

*This article first appeared on the website of the Public Broadcasting Service's POV program as a response to the film "Soldiers of Conscience"*

As co-director of Soldier's Heart, a veterans healing initiative, I have had the honor of meeting a great many veterans, most of whom are suffering in some degree from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Despite medications and good coping strategies, they tell me time and again that the devastation they feel most is in their heart and soul. It is not the terror and confusion of battle or the horrendous conditions of sleeplessness and hunger that burden them. But rather, the single most difficult experience is that of taking life. This is so even when protecting themselves and others from enemy fire. Afterwards, they tell each other, "it don't mean nothing ." This is what they must do to be "good soldiers."

Our military is made up of young people who want a future that seems out of reach otherwise. Many want an education they can't afford on the wages offered them. Most are capable, disciplined, men and women who see honor in service. Our military is the most highly trained in the world. That training requires stripping each recruit of individuality and autonomy to create a unified fighting machine, conditioned to act instinctively, without thinking. Successful missions depend on the trained muscle memory response of each and every member of the unit. But when they are actually on the ground in a war zone, being shot at, taking human life, something unpredictable can happen, another primitive part of our nature as humans takes over. And sometimes, even following orders, they do the unthinkable. Innocent people get killed. Our troops see it all around them. It seeps into their hearts and souls. They go numb to keep from feeling, which may, in fact, serve to help them stay alert and focused, able to protect themselves and their fellow troops.

After the mission, when the immediate danger has past, the heart begins to register what took place. The human being inside has an innate sense that, despite politics and national interests, all human life is sacred and that taking life is abhorrently sacrilegious. Once the troops are home they are suddenly individuals again. Learned muscle memory no longer serves, and the mental memories of their war zone experiences, of taking human life, come flooding in. Their feelings of guilt and anger and sadness are compounded when they question the purpose and meaning of the war they have participated in. We call them heroes and warriors, when inside they feel ravaged and disillusioned.

Military training does not prepare troops for the inherent moral and ethical dilemmas that war poses. It is appropriately designed to diminish such concerns. It is the unique person who can undergo military training and still have the wherewithal to retain their moral compass enough to say no to killing. Regardless of how we may feel about any particular war, we must view those military men and women who stand up as conscientious objectors as true warriors. The film *SOLDIERS OF CONSCIENCE* does a fine job of helping us do that.