

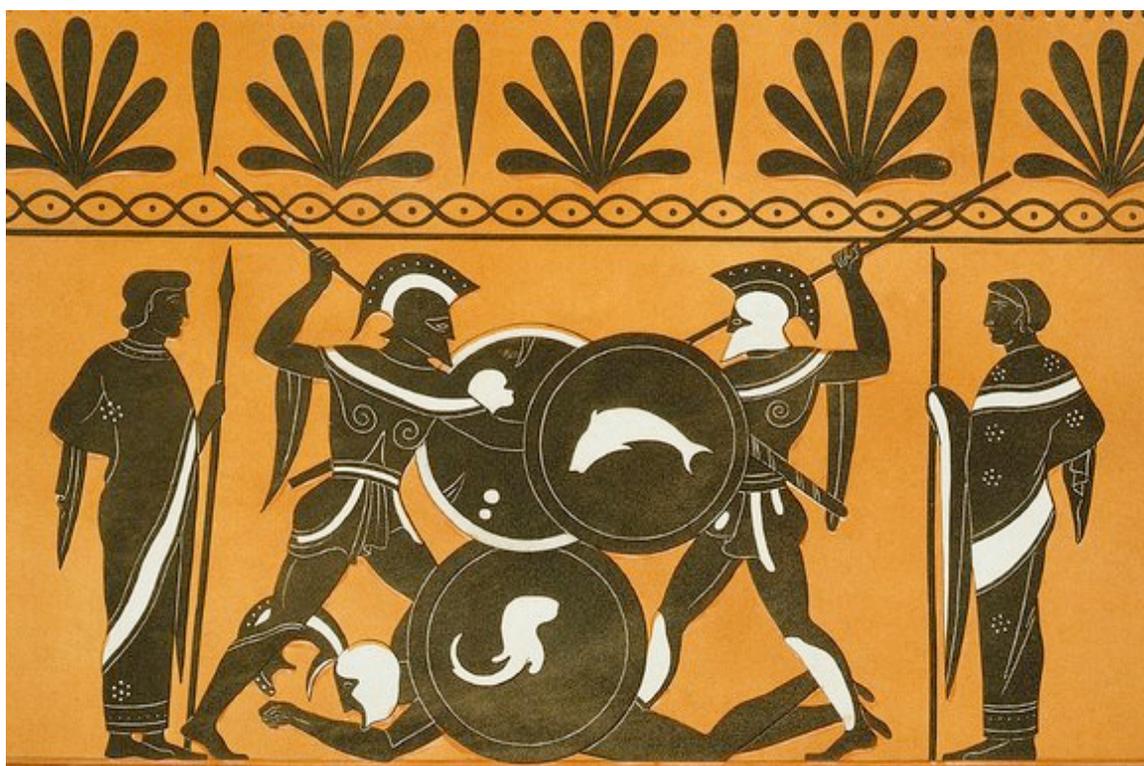


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US calls up Sophocles to fight combat stress

One in five returning troops is diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and suicides are at unprecedented levels

Christina Lamb Published: 3 July 2011



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When President Barack Obama announced plans last month to start withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, he was responding partly to political pressure over the financial cost of the war — more than \$2 billion (£1.2 billion) a week — at a time of economic crisis. Much less discussed are the invisible costs such as the psychological strain on soldiers who have served repeatedly in Iraq and Afghanistan. One in five returning troops is diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Suicides in the US military are at unprecedented levels — an average of five troops attempt suicide every day, says the

PTSD Foundation of America, based in Houston. Last year a record 301 soldiers committed suicide.

“It’s a much bigger problem than we thought,” said Frank Ochberg, professor of psychiatry at Michigan State University, who helped to define PTSD in Vietnam veterans.

“It’s a tough transition from combat ... to being a civilian; to go from being part of a fighting unit to family back home. There’s a lot of pent-up anger and frustration.” The US army has tried everything from video games to acupuncture, from pets to cycling. Now the Pentagon has turned to 2,500-year-old Greek tragedy to deal with the psychological impact of war.

Theater of War, an independent production company, has been awarded \$3.7m to stage readings from plays by Sophocles and has so far given more than 150 performances, from Arlington Cemetery to Guantanamo Bay. More than 35,000 service members and their families have attended.

One of the plays, Ajax, shows the Greek warrior’s descent into personal hell as he feels dishonoured by his commanding officers. Ajax plots to kill them when they give the armour of his dead friend Achilles to another soldier. But the goddess Athena puts him under a spell and he slaughters livestock that he mistakes for the officers. Upon realising this, he kills himself.

Performed by Hollywood actors such as Jesse Eisenberg, who starred in The Social Network, it is harrowing to watch, although not as dramatic as the audience’s response — many have known someone who has taken his life.

The idea was dreamt up in 2008 by Bryan Doerries, a theatre director. “Every day in The New York Times I was reading stories which seemed ripped from Sophocles’ plays,” he said. “I had this crazy idea that ancient Greek drama could offer something worthwhile to the modern world.”

His first reading was to 400 marines and their relatives: “Three minutes into the play all the BlackBerrys were switched off, the audience leant forward and did what the military call ‘lock on’.”

After the hour-long performance, a woman got up and said: “I’m the proud mother of a marine and wife of a Navy Seal who went to war four times. Each time, like Ajax, he came back dragging invisible bodies into our house. Our house is like a slaughterhouse.” That first discussion, which had been scheduled for 45 minutes, went on for three hours.

“It became clear to me that these plays written 2,500 years ago by Sophocles, a general in a century which saw 80 years of war, were written in code that I, as a civilian, couldn’t understand,” said Doerries.

Although the plays are emotionally fraught, they provide relief. "I felt as if I could breathe for the first time again," said one marine. Doerries said a Vietnam veteran had told him: "The fact that PTSD is from BC makes me feel less alone in the world." At one performance a commanding officer asked the audience of 400 how many knew someone who had committed suicide and 400 hands shot up.

Jacob Andrews came back from Afghanistan haunted by friends he had lost, got into disciplinary problems and was discharged. On April 5 he went into woods behind his family home in Kansas City and hanged himself. He was 22.

The week before, Corporal Clay Hunt, 28, shot himself in his Houston flat. He was a "model" returnee who lobbied for veterans on Capitol Hill, organised veterans' bicycle rides and helped with disaster relief in Haiti and Chile.

"He was very despondent about why he was alive and so many people he served with directly were not," his friend John Wordin said.