

Book Corner

Soldiers of Conscience

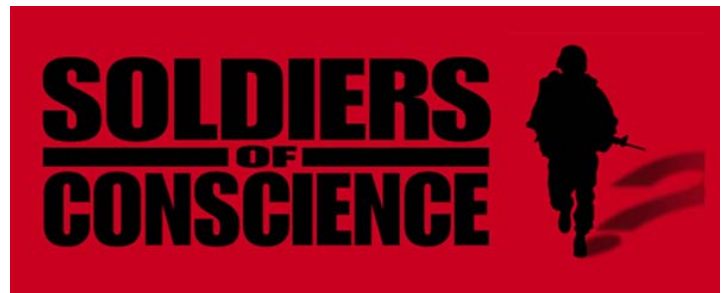
Review by Kent D. Drescher, Ph.D.
National Center for PTSD

Review of: PBS documentary, SOLDIERS OF CONSCIENCE (<http://www.soldiers-themovie.com>).

Soldiers of Conscience is a documentary produced by two award-winning filmmakers Gary Weinberg and Catherine Ryan, and narrated by Peter Coyote. It provides a powerful look into the ethical complexities of war, and the moral decisions faced by those who fight them. The film is primarily comprised of interviews with eight United States soldiers and Marines from Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF), in which they discuss their own personal moral perspectives on war and killing. Four of the participants at the time of filming served in military training roles, one teaching philosophy at West Point, three others serving as drill instructors for basic training. The other four participants served in a variety of job roles while in Iraq and at some point arrived at a moral and ethical decision that led to filing for conscientious objector (CO) status. Two of those filings were approved by the military and the individuals honorably discharged, while the CO filings of the other two were rejected and ultimately resulted in court-martial, prison time, and less than honorable discharge. Each of those who filed for CO status was required in the filing to describe a "crystallizing event," that is an event or series of events that led to a clear shift in their perspective and led to them objecting to "all" wars as opposed to simply objecting to this specific war. The viewer is allowed to hear these individuals describe in their own words the events that shaped their thinking and changed their beliefs. The film makes clear that filing for CO status is not currently, nor has it ever been, an "easy way out" of the military. Rather each member who filed to be a CO shared how much more difficult their military life became following the filing, and showed clearly that in most cases the filing did not shorten their time spent in the military.

One of the strengths of the film is that its producers resist what might be an inclination to take sides and promote a political agenda. Rather, those interviewed are allowed to speak for themselves about their highly personal beliefs, honed and shaped by their experiences before, during, and after their OIF/OEF war zone deployments. The film also provides a helpful amount of historic context about conscientious objection in US history. Additional materials available on the website, further clarify the varying ways in which conscientious objectors to war have been treated from the period of the

Revolutionary war to present day. It becomes clear that though the ability to declare oneself (on the basis of religious/moral beliefs) to be a conscientious objector has existed since before this nation was founded, the treatment of those who have made such a declaration has varied depending on the mood and outlook of the country toward each particular war. If there is a weakness in the film, it is that by allowing each interviewee to simply describe the experiences that led to their varying beliefs, the overall message of the film becomes diffuse and difficult to articulate. It is clear however that this is by design, not by accident. The filmmakers want viewers to exert energy to understand, interpret, and assign personal meaning to the film and in so doing enter into the difficult choices made by the service members who allowed themselves to be interviewed.



Soldiers of Conscience is about the resolution of moral conflict in the context of war either through coming to terms with war's necessity and the actions required to conduct it, or by removing oneself from involvement in war through declaring conscientious objection. The film chooses to portray these two ends of what could be seen as a more nuanced continuum of moral conflict in war. Theorists of moral distress in the medical arena have suggested additional points on the continuum such as *Moral Uncertainty* – i.e. being unsure what moral principles apply, *Moral Dilemma* – i.e. when two conflicting moral principals apply, and *Moral Distress* – i.e. negative feelings at the inability to do what is perceived to be right (LaRocca-Pitts, 2004). A number of trauma theorists and researchers have recently coined the term *Moral Injury* and define it as behavioral changes and changes in long-term view of self/others from involvement in perceived immoral situations.

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For this reviewer, the material presented in the film resonates with a growing awareness of the uniqueness of military combat amidst the array of traumatic experiences that can lead to a diagnosis of PTSD. During the past 40 years that saw the development of the PTSD diagnostic criteria that we have today in *DSM-IV*, the field has focused a great deal on the “least common denominator,” i.e. those elements of trauma and corresponding symptoms experienced by most trauma survivors. In so doing however, the field may have, at times, neglected, or glossed over unique elements of specific traumas that powerfully influence the recovery trajectory, and long-term outcomes for these individuals. Combat is uniquely an activity where behaviors that are proscribed in other contexts (e.g., killing) are sanctioned and even celebrated when performed in accord with established rules of engagement. The stressor criterion for PTSD that defines traumatic events does not easily encompass inflicting of trauma and the act of killing within the definition. Nor do the PTSD symptom criteria adequately address issues of guilt, shame, alienation, loss of faith, and self-destructiveness sometimes seen in combat veterans. Some writers have suggested that killing in combat may have inherent long-term emotional / psychological consequences that extend beyond the diagnostic criteria for PTSD and that might better fit the term “Moral Injury” (Grosman, 1995; MacNair, 2005; Drescher & Foy, 2008). Brett Litz and colleagues (Litz et al., In Press), in a forthcoming review and analysis of the combat research

literature call on the mental health field to focus increased attention to the deleterious effects of moral conflict and moral injury in the lives of war veterans and military service men and women. Filmmakers Gary Weinberg and Catherine Ryan make a similar call using their own unique medium in their film, *Soldiers of Conscience*.

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