

UNDERSTANDING VETERANS: 10 SELECTIONS FROM A VETERAN'S BOOKSHELF

[Duane France](#)

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I often talk to other mental health professionals and community members about how to understand veterans. One of the challenges that veterans experience in seeking mental health

treatment is the thought that “they don’t understand.” There is the idea that one has to have experienced combat or been in the military before they can work with veterans. On one hand, the thought is understandable. The reality is, a small number of the community at large has served, given the size of the military. Another aspect of this concern...and I’m talking to you, veterans...is that the idea of “I can only talk to another vet” is a reason that veterans sometimes give themselves for not seeking help.

So if we can agree that we must try to understand veterans before we work with them, how do we do that? How does someone learn about the military, or combat, without actually experiencing it? Movies (documentaries) can help, if you choose them carefully, and books are an excellent resource. Make sure they’re coming from the veteran or service member perspective are key. I’d like to recommend ten books from my own bookshelf that could help.

1 and 2 (The Beginning) If you are starting from scratch, these two books are a great place to start. Dave Grossman’s books, *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and Peace* and *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* provide a look into the psyche of the Soldier. Grossman is a retired Army officer, psychologist, and professor who has done extensive research and interviews

with combat veterans to develop a greater understanding of the veteran mindset and the warrior ethos. These books provide a deeper look at the method and motivation of veterans. They come from the perspective of someone who is both a mental health professional and a veteran.

3 (Vietnam) There are hundreds of books written about the war in Vietnam. One of my personal favorites is [*We Were Soldiers Once...and Young: The Battle that Changed the War in Vietnam*](#) written by Hal Moore and Joe Galloway. Moore, the commander of the unit that engaged in the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley, and Galloway, an embedded reporter that saw the battle, provide a boots-on-ground perspective about combat and its impact on those who take part in it. The movie, while good, does not do the story justice; there is an entire second half of the book that describes the actions that took place after the battle of LZ X-Ray, of the desperation and heroism that occurred at LZ Albany.

4 (Operation Desert Storm.) Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm were the coalition response to the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in 1990. Referred by veterans as the “Gulf War,” one of the best accounts of that conflict that I’ve read is [*Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War*](#) by Rick Atkinson. Another reporter, Atkinson conducted extensive research that provides an in-depth look at a short but intense conflict. The Gulf War is often dismissed as the “100 hour war”, but the intensity of

those 100 hours, and the constant threat and pressure that veterans of that conflict experienced in the time leading up to and during the war, are admirably described in Atkinson's account.

4 (Somalia) Another of the significant conflicts in the 90's occurred during Operation Restore Hope, the US-led coalition to provide humanitarian relief and aid to Somalia. The story of the events called the Battle of Mogadishu are described in the book and movie *Black Hawk Down*, but an alternative source of understanding for this particular conflict is *In The Company of Heroes*, by Michael Durant and Steven Hartov. Durant was the U.S. Army Special Operations Blackhawk Pilot who was shot down during the battle, and became a prisoner of war following the crash. Durant and Hartov, again, provide a real and first-hand account of what it was like, not only during that time, but also provides a level of insight about U.S. Special Operations Forces.

5 and 6 (Iraq). Again, choosing from the multitude of books written about the war in Iraq is difficult. Two of the books that I have on my shelf happen to be from the on-the-ground perspective: *Boots On the Ground: A Month with the 82nd Airborne in the Battle for Iraq* by Karl Zinsmeister and *In The Company of Soldiers: A Chronicle of Combat in Iraq* by Rick Atkinson. Both of these books follow different units. Zinsmeister was embedded with the 82nd Airborne Division; Atkinson

followed the 101st Airborne Division. Both accounts describe the experience of the common soldier in Iraq. Both provide insight into the beginnings of the war.

7 and 8 (Afghanistan). A member of a particular U.S. Special Operations unit once told me, “if you really want to understand Spec Ops in Afghanistan, there is one book to read. That book was *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda* by Sean Naylor. I took his advice, and this book certainly provides a look at the early days of the conflict in Afghanistan. Operation Anaconda was the first operation in Afghanistan to involve non-Special Operations forces. The exercise involved Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division and 101st Airborne Division, as well as teams developed from across the Special Operations spectrum. Looking at the operation from both the planning and execution perspective, Naylor provides an understanding of what the participants were thinking and feeling in an honest way. Another excellent resource is *Red Platoon: A True Story of American Valor* by Clinton Romesha. Full disclosure, here: I served in the same brigade as Romesha and was in Afghanistan at the time of the events recounted in the book. If you’ve never read a book about people you know, it’s a pretty strange feeling. Romesha provides a first-hand account of the events of the Battle of Kamdesh, the attack on Combat Outpost Keating. The book gives readers an unvarnished, unapologetic

look at the reality of American service members placed in an untenable situation who responded with unparalleled heroism.

9 and 10 (The Aftermath) The impact of combat on veterans is something that is complicated and obvious. Two books look at the impact of combat on veterans and their families. *Lethal Warriors: When the New Band of Brothers Came Home* by David Philipps is a look at what happened in one unit and the community to which the soldiers in that unit returned. Again, full disclosure, my brigade, my hometown. What's more strange than reading about people you know? Reading about places you drive by every day. *Lethal Warriors* provides a stark and startling look at the reality of what sustained exposure to combat can do to individuals. It also shows what the accumulation of these events can do to a community. Another look at the impact of combat is *The Invisible Front: Love and Loss in an Era of Endless War* by Yochi Dreazen. Dreazan tells the story of General Mark Graham and his wife Carol, and their two sons. Jeff Graham is killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq, and Kevin Graham dies by suicide. The stark contrast that the Grahams experienced in the different responses to the deaths of their sons provide a narrative about stigma, the response to veteran suicide, and the reality of the impact on both on those that support and care for the veteran.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. It doesn't even scratch the surface of the books out there that describes the life

of a vet. Perhaps you have your favorites; if so, I'd love to hear them. Maybe you disagree with some of my selections, and that's cool, too; I'd love to hear that as well. If we take the time to learn and understand then we can provide greater support for those who have supported us. When we think we've learned it all, then we should know that we actually know nothing.