The Moral Weight of War
Marines deserve to know the truth.
BY JULIA BAIRD

"WE DON'T HAVE the luxury of choosing our wars. We go where and when our president tells us to—without hesitation. I know it's hard for some to understand: no matter how much it sucks at times, we love what we f—kin' do" (Mike Scotti, in the documentary Severe Clear).

Seven years after the war in Iraq began, it's still refreshing to hear frank words from a Marine who has fought there. Who has endured, killed, seen hell, and returned. Who admits the only thing Marines think about more than sex is their rifles. Perhaps it is because the debate about war is usually dominated by pundits, perhaps because our news coverage of Iraq has plummeted.

(Andrew Tyndall, who keeps track of major-network nightly news, found that there has been only one report from a correspondent on the Iraq War this year. One! This is doubtless due to progress made, but 98,000 troops remain.) Or maybe it's because we don't often see real footage of soldiers drinking, being anointed with oil before battle, or getting high on combat, and shouting: "This is the coolest thing ever! It's raining bombs! Steel rain!" Nor do we too often see graphic images of dead, bloodied U.S. soldiers, or the brains of a young Iraqi girl lying on the road after her father did not obey a signal to stop his car.

Mike Scotti's story is particularly arresting because as he fought on the front lines of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, he recorded what he saw on a mini-DV camera. This footage forms the spine of Severe Clear, which is raw and thought-provoking. It reminded me of two lessons of war that are both obvious and constantly forgotten—and a third that is urgent today. The first is that soldiers need a clear, true reason to fight. The second is that surviving a war requires enormous mental strength. The third is that if we send men and women to battle under false pretenses, our responsibility to care for them afterward is even greater.

The first is why Scotti carried a photo of Beth Quigley, a friend who died on September 11, in his pocket when he went into combat. As he watched a bombed patch of land burn with leaping flames, he says: "I knew people were dying out there, but to be honest I didn't give a f—k. For me this was payback for September 11." He wrote in his journal, "There will be no debate once we find Saddam's weapons." When those weapons were not found, Scotti tried to stop thinking about it. But when he came home, feeling like an alien, to discover there was no "imminent threat" from the Iraqi regime, he felt an overwhelming anger and slipped into a self-destructive "black hole." As we saw in the The Hurt Locker—which Scotti found so accurate, it was unnerving—returning home can be profoundly alienating. A 2008 RAND study found that 20 percent of those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan reported symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder or major depression. Only half have sought help, and half of those received "minimally adequate" treatment. Part of this depression is undoubtedly coming back, as a warrior who survived war, to realize you may not have needed to be there in the first place. The moral weight of war, and killing, is heavy enough without strategic errors. As Nancy Sherman writes in The Untold War: Inside the Hearts, Minds and Souls of Our Soldiers, "that psychological anguish in war is also moral anguish is a fact too often ignored."

And there is serious psychological anguish. A report by the Congressional Quarterly found that more U.S. military personnel had killed themselves in 2009 than had been killed in either the Iraq or Afghanistan wars that year. A 2007 CBS investigation found that about 120 veterans committed suicide each week in America in 2005. The highest suicide rate was among veterans age 20 to 24 who had served in the war on terror: between two and four times higher than civilians their age.

When I met Scotti, I was struck by how lean and driven he was. He says he dug himself out of his hole by viewing his war experiences as a source of strength: initiative, discipline, focus, attention to detail, and strategic thinking. He went on to finish an M.B.A. from NYU Stern, work in finance, and found a charity. He wanted me to know how proud he was to be part of Bravo Battery, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, a.k.a. the Beastmasters, the artillery unit that supported his infantry in Iraq.

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And that brotherhood and service still mattered more than any strategic reasons to go to war. But of course these reasons matter, even for the few, the proud, the Marines. We owe them honor, truth—and ongoing care.

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