the Gulf War, friendly fire was responsible for at least one-quarter (and according to veterans perhaps as many as half) of all coalition casualties. Such deaths are not casual matters to be written off as inevitable accidents of modern war. Rather, deaths due to friendly fire underscore ignored but persistent problems of modern war and the way we perpetrate it. Morris calls such deaths by friendly fire "fratricide."

As a psychotherapist specializing in the treatment of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder among veterans and other survivors of war and violence, I can detail stories of surviving friendly fire from every war since Viet Nam. I worked with a grunt who was the only survivor when our own artillery forces bombed his sleeping squad, with a spotter pilot almost shot down by our side, with a Gulf War veteran trapped in Khafji while both the enemy and our own forces tried to destroy him because his tiny position was in the way of their big fight. I counseled a marine who on orders assassinated an American colonel who was black-marketing. And a Puerto Rican Viet Nam vet who, because he was bilingual, was ordered to command the other non-English speaking Hispanic GIs in his unit to sacrifice themselves in certain death operations. If he did not, his officer declared, he would have been sent to his death in their place. And I counseled a grunt who with his squad shot down their commanding officer's helicopter after his blood-crazed orders had caused the needless deaths of some squad members.

All these killings -- accidental, self-protective, racially and ethnically prejudiced, purposeful, vengeful or just cruel, could be labeled "friendly fire." Each one, occurring in the war zone during military operations, was officially classified as a combat death. Veterans and survivors' pain and sense of betrayal caused by such incidents do not disappear over time. Survivors of friendly fire incidents are left outraged and permanently mistrustful because they were the targets of their own side. Or they are left feeling permanently suspect and stained in their own eyes for doing the morally reprehensible and unforgivable.

The problems incumbent upon friendly fire are both macro- and microcosmic. They are due, on one hand, to technological factors and the brutal unpredictability of war, and on the other to the human forces of morality vs. savagery that are inevitably unleashed during warfare.

Military technology has become so advanced and modern weaponry so destructive that it is impossible to avoid killing our own. Further, the speed and destructive capabilities of military hardware have surpassed the human ability to accurately use, adjust or adapt to

it. Most veterans of recent wars testify that it is now not skill as a soldier but dumb luck that determines who lives or dies. Pilots in our aircraft, artillery units behind the lines, grunts on the ground, have almost no time and too much stress to determine whether the shapes they shoot at are friendly or hostile. Our brains cannot function at the speed of our weapons. Our nervous systems cannot take the shock of modern combat. Our hearts cannot tolerate the massive doses of brutality, destruction and loss.

The technology of destruction itself does not account for such morally reprehensible acts as being ordered to kill your own or emotionally desperate acts of killing our own in order to protect our own. Fragging or assassinating dangerous officers or causing the deaths of comrades because orders guaranteed your own death if you did not comply represent the inevitable distortions of the human mind, the devolution from civilization into savagery, that can occur in any one of us when we are immersed in unrelentingly brutal conditions with utmost terror but no hope. War puts us in a “kill or be killed” double bind. We cannot emerge unscathed and sometimes, accidentally or on purpose, the target will be our own.

With advanced technology comes an inevitable degree of massive slaughter of enemy combatants, innocent civilians, and our own troops. Advanced moral ambivalence, moral trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder will all inevitably result from modern war. David Morris is correct to call it fratricide, for it sits in the conscience and soul as that profound a crime, condemned as spiritually heinous since Cain killed his brother Abel.

David J. Morris, “Fratricide reflects need for more training,” *Times Union*, Mar. 26, 2004, A-11.