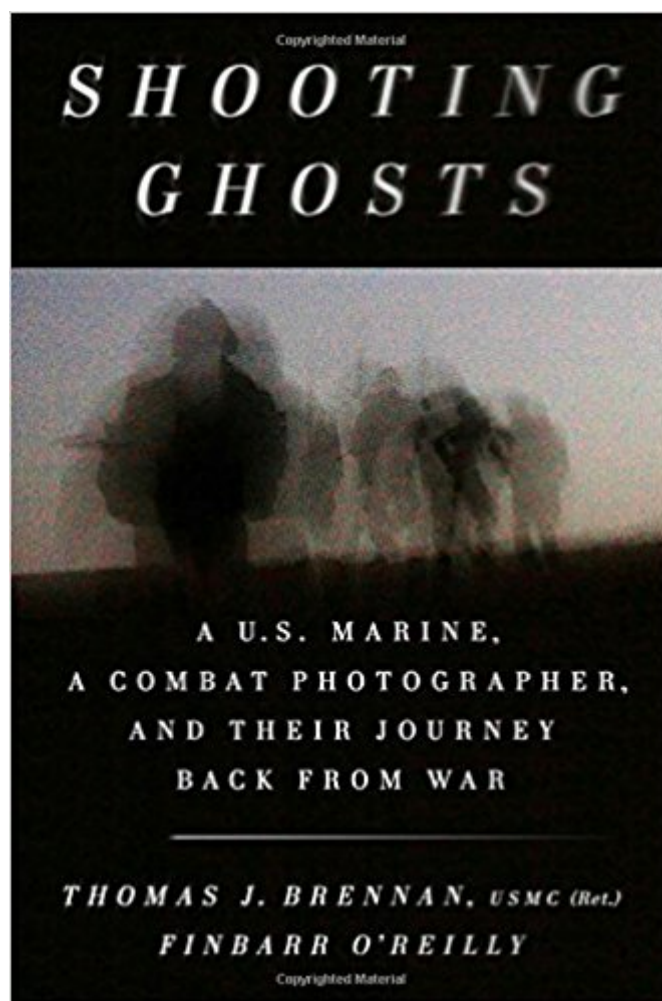


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Shooting Ghosts: A U.S. Marine, A Combat Photographer, And Their Journey Back From War



Synopsis

"A majestic book." --Bessel van der Kolk, MD, author of *The Body Keeps the Score* A unique joint memoir by a U.S. Marine and a conflict photographer whose unlikely friendship helped both heal their war-wounded bodies and souls War tears people apart, but it can also bring them together. Through the unpredictability of war and its aftermath, a decorated Marine sergeant and a world-trotting war photographer became friends, their bond forged as they patrolled together through the dusty alleyways of Helmand province and camped side by side in the desert. It deepened after Sergeant T. J. Brennan was injured during a Taliban ambush, and both returned home. Brennan began to suffer from the effects of his injury and from the fallout of his tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. But war correspondents experience similar rates of posttraumatic stress as combat veterans. The causes can be different, but guilt plays a prominent role in both. For Brennan, it's the things he's done, or didn't do, that haunt him. Finbarr O'Reilly's conscience is nagged by the task of photographing people at their most vulnerable while being able to do little to help, and his survival guilt as colleagues die on the job. Their friendship offered them both a shot at redemption. As we enter the fifteenth year of continuous war, it is increasingly urgent not just to document the experiences of the battlefield but also to probe the reverberations that last long after combatants and civilians have returned home, and to understand the many faces trauma takes. *Shooting Ghosts* looks at the horrors of war directly, but then turns to a journey that draws on our growing understanding of what recovery takes. Their story, told in alternating first-person narratives, is about the things they saw and did, the ways they have been affected, and how they have navigated the psychological aftershocks of war and wrestled with reforming their own identities and moral centers. While war never really ends for those who've lived through it, this book charts the ways two survivors have found to calm the ghosts and reclaim a measure of peace.

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Customer Reviews

Praise for Shooting Ghosts "A courageous breaking of the code of silence to seek mental health for veterans and the war-scarred." —Kirkus Reviews Brennan and O'Reilly strip away any misplaced notions of glamour, bravery, and stoicism to craft an affecting memoir of a deep friendship. —Publisher's Weekly, (starred review) "A majestic book that describes the parallel tracks of a warrior and a photo journalist from different continents, who meet in the hell of Afghanistan and then, separately and together, find their tortuous journeys home. Beautifully written, reminiscent of All Quiet on the Western Front, and What It Is Like to Go to War, Shooting Ghosts ultimately is a hopeful book that shows that recovery always involves a pilgrimage of rediscovering community and reconnection." —Bessel van der Kolk, MD, author of The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma "An extraordinarily honest and courageous book that takes the reader on a journey through the darkest days of despair, then along the path to rediscovering purpose in life. It reveals what it means to be human, and is a testament to the healing powers of friendship." —Emma Sky, senior fellow, Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, Yale University, and author of The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq "Peering into the hellish abyss of trauma-induced madness, a marine and the photojournalist sent to photograph him tell how their lives and experiences intertwined on parallel paths of violence, despair, and, ultimately, reinvention. While the two men had different missions and experiences, their stories mingled, compared, and contrasted in Shooting Ghosts make for a remarkable and memorable book." —Santiago Lyon, former vice president of photography at the Associated Press, winner of two World Press Photo prizes and the Bayeux-Calvados Award for War Correspondents "Shooting Ghosts should be mandatory reading for all of us families and loved ones who are —œgrateful for the service —œ of our armed forces. It perfectly captures the aching dissonance veterans feel when they return to a home front they have longed for, but where no one can see their wounds. It's also a sobering reminder that while war correspondents don't carry weapons, they bear witness to the same traumatic events of war." —Lee Woodruff, Author of the #1 New

York Times Bestseller In an Instant: A Family's Journey of Love and Healing

Thomas James Brennan, recipient of the Purple Heart, was a sergeant in the Marine Corps until medically retired in 2012. He served in Iraq during the battle of Fallujah and was a squad leader in Afghanistan's Helmand province with the First Battalion, Eighth Marines. Since 2012, he has been a regular contributor to The New York Times At War blog. Brennan was the military affairs reporter at the Jacksonville Daily News from early 2013 through mid-2014. He has a master's degree in journalism from Columbia, and is the founder of TheWarHorse.org, a nonprofit online newsroom dedicated to chronicling the effects of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Finbarr O'Reilly is an internationally acclaimed photographer who has spent more than a decade working in Africa and the Middle East and who has won the World Press Photo of the Year, the highest individual honor in news photography. He was profiled in the documentary film *Under Fire: Journalists in Combat* (Peabody Award winner, Oscar finalist) and has held fellowships at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and the MacDowell Colony. He was a Reuters senior photographer for Israel and the Palestinian Territories in 2014.

Shooting Ghosts is powerful, authentic and honest. My sense is that neither TJ nor Finbarr left anything out. Readers will get an insight into what trauma and guilt does to people. How it feels to lose comrades and colleagues on the battlefield. How moral injury dents the soul and makes suicide seem the only escape. It is also about an unlikely friendship. TJ and Finbarr are the quintessential odd couple, who together try to find meaning from what they did: one a Marine, the other a photographer. When TJ and Finbarr meet in Afghanistan's Helmand province in October 2010, Finbarr is at the height of his career. An internationally renowned photojournalist, Finbarr won the premier prize in the 2006 World Press Photo contest. TJ is a relatively low-ranking Marine sergeant responsible for 15 men and an outpost called OP Kunjak deep in Taliban territory. Toward the end of the book, Finbarr is without a job. Nowhere is home. He is depressed and directionless. Indeed, Finbarr dedicates *Shooting Ghosts* to his mother, saying "I promise to get a real job again one day." TJ on the other hand has made a new career as a journalist (yes, that's not a typo). I cheered TJ on as he worked tirelessly to make the transition from warrior to writing about military issues despite struggling with PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI). He eventually founded The War Horse, a critically acclaimed website that says it's the home for "responsible reporting on and conversation about war." Earlier this year, TJ broke the Marines

United nude photo-sharing story, the biggest scandal to rock the U.S. military in a decade. Given this unique collaboration, I was curious to see how the book flowed. It moves from Finbarr to TJ and back again. At times, I was so engrossed in one chapter that I would momentarily be annoyed when authorship changed. But they pulled it off. The early chapters show how Finbarr and TJ get to know each other at OP Kunjak. Finbarr is embedded with TJ's unit, much to the Marine's irritation. But a bond soon grows. Finbarr is there when TJ is nearly killed by a rocket propelled grenade during a patrol. He photographs TJ wounded while other Marines help their squad leader. It's a moment that will forever tie them together. In the prologue, Finbarr writes that guilt is a major issue for soldiers and war correspondents. "For TJ, it's the things he's done, or didn't do, that haunt him. My own conscience is nagged by the fact that I'm paid to photograph people at their most vulnerable while I'm able to do little to help." Finbarr is describing moral injury, a term very few people have heard of but which is getting increasing attention inside the U.S. military. Moral injury is the wound to a person's conscience from something they did, witnessed or failed to prevent that transgresses personal moral and ethical values. It damages one's moral compass, one's soul. There is no consensus among experts on whether moral injury is a sub-set of PTSD or a distinct condition. But there appears to be agreement that moral injury and PTSD can co-exist and that it's possible to have one, and not the other. Finbarr writes about TJ's moral injury. I won't reveal what haunts TJ, suffice to say it's the stuff of nightmares. Although Finbarr doesn't explicitly say it, I suspect he is suffering moral injury too. As far back as 2007, Finbarr recognised what his work was doing to his soul. He'd been sent to Cameroon to cover the aftermath of a plane crash that killed 114 passengers and crew. Leaning against a tree near a fetid swamp where the plane came down, Finbarr realises he's standing on a disintegrating corpse. "It wasn't the grisly scene (of the crash) that bothered me so much. What affected me was the uncertainty about my role. I just felt like a parasite. It was, perhaps a crack into which later traumas would become wedged," he wrote. Finbarr also mourns friends and colleagues. In April 2011, celebrated war photographers Chris Hondros and Tim Hetherington were killed in a mortar blast in Libya. Finbarr had been there a few weeks before covering the country's civil war. The same month Tim and Chris are killed, TJ arrives home in North Carolina. He had recovered enough from the RPG explosion to finish his

deployment. But he soon goes downhill. Frustrated with daily life, he writes how he yearns for silence. He has nightmares. There are gaps in his memory because of his TBI.

He's enveloped in emotional numbness that his wife Mel and three-year-old daughter Maddie don't understand. He yells obscenities at Mel. In July 2011, TJ tells Mel he wants to buy a shotgun to kill himself. He is diagnosed with PTSD. In 2012, doctors find a golf-ball size area of damaged matter in TJ's brain in the right frontal lobe, the area that affects mood, balance, memory, speech and behaviour. Later that year, TJ writes a note to Mel: "To the woman I love with my whole heart and soul: You are finally free of the terror I have caused in your life." TJ takes an overdose of prescription medication. He survives. Deemed unfit for military service by the Marine Corps, TJ works on becoming a journalist so he can still serve his Marines. Finbarr guides TJ in this new career, editing some of his early work and encouraging him. TJ interviews veterans. He focuses on how they cope with the transition to post-war life. They tell him things they have never told their families. When budget cuts force a furlough of military mental health workers, TJ's reports make it all the way to the U.S. secretary of defense. TJ has a new mission. "Sharing stories seems to make the veterans feel better. In order to move on with my life, I realise I have to confront my own dark history – the rage, the violence, the killing – and come to terms with the things I've done," TJ writes. As TJ is finding purpose again, Reuters tells Finbarr in late 2014 that his job as senior photographer for Israel and the Palestinian Territories has been eliminated in a round of cost-cutting. A few months later, emotionally burned out, lonely and feeling like his career had come crashing to an end, Finbarr wonders whether life is still worthwhile. He now knows how TJ felt. Finbarr goes to live with his mother in Ireland for a while. There, his transition to life after war begins. Finbarr and TJ work on their book. TJ has shown Finbarr that writing about personal trauma can be cathartic, that it can help others. "We both grapple with our less-than-heroic – but very human – behaviour in the face of fear, regret and confusion. Our book is about the things we have seen and done, the ways we have been affected, and how we have navigated the psychological aftershocks of war. It's the latter part of the journey that matters most," Finbarr writes. (Full disclosure. I have never met Finbarr. We struck up a virtual friendship late last year and have exchanged many emails since. I have never spoken to TJ)

This is a powerful and memorable book about two young men, a photographer and a U.S. Marine, who went to war under very different circumstances but forged close bonds through their shared

experience of war's horrors and their resilient rebuilding of their lives and careers. Highly recommended.

Thomas Brennan and Finbarr O'Reilly offer a compelling and illuminating first-person account of an important consequence of modern combat which is still not fully understood or, in some cases, even recognized. Brennan, a decorated U.S. Marine, and O'Reilly, an award-winning Canadian photojournalist give an interlaced, autobiographical account of their wildly disparate but ultimately intertwined roles in the wars of the 21st century. Their paths cross beginning in October 2010, when Finbarr is embedded with a Marine combat unit under Brennan's command. This quickly leads to the shared experience which anchors the book, a brief November 2010 firefight in Kunjak, Afghanistan, where Brennan suffers a career-ending traumatic brain injury due to the close-range explosion of a rocket-propelled grenade. O'Reilly's photographs of the aftermath provide Brennan with a visual record of an event which, due to the severity of the blast, he has no memory of. At the highest level, this book offers a dissection of the physical, intellectual and emotional trauma which can result from injuries or experiences that have left no obvious, outwardly-visible physical signs. In the case of Brennan, although his physical appearance is unchanged, brain scans reveal damage to a significant "golf ball-sized" area of his brain. O'Reilly, although physically unharmed in any respect by the Kunjak firefight, is apparently already suffering from the mental impact of a career spent covering some of the world's most disheartening stories, often at significant personal risk. Although committed to the idea that it is his responsibility to provide, through his lens, an accurate visual record of important stories which would otherwise be inaccessible to virtually all of the world's population, O'Reilly feels that he is becoming numb to the trauma he witnesses, and he fears that the world is too. The book draws on the dichotomy between the way the military and private industry handle mental health issues. In the case of Brennan, his TBI and his ultimate decision to request treatment for its effects, leads very quickly to the end of his Marine career. O'Reilly's employer at the time, the global news organization Reuters, offers Finbarr both better quality of care and a far more employee-friendly path. As this is, at its core and indeed stated on its cover, a story about a return from war, the book has a much sharper focus on Brennan than O'Reilly. However, O'Reilly's presence in the narrative proves an extremely useful foil. His broader experience in global conflict provides necessary context and, of course, his photographs and memory of the central firefight are crucial to the story. That being said, the compelling story within the story is clearly Brennan's fall and redemption. Following the Marine Corps' decision to medically retire Brennan, he finds himself facing the lingering mental and physical effects of his TBI combined with a profound loss of purpose.

He contemplates and ultimately attempts suicide, changing his mind only after the pills he intended to have end his life have been already swallowed. With the help of his family and O'Reilly he refocuses his efforts on his recovery, obtains mental health care at a higher level and develops a new career as an award-winning journalist (he is a frequent contributor to The New York Times, is the founder and leader of non-profit investigative journalism website The War Horse and co-author of this book). My takeaway from reading this book, in addition to a better understanding of the specific stories that O'Reilly and Brennan have to tell, is an awareness of the residual damage from three decades of desert wars. Brennan's Marine record clearly identifies him as one of the smartest and most organized individuals at his level in the Corps. Even drawing on those qualities, and with the solid support of his family, friends and non-military professional associates, it has been a monumental struggle for him to recover from the damage done to him by multiple concussions suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most of the work he did to facilitate his recovery was done outside the Veterans' Administration process. Clearly, our veterans deserve a better system.

As a Canadian Photojournalist have always used Mr Finbarr O'Reilly as a role model and moral compass. His bravery covering War was an inspiration but the true power of Shooting Ghosts will be allowing warriors of all kinds to seek mental health help. When I was younger Conflict Photography seemed a noble calling_ but that was shattered _after watching Documentary UNDER FIRE Journalist in Combat. O'Reilly showed me the anguish faced by Photogs surrounded by horrific events such as the violent death of a child. It made me cry like a baby and examine my own battles with depression. Thomas Brennan should get a medal for opening himself before the World. If only one person seeks help and is saved it will be all worthwhile.

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