



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Phantom Weapon Syndrome

Travis L. Martin

American Imago, Volume 72, Number 1, Spring 2015, pp. 63-88 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

AMERICAN  
**IMAGO**

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND  
THE HUMAN SCIENCES  
VOLUME 72 • NUMBER 1 • Spring 2015

➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aim/summary/v072/72.1.martin.html>

## Phantom Weapon Syndrome

### Introduction

*I still remember the serial number inscribed on the side of the M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW) I carried during my second deployment: 102143. When I think of war, I feel it in my hands: roughly fifteen pounds, a weight that pulls on in my left shoulder blade as my body recalls carrying it on every mission I ever went on in Iraq's Al Anbar province. Mostly, I remember its feel: the cool of its steel barrel under the desert sun, the carrying strap cutting into my neck as I hiked the half-mile trek to the chow hall, the exhilaration of pulling back the charging handle and hearing the metal symphony of springs and levers working together at my command. Beyond remembrances are pangs and longings still with me eight years after taking off the uniform. I've seldom felt secure without it next to me when I sleep. The shotgun I keep in my house is a poor substitute for the weapon that kept me alive; no matter how close I put it to the bed, it's just not the same. It felt as if an appendage was ripped from my body when I turned it in at the armory at the end of the deployment. I do not feel whole. I suspect I never will (Fig. 1).*

In this essay I will isolate a symptom particular to those who have served in modern combat. In my experience as a veteran of the Iraq War, as well as in my work as editor-in-chief for the non-profit organization Military Experience and the Arts, I have repeatedly encountered a nostalgic pang, a longing for the rifle or primary weapon carried into battle. The veterans I work with in online support groups use words like “lost,” “helpless,” “empty,” or “naked” to describe this longing. Many express symptoms of paranoia and hypervigilance in relation to their missing weapons. One even compared it to “losing a stuffed animal that you slept with for a long time,” and two



Figure 1. SAW, by Jerad W. Alexander. Digital Photograph (2005).  
Courtesy Jerad W. Alexander.

others to a lost “battle buddy.” A few echo my own thoughts above and describe a feeling of losing “an extension” or “part of my hand that is missing.” When I ask other vets about their weapons, they all express some level of discomfort: “It’s like you’ve left a door unlocked or the oven on...but it’s every ten seconds for the rest of your life. I [was] discharged in 2005 and still look for it.” (Fig. 2) Despite the consistency of these responses—a number of which are underscored in literary and artistic examples below—I am aware of no detailed scholarship on this particular condition and I present what follows as an early contribution to its study. The essay explores the specific sense of object-loss that appears in soldiers who turn in their weapons at armories after having relied for a year or more on those weapons for their survival. I refer to this psychological phenomenon as “Phantom Weapon Syndrome.”

I chose the term—Phantom Weapon Syndrome—because of the condition’s striking similarity to the “phantom limbs” described by amputees. It is widely accepted that phantom limb pain “is a major cause of morbidity and has a profound impact on patients’ functioning and well-being. Phantom pain



Figure 2. *Bye My Darling*, by Giuseppe Pellicano. Steel and Aluminum (2012), 26 X 8 in. Courtesy Giuseppe Pellicano. I frequently receive submissions from authors and artists who explore relationships with their weapons. The creator of this work, Giuseppe Pellicano, had this to say in his description: “*Bye My Darling* is homage to the weapon I carried while in service. Surrounding the base of the sculpture were photographs of the sculpture’s cremation. Viewers were invited to take them. The piece was set afire as a symbol of bidding my weapon farewell. I will never be able to hold, aim, or fire it again, but the memories remain” (2013, p. 347).

is present in about 80% of amputees...[and it] occurs as early as within a week following amputation in 72% of patients” (Alviar, Hale, & Dungca, 2011, pp. 2–3). Future studies into Phantom Weapon Syndrome would likely find correlations between the number of sufferers, onset time, and co-morbid conditions associated with phantom limb pain, especially post-traumatic stress. Care providers do not discount the psychological suffering that occurs after an amputation. Nor should they discount the psychological impact of Phantom Weapon Syndrome. As more than two million veterans return from Iraq and Afghanistan, we need also to address Phantom Weapon Syndrome as a constituent part of the psychological problems that many will face.

Psychological approaches to phantom limb have already been established: Bradshaw et al. use an imagery-based intervention to create and maintain “a conscious, long-term mental image of the missing limb” (2010, p. 805). Bamford et al. use virtual reality therapy, creating a mirror box with patients to

reflect an existing limb on the “visual space occupied by their phantom limb” (2007, p. 1465). That phantom limb is, like PTSD, a psychological problem, suggests that similar treatments might be warranted for Phantom Weapon Syndrome. Shapiro et al. employ Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) because patients prescribed “nonpsychological treatments” find the results to be “unsatisfactory and transient, and in some cases not even better [than] the placebo control at long-term follow-up” (Shapiro, Schneider, Hofmann, & Rost, 2008, pp. 76–77). In addressing phantom limb, all of these clinical researchers recognize “an interaction of physical and psychological factors” when the analysand is processing the trauma of losing a limb (p. 79). The loss of the weapon carried into combat is also a form of amputation, one which results in symptoms tied to both the physical world as a weapon, and in the psychological realm as the mind’s conception of that weapon. What follows will address that mental construct, first as a transitional object in Basic Combat Training, and later as a fetish necessitated by combat.

I posit that this intersection between material loss and psychological suffering, one deeply involved in the process of post-war adjustment for military veterans, clearly plays itself out in the psychoanalytic debates regarding fetishes and transitional objects. It is not my intent to conflate these two phenomena. Rather, it is my belief that Basic Combat Training recreates certain elements of childhood development, specifically those involved with the adoption of a transitional object. Soldiers’ persecutory experiences in Basic Combat Training result in a pathological relationship with that transitional object—the weapon. This relationship is intentionally created by the military institution, resulting in soldiers who are predisposed towards fetishizing their weapons upon entering combat. Their internal conceptions of their weapons grow in a way that outpaces the one carried in the physical world. Through fetishization, the weapon is imbued with preternatural qualities, helping soldiers who might otherwise succumb to fear or flight overestimate their abilities, providing them with the confidence needed to endure the psychic experience of war. And then, once the

deployment is over, these sources of psychological safety and security are simply taken away.

Basic Combat Training invites a form of regression that Salman Akhtar defines as “temporal regression,” a form which “implies a return to an earlier mode of existing and relating; this could involve the emergence of libidinal pleasures and object-relations already renounced” (2009, p. 243). In training, it is this temporal regression that enables the military institution to reprogram young men and women as soldiers. Or, using Akhtar’s description of the process, we might say that Basic Combat Training invites “regression in the service of development.” Drawing upon the work of Peter Blos, Akhtar situates this form of regression within adolescence and even earlier as a form which re-inaugurates “infantile drive positions, early object relations, and old solutions to central conflicts” (p. 243). By stripping recruits of their identities, expecting them to walk, talk, and socialize in new ways, and thrusting them into a hyper-masculine environment where decisions equate to life and death, the military purposely invites regression in order to foster dependence on and loyalty to their institution. The transitional object is preordained; recruits are handed weapons at the exact moment in which training introduces the enemy, a threat to the institution they depend on. As mastery of the weapon assists recruits in transitioning from automatons to capable, effective soldiers, dependence fades into loyalty and a predisposition for fetishizing the weapon follows them into actual combat.

I will refer to the feeling of connectedness that recruits initially experience in relation to the military institution as an “illusion of oneness.” Basic Combat Training begins, most often, with scared teenagers exiting a bus to the screams and threats of drill instructors. It shocks the recruits. In their vulnerable state, often the first time they have left home, they begin to depend on the military for all of their basic needs. Food, water, shelter, and safety are traded for submission and obedience. In week four or five, just as the recruits begin to trust their all-providing institution, they are handed weapons. Then, an outside threat—the enemy—shatters the illusion that the military they have come to depend on is omnipotent. The

weapon, and the accompanying order to master it, suggests to the recruits that they are separate from the military institution—and that they must come to its defense.

D.W. Winnicott claims that infants gradually accept separation from the mother. When the all-loving, all-providing caretaker becomes a “not good-enough mother” (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p. 428) the infant experiences a loss; the safety and security provided by feeling “one” with the mother is taken away and the infant must learn self-reliance. The military institution ceases to be a “good-enough mother” at precisely the moment the enemy is introduced. This threat is necessarily undefined—faceless targets and silhouettes at the firing range—even after the marksmanship stages of training. In their regressed state, recruits adopt their weapons the way a child might a toy or a blanket. Mastery of that object helps them combat the anxieties inspired by their faceless enemy, transitioning them from a state of obedient dependence to one of loyal autonomy. Some measure of withdrawal is inherent with any object loss, as is a desire to reclaim the object. Soldiers, suffering from the object loss that occurs after the illusion of oneness is shattered, are taught to redirect those energies into training and effectiveness in their tasks and drills, especially mastery of the weapon. In effect, the military functions *because* its troops desire reclamation of the safety and security they felt in their initial weeks of training.

Winnicott claims that “an infant’s employment of a transitional object, the first not-me possession” is where we witness “both the child’s first use of symbol and the first experience of play” (1971/2005, p. 130). Symbolically, the rifle, which is easily adaptable to this purpose because of its phallic nature, becomes an extension of the recruit’s ability, restoring some confidence in the military institution’s power when it is mastered. If we were to juxtapose the development of the soldier alongside the development of the child, the forced devaluation of self experienced by recruits might appear in infants as the mother admonishing its narcissistic survival instincts. Winnicott reasons that pathological development in this “potential space” is due to “exploitation” (p. 139). Normal development, in which the transitional object is gradually decathected, can only take place

in what Winnicott calls a “not too persecutory” environment (p. 13). Basic Combat Training, be it in the form of screaming drill instructors or threats of impending death in combat, is the antithesis to that environment. So, Basic Combat Training lays the groundwork for future pathological object relations, a fetishization of the weapons that soldiers carry into battle.

In what follows, I will chart how the weapon functions as a transitional object in Basic Combat Training and as a fetish in combat. I will draw upon personal war experiences and literary examples to explain why and how these processes occur. In all cases, the weapon exists as a material possession as well as an internal object imbued with special qualities. At the unit armory, when veterans hand their material weapons over at the end of a deployment, Phantom Weapon Syndrome emerges as a symptom of an object loss, one that persists in the post-war mind long after the soldier comes home.

### **Training: The Weapon as Transitional Object**

*Ask any new soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine about his or her basic training experience. Invariably, you will hear stories about how their drill instructors were demented, deranged—the worst their respective branches of the military had to offer. They will say they were deprived of food, basic necessities, and contact with their loved ones. Likely, they will attribute their survival to God, luck, or the mere pity of their drill instructors. Ask them again a few years later. The story changes. These same troops talk about basic training as the easiest nine to twelve weeks of their lives. They say things like “all we had to do was what we were told” and “I would do it all again in a heartbeat.” Often, these veterans speak fondly of their drill instructors, crediting them for molding them into the hardened warfighters they later became.*

In *Achilles in Vietnam*, Jonathan Shay, a lifelong mental healthcare practitioner who worked with Vietnam veterans and later compared their stories to those found in works of Homer, articulates a “fiduciary assumption” made by recruits:

The vast and distant military and civilian structure that provides a modern soldier with his orders, arms, ammuni-

tion, food, water, information, training, and fire support is ultimately a moral structure, a *fiduciary*, a trustee holding the life and safety of that soldier. The need for an intact moral world increases with every added coil of a soldier's moral dependency on others. The vulnerability of the soldier's moral world has vastly increased in three millennia. (1994, p. 15)

Characterized by complete submission and obedience by recruits on one hand, and omnipotence and provision by the military institution on the other, Shay's "fiduciary assumption" reflects a regression to the object relations of infants and their mothers. Like infants, soldiers must rely solely upon the military to protect and provide for them once they arrive at their training stations. The anxiety produced by this submission is mitigated through the construction of an illusion, one in which soldiers are protected *by* and *from* the military so long as they are one *with* it.

In children, Freud attributed the creation, maintenance, and eventual repair of this sort of shared-reality to fetishism. He understood the fetishized object as "a substitute for the woman's (mother's) phallus" (1927, p. 91), arguing that it is an attempt to reconcile the incompatible notions of omnipotence and being subject to castration. Later analysts, like Winnicott, have delineated between fetishes and transitional objects. This delineation, I believe, holds in the case of the regressed state in Basic Combat Training. When soldiers are introduced to the concept of the enemy, one capable of killing them despite mother-military's best efforts, the soldier's omnipotent care provider is threatened with castration. At the firing range, recruits learn to treat their weapons in a way that resembles Winnicott's first "not me" object (1971/2005, p. 6). In infants, the adoption of the transitional object is not pathological. Instead, it aids in a gradual weaning—emotionally or physically—from the mother. Basic training purposely recreates these conditions.

Silhouettes, pop-up targets, and other faceless enemies used in training, in their lack of definition, suggest that mother-military will always be under threat. Like the marksmanship badge, the weapon exists as a physical object but also with a

symbolic meaning. Specifically, to recruits, the weapon exists internally as an illusion used by the mind to override the anxiety produced by the introduction of the enemy. Describing the conservative nature of instincts, Freud wrote that “the pressure of external disturbing forces” compels individuals away from “an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things” (1920, p. 36). Not only does the military produce similar pressure through complete psychological control of its recruits in the initial weeks of training, it marshals as well an external disturbing force—the enemy—to shock recruits out of their complete dependence. Alternating regression and disturbance in the service of development is an intentional, fundamental part of the soldier’s reprogramming.

Winnicott views transitional phenomena as “the intermediate area of experience, between the thumb and the teddy bear, between oral eroticism and the true object-relationship, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected, between primary unawareness of indebtedness and the acknowledgement of indebtedness” (1971/2005, pp. 2–3). For infants, the transitional object “stands for the breast, or the object of the first relationship” (p. 12). For recruits in basic training, the weapon occupies a role similar to the first “not-me” object, replacing the illusion of “omnipotent control” that I have called an illusion of oneness existing between recruits and *mother-military*. The illusion is replaced with “control by manipulation” when recruits enter marksmanship training out of necessity and on both symbolic and literal levels.

Symbolically, the weapon provides recruits with the ability to eliminate the “external disturbing force” threatening to castrate the mother. Soldiers learn not only to fire the weapon, but also how to bludgeon people with it, how to use its butt stock to soften their landings when falling into the prone firing position, and how to affix a bayonet and stab the enemy, often to the call “What makes the green grass grow?” and their response “Blood, blood, bright red blood!” The weapon provides recruits with what Winnicott would describe as a fundamental stage of reality testing, or an opportunity to develop self-reliance through defense of the mother. They disassemble it, scrub away dirt, and polish away carbon. In reality testing, and like infants, recruits are abusive of their transitional objects.

As I stepped off the bus after arriving at my training station at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri, a cast of screaming men and women welcomed me. Compared to me—an eighteen-year-old fresh out of high school—the drill sergeants were hulking, muscular, and threatening. I had heard my share of stories about physical punishment from veterans. I had seen Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. To me, the decision to walk the way I was told to walk, to talk the way I was told to talk, and to obey, without hesitation, any absurd or degrading order a drill sergeant screamed at me was an easy decision to make. In return, I was granted exclusion from physical punishment; I was fed and provided with a place to sleep. They even put money in my bank account each month. Following orders carried benefits. Disobeying them carried immeasurable amounts of punishment. I learned to shut down the parts of my brain that produced opinions and objections. Narcissistic holdovers like pride and self-respect became vestigial; memorization of "The Soldier's Creed" was a requirement:

I am an American Soldier.

I am a warrior and a member of a team.

I serve the people of the United States, and live the Army Values.

I will always place the mission first.

I will never accept defeat.

I will never quit.

I will never leave a fallen comrade.

I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills.

I always maintain my arms, my equipment and myself.

I am an expert and I am a professional.

I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy, the enemies of the United States of America in close combat.

I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life.

I am an American Soldier.

"I" appears frequently in the creed, but notions antithetical to self-preservation immediately follow it. "I" is "an expert" and a "professional," but that expertise lends itself only to the

institution, not to the self. The maintaining of “arms,” “equipment,” and “self” seems out of place alongside such lofty ideals. At the same time, it is important to note that the “self” is just another piece of “equipment,” a defender of mother-military, whose castration is forever threatened by “the enemies of the United States of America.” “The Soldier’s Creed” is drilled into the minds of recruits when those minds are most susceptible, even before the prefrontal cortex is fully developed. Unlike infants, recruits do not develop naturally. Following the immediate shock experienced after encountering their first drill instructors, soldiers regress to a state of infantile dependence and submission. Then, once they learn to depend on mother-military, they are handed weapons and told that she is under threat.

The assignment of a weapon and the order to master it weans soldiers from complete reliance upon mother-military. Just as Winnicott argues that the mother “affords the infant the opportunity for *the illusion* that her breast is part of the infant” (1971/2005, p. 15), drill instructors employ similar tactics in the initial weeks of training to get diverse groups of civilians to work in unison and to obey orders. With infants, a gradual *disillusionment* with the mother takes place, teaching them to conceive of the breast externally through the use of a transitional object. The transitional object is “*not an internal object* (which is a mental concept)—it is a possession” (p. 13). In presenting a need for recruits to master a weapon, the drill instructor, as a representative of mother-military, and in his or her vulnerability, ceases to be a “good-enough mother,” or one that is omnipotent and all-providing. Training’s shift in emphasis from dependence to mastery fosters in recruits a “growing ability to deal with...failure” (p. 14). Drill instructors cannot fire recruits’ weapons for them. Combat requires that soldiers think on their feet and adapt to the conditions that present themselves in life or death situations.

As stated earlier, seasoned veterans often refer to basic training as one of the easiest times of their lives. Yet, the scene I’ve painted of screaming drill instructors seems at odds with that notion. After the initial shock wears off, recruits learn to

obey without question, to respond with enthusiasm to degrading or demoralizing punishments, to push their bodies past perceived limits because the military tells them that they are capable of more. Soon enough, independent thought becomes a threat and the recruit works hard to eliminate it. But combat presents situations that require more than absolute obedience. Soldiers must not only apply the training they have received, they must adapt it to the terrain and circumstances of a warzone. The faceless enemy they are introduced to in basic training persists as an ever-looming threat. The only escape from that threat, even long after soldiers are discharged, would be to return to the initial weeks of training, when mother-military was still omnipotent. For the sufferer of PTSD who deals with paranoia, fear, and the expectation of a shortened life, the only point in his or her past that could possibly provide safety is the initiative stage of Basic Combat Training, the easiest few months of that veteran's memory.

As recruits attempt to reclaim the illusion of oneness, they unwittingly move from dependence to autonomy, "from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate" (Winnicott, 1971/2005, pp. 19–20). The transitional object facilitating this transformation is the weapon. Cadences and the famous "Rifleman's Creed" are good examples of this process's existence in indoctrination:

This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life. Without me my rifle is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless.

I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than the enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me. I will. My rifle and I know that what counts in war is not the rounds we fire, the noise of our burst, or the smoke we make. We know that it is the hits that count. We will hit.

My rifle is human, even as I am human, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strengths, its parts, its accessories, its sights and its barrel. I will keep my rifle clean and ready,

---

even as I am clean and ready. We will become part of each other.

Before God I swear this creed. My rifle and I are the defenders of my country. We are the masters of our enemy. We are the saviors of my life.

So be it, until victory is America's and there is no enemy.

In the creed above, written anonymously but memorized by every Marine in basic training, the story of mother-military and her new recruits unfolds. The weapon evolves from a non-descript, common item to one that the recruit must master in order to survive. As indoctrination continues, the rifle takes on more meanings: it shares a reality with the recruit, one in which both are under constant threat. Knowing its composition—"its strengths, its parts, its accessories, its sights and its barrel"—is analogous to defeating that threat. At the end, the once submissive and completely dependent recruit uses the weapon to master even the enemy. Together, the troop and his or her weapon, not the Marine Corps, become "saviors" who have the capacity to deliver "victory" to America in the form of an annihilated enemy.

As this process unfolds, the narrative of becoming a soldier, that story in which the new recruit attributes success in training to luck, magnanimity on the part of the drill instructor, or the benevolence of a higher power, shifts to a narrative in which this same soldier is *created* through the dedication and professionalism of the basic training cadre. Motivation, the desire to perform and please an institution that, if all goes well, hopes to send these young troops to faraway lands to fight, kill, and perhaps even die, is maintained by redirecting the energies associated with the desire to return to the illusion of oneness. When the enemy disrupts this illusion, and when recruits learn that they are not one with the institution, but liable for its protection, the weapon emerges as an object to help them make the transition into soldiers.

The weapon, like the transitional objects of infants, is "gradually decathected" (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p. 19) once training is complete and troops move to their first duty stations. In the garrison environment, barracks inspections, physical

fitness, and awards are equal to the weapon in proving one's worth to the military. Soldiers are weaned from their weapons like infants are weaned from the breast, but in a way that ensures a pathological relationship with the weapon once it is reencountered in combat. Basic Combat Training, by design, ensures that soldiers fetishize their weapons in combat. Mother-military is forever threatened, and recruits are forever training and fantasizing about coming to her rescue. This need to reclaim the illusion of oneness, coupled with the need to survive the psychic turmoil inherent in war, causes soldiers to take weapons from the real world and morph them into something more powerful in the mind.

### **War: The Weapon as Fetish**

*My first deployment to Iraq took place just after the invasion in 2003. Troops wore forest-green camouflage in desert terrain. As a transportation unit, we waited behind the "Combat Arms" soldiers at the end of the line for armored plating to put in our flak vests. We traversed roads pockmarked by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in vehicles with even less protection; some trucks didn't even have doors. Our communications equipment, left over from the Cold War, would stop working as soon as we left the wire. We went hours at a time without communicating with a friendly military base. At night, mortars rang out overhead like thunder in the spring. The 120 plus degree-heat was as real of a threat as the enemy.*

*In 2004, another unit tasked with completing similar missions refused until they were given armor and working equipment. We didn't know any better.*

*We gradually grew accustomed to the heat. We laughed at the irony of chalk-lines made on our olive-drab cots by human sweat. We got used to the sounds of mortars, preferring sleep to the midnight shuffle of waking up, donning full protective gear, and shambling to a nearby bunker. We grew numb even to the possibility of death, lulling ourselves into an illusion of safety by placing sandbags strategically in the floorboards of each truck, extra flak vests over the doors, and other prayers. We placed sodas in wet socks and hung them from our mirrors as we drove down the road to cool them. We were told to point*

*our rifles out of the windows of our vehicles at all times so as to scare off terrorists on the fence about attacking our convoys. In the winter, we tortured rats with homemade flame-throwers and atropine injectors to let off steam.*

*When we returned to Iraq nine months later the war had completely changed. In 2005 we escorted Iraqi and Jordanian truck drivers as they delivered supplies from base to base. Every truck was encased in thick metal armor. Our communications equipment was state of the art. We had devices called “Warlocks” that would, supposedly, cut off the radio signals needed to detonate IEDs. Our sleeping quarters were air-conditioned; we had running water in our bathrooms, hot chow, and a small post-exchange where we could buy toiletries and iPods.*

*Gone were the days of appearing aggressive. As lead gunner on the majority of my platoon’s convoys, I directed traffic, looked for dead animals with wires sticking out of them, called up reports about boxes, suspiciously parked cars, and other threats. My job was one of restraint. We were no longer an occupying force; we were nation builders, protectors, and targets. We waited on edge for the blast or boom that would allow us to act.*

*We could not fire our weapons before completing the “escalation of force” procedures: shout, wave glow sticks, fire a flare, shoot warning shots into the ground, kill. My friend Darrin accidentally shot a flare into a car and killed everyone inside. One night, I neglected to “kill” an Iraqi man who ignored my warning shots and calmly smoked a cigarette. Armor didn’t save our friend Kevin Jones from a roadside bomb.*

*We traded the heat and prayers of our first deployment for the cold of night and the “rules of war.” Firing a weapon could save a life, end it, or result in prison time. In any event, those were the decisions that still haunt so many of my friends. Oddly enough, we miss the power—the ability to make a difference—that came with those decisions, knowing at least on some level that it was an illusion all along.*

Basic Combat Training recreates mother-infant dynamics to ensure recruits’ obedience. Later, when mother-military is threatened, these same soldiers adopt weapons as transitional objects, mitigating the anxiety associated with that threat in a way that is similar to Winnicott’s transitional objects in the lives of infants. Unlike infants, recruits are not given a chance to engage in play with their weapons; its symbolism is preordained

as a tool used for fighting their faceless enemies. As a result, a pathological relationship between soldiers and their weapons will ensue. Soldiers fetishize the weapons they carry into war.

Jeffrey Prager also draws upon Winnicott, exploring intersubjectivity and changing definitions of trauma, arguing that the “not good-enough mother” often plays a role in “pathological social relations” (2011, p. 428). He continues, discussing how intersubjectivity—the “interaction between self or others” which informs “the major concepts” of psychoanalysis—relates directly to war and trauma:

The soldier caught in crossfire may later suffer from PTSD, but not because of the danger of war *per se*. Rather, the wounded or those with their life on the line suffer traumatically because the danger faced at the moment overwhelms any internal capacity to feel invulnerable... It is the abandonment of a sense of (irrational) security which was accompanied by an unconscious and abiding fantasy that an other, e.g. mother, was present to always protect oneself from harm. (p. 429)

Agreeing with Prager’s assertion that trauma “overwhelms any internal capacity to feel invulnerable,” I want to explore the root of that feeling. If my theory of psychological development in basic training holds, soldiers entering into war have already given up on the fantasy of mother-military as omnipotent protector. When faced with a fantastical enemy, soldiers cling to their weapons, just as they were taught, fetishizing them, imbuing them with qualities that will help them account for the unknown, protect against unseen threats, and elevate their abilities to a level capable of surviving war. Whereas Prager intuitively picks up on the regression to infant-mother relations, I want to take his analysis a step further, building upon this essay’s previous section to explain how fetishization of the weapon in war is the result of regression in Basic Combat Training.

Not long after my discharge in 2006, I enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course. The professor, using an insightful anecdote, made me think about the mental games I had played with myself as a machine gunner in Iraq:

---

Think about the simple act of driving to school or work. Every day, you get in a car—a hunk of metal that weighs thousands of pounds—and you go fifty or sixty miles per hour from point A to point B. As you drive, the only thing keeping you from crashing into another vehicle—going the same speed and with the same amount of weight—is a thin, yellow line painted on the pavement. That line can't protect you. But you fool yourself into believing it can—that the other drivers, people you know nothing about, will stay in their lane. It's all a fantasy. So, why do we believe it?

*Because I had to*, I thought to myself. He was right. And the more I thought about this illusion the more I realized how necessary it had been to delude myself before and during each mission. We were never safe. There was nothing I could have done to stop an IED or an ambush from killing every single person I was supposed to protect. We might have fought back. But if it had been our time, we would have died. I started looking at the whole of my military experience very differently.

Training is little more than a way for leaders to convince soldiers that they are capable of controlling their own fates. Without that illusion, they would refuse to go on missions. Kevlar vests, metal armor, automatic weapons, these things have surely saved a lot of lives. But I began to realize that I had given them much more credit than they were due. I had never been trained to use the M240 Bravo mounted to my gunner's hatch. I did not know if I was a good shot with it, if I would hit my target when the time came. Still, I had thoroughly convinced myself that I could hit anything. I felt the same way about my primary weapon, the SAW described at the beginning of this essay. I had scored near perfect with it on the firing range in Germany, but firing a weapon from a moving vehicle, in the dark, under threat, and while sleep deprived is a totally different experience. I had fetishized both of these weapons.

The weapon that exists as an internal object in combat is not the same as the one found in basic training. Transitional objects, as Phyllis Greenacre argues, “fade out...[and] graduate into becoming a favored toy which retains the desirable qualities, is played with for a time, and then is retired to the position

of a memento of things past” (1969, p. 148). As a transitional object, the weapon restores confidence and enables recruits to defeat an enemy who grows stronger in proportions limited only by the recruit’s imagination. Mastery of that weapon persists after training as an unconscious drive to restore the illusion of oneness—the safety and security of being one with the military institution—felt in the initial weeks of training. In combat, this drive serves soldiers well; there, the weapon must be used to defeat a *real* enemy.

Greenacre distinguishes between the fetish and the transitional object in a way that can help us better understand how the weapon in war functions differently than in training: “The transitional object appears in and belongs to infancy, and is generally relinquished when infancy merges into childhood. The fetish, on the other hand, is commonly adopted as a necessary prop or adjunct to insure adequate sexual performance in adult life” (1969, p. 144). In my reading of the psychological development of the soldier, infancy corresponds with training and war with adulthood. Greenacre further defines the fetish as being rooted in the “disturbances in infancy,” reinforcing the notion that soldiers entering into combat are predisposed to fetishize their weapons. She views the fetish as similar to “an amulet or magic object, as a symbolic object in religious rites, as a token in romantic love, and as a special property in children’s play” (p. 144). Combat, especially of the modern variety which consists heavily of unseen threats like Improvised Explosive Devices, car bombs, mortars, and other forms of death, requires that soldiers create a fantasy through which they can master the unknown. The canvas upon which this fantasy is painted is the weapon; more specifically, it is the soldier’s ability to master that weapon (Fig. 3).

The Iraq War was, as poet Brian Turner writes in “2000 Pounds,” one in which the lines between enemy and friend were constantly blurred: “Small children who will play with you, / old men with their talk, women who offer chai— / and any one of them / may dance over your body tomorrow” (2005, pp. 25–28). In my own experience, it was nearly impossible to distinguish between the Iraqis we were there to save and the Iraqis trying to kill us. Our lives were constantly under threat from unseen forces. This anxiety was amplified by the need

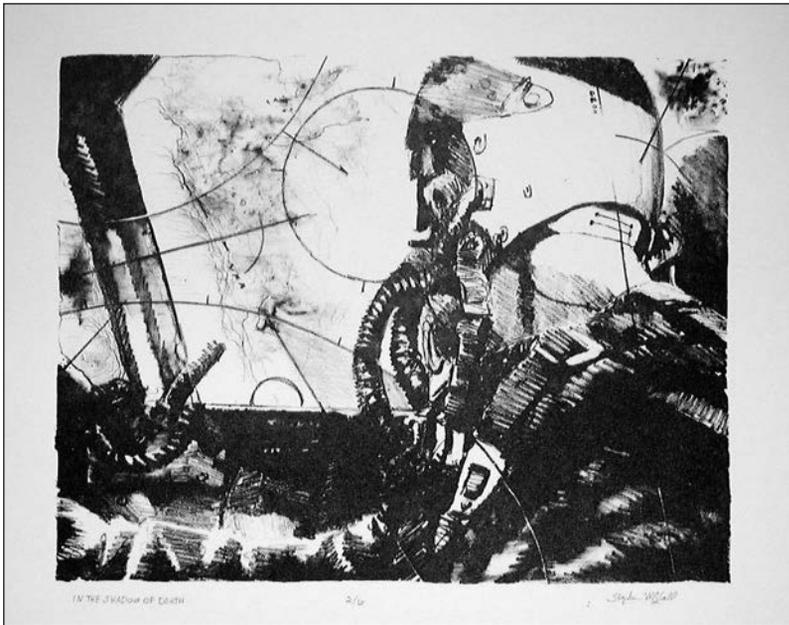


Figure 3. *In the Shadow of Death*, by Stephen K. McCall, 1985. Lithographic print on paper, 10 X 14 in. Courtesy Stephen K. McCall. It stands to reason that those military members whose occupations require closer interaction with devices other than rifles may appropriate other transitional objects or, later, fetishize them. This work, also submitted to one of Military Experience and the Arts's publications, contained the following description from artist Stephen K. McCall: "This black and white lithograph is an image of a pilot scanning the terrain. He has banked his aircraft starboard, peers over the rail, and begins his search. He is sensitive enough to the dynamics of his aircraft to ignore the instrument panel allowing him to focus on the patterns and details below. This image was created to relate the unique 'oneness' a man has with his machine and give reverence to our hero pilots" (2013, p. 249).

to adhere strictly to the rules of engagement. Regrettably, the concentration of American teenagers with automatic weapons in a confined space resulted, as it did in every war in the twentieth century, in senseless acts of violence against the citizens of an occupied nation. The rules that resulted from those actions imposed uniformly on those of us trying to make good decisions while also staying alive, only reinforced, however, the sense of being threatened from the outside while restrained from within. Our hands were tied. We simply waited and hoped that the first shot or explosion in any given ambush would not be the one that ended our lives (Fig. 4).

Our hope for survival precipitated another one that told us, if we were given the *chance* to fight, our weapons would perform adequately and keep us alive. In retrospect, these hopes were little more than illusions that functioned precisely as Greenacre describes them in one- to two-year-old children. She claims that raw materials, toys or other “special objects,” tend to “entertain some unusual or fantastic illusion...which widens [the infant’s] area of assured investigative conquest even farther” (1970, p. 455). Our toys were our weapons. They allowed us to investigate the possibility of life after war and its traumas. In time, we would find out if we would live, die, or have the chance to fight back. Weapons, and the magical qualities we invested in them, helped us see options other than death.

The fetish, according to Greenacre, “offers a cushion against distress...combin[ing] magical materialization and obliteration, a figurative bringing to life or killing” (1969, pp. 161–62). Along with staying alive, soldiers formulate the even more fantastical illusion that they will use their weapons honorably if given the chance. The weapon becomes a “security prop,” an “amulet or magic object, as a symbolic object in religious rites, as a token in romantic love, and as a special property in children’s play” (p. 144). It is no wonder troops commonly give their weapons the names of lovers; as security props, and like amulets, these weapons supplement soldiers placed in the chaos of war with another personality, one untainted by war and capable of making tough moral decisions. Unlike the transitional object, “[t]he fetish, on the other hand, contains congealed anger, born of castration panic” (p. 162). If they give in to that anger, soldiers will become ostracized from the military family, imprisoned, their weapons taken away: castration.

The weapon, then, must become infallible, capable of seeing through the fog of war, making the right decision, and saving lives. It must, out of necessity, possess all of those abilities that the soldier lacks. To match an unpredictably dangerous enemy, that faceless silhouette introduced to recruits in basic training, soldiers must fashion weapons in their minds that become stronger and more effective with each passing day. As the paranoia and constant threat of death and castration mounts, the weapon crafted internally in the soldier’s mind must keep



Figure 4. 240-Bravo Machine Gun. This picture was taken as I sat and waited in my gunner's hatch while on a mission in 2005. Note that there are flares and glow sticks closer to my position than the weapon itself.

pace. The weapon creates safety, ensures security, performing oppositely in the psychic realm than it does in the real world, as a mere instrument of death.

At the end of our deployment, we boarded a plane and flew back to our duty station in Germany. Our weapons were locked away in a secure armory, and we were expected to go about our lives as if nothing ever happened. We saw our weapons occasionally—at the firing range, in cleaning rituals, or at certain ceremonies. We were allowed to visit with the weapons we carried in battle. But the situation was always staged: a hallway with a box of cleaning tools, marching in formation, or other situations in which our movements were restricted. As Greenacre explains, “the fetishist becomes addicted to the use of his prop” (1969, p. 150). We checked for weapons that were no longer there. We felt them still strapped to our shoulders and at our fingertips. We felt naked in our civilian clothes as well as our uniforms. This feeling, which I call Phantom Weapon Syndrome, is a form of withdrawal.

Kevin Powers's novel, *The Yellow Birds*, describes a scenario eerily similar to the one from my own life. His protagonist, Private Bartle, finds himself in Germany after his deployment to Iraq. Though restricted to base for acclimation, Bartle decides to go AWOL, visiting a nearby city. In his cab ride, he describes a panic attack:

As I looked out onto the trees that edged the road, my muscles tensed and I began to sweat. I knew where I was: a road in Germany, AWOL, waiting for the flight back to the States. But my body did not: a road, the edge of it, and another day. My fingers closed around a rifle that was not there. I told them the rifle was not supposed to be there, but my fingers would not listen, and they kept closing around the space where my rifle was supposed to be and I continued to sweat and my heart was beating much faster than I thought reasonable. (2012, pp. 53–54)

Literary, artistic, and colloquial examples of Phantom Weapon Syndrome are abundant. Powers's example clearly links the panic attack to the missing weapon. The symptoms of PTSD are present, but they are directly linked to pangs and longings for a missing weapon. Veterans have described Phantom Weapon Syndrome. Now it is up to us, as healers and students of the mind, to address it.

### Postscript: A Failed Attempt at Repatriation

*The man fires a rifle for many years, and he goes to war, and afterward he turns the rifle in at the armory and believes he's finished with the rifle. But no matter what else he might do with his hands—love a woman, build a house, change his son's diaper—his hands remember the rifle and the power the rifle proffered. The cold weight, the buttstock in the shoulder, the sexy slope and fall of the trigger guard.*

*Jarhead* [Gulf War memoir of Anthony Swofford], p. 123

I conceived of this article in a class entitled “The Psychoanalytic Subject” taught by Dr. Virginia Blum at the University

of Kentucky in spring 2013. In the summer that followed, I gave in to the urge I had had for over seven years and purchased a civilian facsimile of the weapon I had carried on my 2003 deployment—the politically charged AR-15. I had already concluded, logically in the initial draft of this paper, that the weapon I carried in my mind and the weapon I had carried in Iraq were two separate things. But this conclusion did little to assuage the pangs of that object loss. In truth, I had three fetishized weapons: the M-16 from my first deployment (below), the M-240 Bravo that had been mounted to my gunner's hatch (see Fig. 4), and the fully automatic SAW (see Fig. 1) from my second deployment. Civilians cannot buy fully automatic weapons, so I opted for the 2003 fetish. I scoured the Internet for months looking for just the right model. I did not want all the fancy contraptions and accessories that had come out since I carried the weapon in 2003—a short barrel, a bipod, or laser sight. I wanted a weapon considered by many as inferior; I wanted the one I carried in my first deployment. I found it in an online gun store. The owner, a retired politician, allowed me to come to his rural farm and test it out before the purchase. It felt good. But it also felt different (Fig. 5).

I was thinking of this paper and processing the theories I've outlined here when I made my purchase. The part of me still coping with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—who is convinced he will die prematurely, who perceives threats where there are none, who is still waiting in his gunner's hatch for the sound of a blast—thought that the purchase would alleviate many of the anxieties he still carries with him years after leaving Iraq. I shift to the third person here because I am capable. The type of intellectualization I have exercised in this essay seems to be my saving grace. But I know that there are many who have not been afforded the opportunity to develop those skills. They return to their fetishes unknowingly. They spend great sums of money on inadequate substitutes, stockpiling guns and ammunition. They hope the pangs will pass. But then they do not.

Conceiving of and mapping out Phantom Weapon Syndrome did not result in being cured of it. A few weeks after buying the AR-15, I took it to my grandfather's farm in southern Kentucky to align the sights and to familiarize myself with



Figure 5. Practice firing my AR-15 on my grandfather's farm in southern Kentucky in summer 2013.

it. The first thing I noticed was that the weight was off—a bit heavier. As I took turns firing it with my girlfriend, I quickly grew irritated with the heat and insects. I eventually gave up and put it back in its case. My girlfriend produced a closer shot group than I did. But that is not what bothered me. It just was not the same. I did not feel safer. I did not feel whole. And I was out nearly \$1500.

Currently, the rifle sits idly in my safe and holds little or no personal significance in my day-to-day life. However, the purchase did confirm what I had suspected in the initial stages of this research: What I miss is an internal construct, the ideal of a weapon that could keep me safe in combat, a construct like the one I used as an object to transition from recruit to soldier in basic training. I do not miss a physical possession. Even if I could somehow hunt down the weapon I carried with

me and convince the military to relinquish it, it would not be the same. What I lost at that armory in 2005 was an illusion. The loss of that imaginary object left me powerless to control the threats that have persisted in my psyche. So the project of reclaiming my fetish may have been doomed from the start. I hope, however, that what I have learned will encourage a continued conversation on the role of the weapon in post-war adjustment and re-assimilation. Specifically, I hope that future studies on Phantom Weapon Syndrome isolate its symptoms as they relate to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Likely, it will take much more than helping veterans understand *why* it is they reach for phantom weapons in the middle of the night to cure them. As with all mental illnesses, we can only ascribe the name “Phantom Weapon Syndrome” to a cluster of symptoms. I suspect it is just one part of the puzzle that is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. We have yet to cure that condition. But we have also never considered the crucial role of the weapon in its persistence. I suspect, if an analyst or scholar can find a way to replace the sensation of missing weight in a soldier’s hands when thinking of the weapon he or she carried into battle, it will be a step towards making the rest of us feel safe and secure again.

## References

- Akhtar, S. (2009). *Comprehensive dictionary of psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books.
- Alexander, J.W. (2013). SAW. *The Journal of Military Experience*, 3, 238.
- Alviar, M.J.M., Hale, T., & Dungca, M. (2011). Pharmacologic interventions for treating phantom limb pain. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, 2(12).
- Anonymous. The rifleman’s creed. *USMCPress.com*.
- Bamford, C., Murray, C.D., Pettifer, S., Howard, T., Patchick, E.L., Caillette, F., & Kulkarni, J. (2007). The treatment of phantom limb pain using immersive virtual reality: Three case studies. *Disability & Rehabilitation*, 29(18), 1465–1469.
- Bradshaw, J.L., Giummarra, M.J., Georgiou-Karistianis, N., Nicholls, M.E.R., Gibson, S.J., & Chou, M. (2010). Corporeal awareness and proprioceptive sense of the phantom. *British Journal of Psychology*, 101(4), 791–808.
- Freud, S. (1920). Beyond the pleasure principle. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 18, pp. 1–64). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1927). Fetishism. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 21, pp. 147–158). London: Hogarth Press.
- Greenacre, P. (1969). The fetish and the transitional object. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 24, 144–164.
- Greenacre, P. (1970). The transitional object and the fetish with special reference to the role of illusion. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 51, 447–456.
- McCall, S.K. (2013). In the shadow of death. *The Journal of Military Experience*, 3, 249.
- Pellicano, G. (2013). Bye my darling. *The Journal of Military Experience*, 3, 347.

- Powers, K. (2012). *The yellow birds*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Prager, J. (2011). Danger and deformation: A social theory of trauma, part 1. *American Imago*, 68(3), 425–448.
- Shapiro, F., Schneider, J., Hofmann, A., & Rost, C. (2008). EMDR in the treatment of chronic phantom limb pain. *Pain Medicine*, 9(1), 76–82.
- Shay, J. (1994). *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*. New York: Scribner.
- Swofford, A. (2003). *Jarhead*. New York: Scribner.
- Turner, B. (2005). *Here, bullet*. Farmington: Alice James.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1971/2005). *Playing and reality*. New York: Routledge.