

What's It Like to Kill Someone?

I have been asked that question more times than I care to count. I have been asked it by complete strangers, friends, and by those closest to me. I have been witness to the anger that erupts when someone is asked it and I have on occasion been the outlet of that anger. Most real honest-to-God combat veterans will tell you that asking that question is inappropriate, to say the least. However, the farther away I get from my time in the military, the less the question bothers me. In fact, I often find myself asking "what *was* it like to kill someone?" When I think of being asked it occurs to me that I was offended by it not because it was inappropriate, but because I didn't really have an answer to the question. It was much easier to explode into a tirade or ignore the question than to face it.

I have killed. Killing to me wasn't so much an act as it was a journey. It began as we marched in formations at Fort Benning, when we responded to the Drill Sergeants counting our steps by saying "Train to kill, kill we will!" I went to the rifle range with my comrades and shot at pop-up, man-shaped silhouette targets. The Army's mental conditioning designed to offset the "Thou Shalt Not Kill" training provided by society. Action, reaction; target up, shoot, target down; see the enemy, kill the enemy. Train to kill and kill we will. More of the same mental conditioning was provided to us at our units. In Staff Sergeant Moore's Squad we were taught to "Strike Fast, Kick Ass!" See the enemy, kill him first. Strike fast, kick ass. Our job as Infantrymen, to close with and destroy the enemy by means of maneuver and superior firepower, was drilled into our heads and into our souls. Trained to kill, kill we will. The journey took a few years. All of the training and mental conditioning culminated at one moment, a squeeze of a mechanical trigger, just a fraction of friction. I remember feeling relieved that I had done it, had proved to myself and those around me that I was capable of doing what I was trained to do.

The act of killing I think is immensely private. My buddies saw me do it, but the feelings I had about it were mine alone. Those feelings are not always the same for everybody. I felt a sense of relief and a feeling of accomplishment. I had done it without hesitation and without fanfare. Others took it much harder outwardly. It was not uncommon for guys to lose their nerve after taking a life, or for them to become overwhelmed with the feeling that they had done something wrong. Then, some of the boys took great pleasure in killing, or at least they seemed to. As a defense against labeling the act of killing as killing we use gentle euphemisms to describe it like wasted, smoked or zapped. We also dehumanized our enemy to make wasting him easier on the conscience by calling him Haji, The Dirty Haj, and Raghead to name a few. And after the first time I killed another human being came as a relief to me, all of the ones I killed after him didn't matter. Killing became a perfunctory and mechanical aspect of my employment.

What is it like to kill someone? As I look back on it now, years after what I hope is the last time I will ever have to kill another person my answer is this: The act of killing is a terrible and sad thing. For many it is a mentally and spiritually damaging act from which they'll never recover. For others it doesn't mean anything. For me, all I know is that it is better to be alive than to be dead, to walk the Earth, not to walk in someone else's memories. I also know that to explain what killing is "like" to a person who has never had to kill, is an exercise in futility. They possess an annoying curiosity on the subject of killing, and maybe they have a right to know exactly what we did on their dime and in their name. Perhaps instead of coming unglued or shutting down,

we as veterans should tell them exactly what they want to know even if they could never possibly understand it. Maybe we should find a way to articulate it to them in one word. If I had to sum killing up in one word, I'd say, "Easy."

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