

Frozen and Abandoned: Superveterans, Veterans, and Bringing Them Home

by Jason Yee

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The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) released a report in 2014 that revealed "an average of 20 Veterans died by suicide each day, [and] Veterans accounted for 18 percent [of the U.S.'s suicide deaths while constituting only] 8.5 percent of the U.S. adult population" (*Suicide*). According to the report, between 2001 and 2014, substance abuse among veterans who used services from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) rose from 27% to 41%, and, over the same period, cases of diagnosed depression rose from 14% to 23% (*Suicide*). The VHA makes mental health treatment available for both active duty and discharged veterans, but its woeful inadequacy appears in the fact that "[among the daily suicides], six of the twenty were users of VHA services" (*Suicide*). American veterans, both past and present, are affected heavily by the horrors and stressors of war and occupation, and those burdened by the emotional scars of service can easily find themselves facing isolation and ostracism due to the outward symptoms of that burden.

One approach to understanding the thought processes of returning veterans is to look at the myth and storytelling that has come out of our wars, and how those myths amplify and emphasize the realities of our nation's returnees. Nor-

man Austin, professor emeritus of classics at the University of Arizona, writes that "mythology is a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision... of a people or culture" (2). In American comic books, the stories of superheroes – fictional men and women who, according to Stan Lee, Marvel's legendary comics writer and editor-in-chief, "have the inner qualities of courage, integrity, honesty, and compassion" – give us a distinct American-mythos-laden spyglass to see into the values that we hold dear (Lee). Superveterans, superheroes who are either actively in the military or have previously served, particularly magnify our society's view on the mentality, morality, and expectations of our nation's veterans. Three superveterans in particular, Captain America, Eugene "Flash" Thompson as Venom, and The Punisher, shed light on a trio of key themes in real veterans' emotional coping mechanisms. Captain America is, by appearance, an emotionally ironclad warfighter leveraging his duties as a perpetual combatant as an excuse to eschew his past traumas instead of confronting them (*Captain America* #110). The Punisher is a veteran whose moral fiber was so shaken during his service that he becomes a slave to violence and copes with his trauma by shedding his humanity (*Punisher Born*). Eugene Thompson, a character originally introduced in 1962 as the antagonistic high school jock who bullied Peter Parker, also known as Spider-Man (*Amazing Fantasy*), is a medically discharged veteran who reaches out to friends and family to help relieve him of the burden of his trauma, and who only volunteers for superheroic service after making a full mental recovery (*Amazing Spiderman* #622). With these three superveteran models in mind, I make two asser-

tions: first, that Eugene “Flash” Thompson is the best positive superhero role model for American veterans reintegrating into society; and second, that for the sake of American veterans returning from their duty with trauma, we must fully embrace and use the model he provides to change our society’s outlook on how we treat our war-wounded. His model acts in opposition to those provided by Captain America, the perpetual soldier steering himself towards martyrdom in an effort to outrun his past, and by The Punisher, the left-for-dead survivor of the Vietnam War turned psychopathic vigilante who serves as a biting commentary about our past treatment of wounded veterans but nevertheless fails to provide a solution to the problems.

Joe Simon and Jack Kirby created Captain America (known as Steve Rogers prior to his superhero transformation) as the ideal superhero to represent American soldiers fighting against the Nazi Third Reich in Europe during World War II, and his first appearance in March 1941 was a drop of pro-interventionist media in a country led by isolationist doctrine (*Captain America* #1). Rick Remender, the writer of the *Captain America* comics series released in 2014, claimed in a full-page reader response that Captain America is “a patriotic soldier, directed by a personal ethical compass, belief in the American dream and faith in his fellow man... He’s the person you wish you were... [and he] will no doubt spend his entire life protecting people” (*Captain America* Vol. 1). Remender’s revision of Captain America keeps the superhero as an idealized, all-American role model for patriots, but Captain America as a whole, from his inception to his current narrative standing, sets a potentially fatal model for veterans. In *Avengers* #56, writer Roy

Thomas fleshes out the character’s trauma, brought on by failing to save his sidekick, Bucky, from dying in the line of duty. Lee, Marvel’s editor-in-chief, has maintained this trauma as a cornerstone of Captain America’s character for decades, but Captain America never actually confronts it. He suffers frequent performance-inhibiting flashbacks, but his writers regularly use the immediate crisis of each comic issue to drown out any introspection or attempt to deal with his grief. Living with trauma, but never confronting it, and always reburying it when it surfaces, is a dangerous decision for real veterans that no role model should encourage to the war-wounded.

Captain America’s writers clearly had good intentions in mind in encouraging wounded veterans to overcome their traumas, but they have used the character and his sidekick in a way that urges these wounded men and women to just “get over it.” Stan Lee set the precedent for writers attempting to dodge Captain America’s traumatic hang-ups with the egregious “get over it” moment that can be seen in *Captain America* #128, in which Captain America buys a motorcycle—despite on the same page claiming to avoid motorcycles because they remind him of Bucky riding in his sidecar—and then moves on to fight the Satan’s Angels biker gang to completely cure himself of his motorcycle avoidance. This message was Lee’s attempt to address the emotionally shattered men returning home from the Vietnam War in 1970—a time when post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was not yet even recognized—and was a step forward in American mythos’s ability to address war trauma despite its ham-handedness in execution. Ed Brubaker’s attempt to address PTSD through Captain

America three and a half decades later in 2005 was far worse than Lee's, however, in his cheap retconning of Bucky's death in *Captain America Vol. 5* by transforming him into The Winter Soldier—a move implying that emotional wounds can simply be forgotten or painlessly removed via convenient narration. Veterans might easily view this as a vile rebuke to just "get over it" regarding their grief over lost friends and companions. The "get over it" message that Brubaker reproduced in 2005 should have remained a relic of attempted progress instead of being revisited and reinforced in modern times, because this message has potentially fatal consequences for the veterans who attempt to imitate the model set forth by Captain America.

Combat veterans set aside introspection and mental healing during war time for the sake of performance, but ignoring trauma is a temporary patch—one that can fester if left to persist into peace-time—to help them survive the violence of war that they, obligated by duty, cannot abandon. *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience*, a documentary directed by Richard Robbins about various American veterans' service stories during our second invasion of Iraq, tells the story of Colby Buzzell, who, with his platoon, must break through an ambush kill zone. The documentary shows his brush with death as he exits his armored vehicle while under fire to replenish his vehicle's empty gun, and, after the ambush, his moment of introspection in the motor pool, where his sergeant approaches him to check that he is okay. Buzzell's sergeant, seeing his emotional exhaustion from the fight, gives him advice that he had, in turn, received from his father, who served in Vietnam: "Put all the things that bother you and

keep you awake at night and clog your head up—put all those things in a shoebox. Put a lid on it, and deal with it later." Buzzell, after receiving the advice, says, "I've put the events of that day in a shoebox, put the lid on it. Haven't opened it since" (*Operation*). This shoeboxing of trauma—the same choice that Captain America makes—is, according to David Wood, a senior military correspondent for *The Huffington Post*, a technique that lasts "only temporarily"; in the same article, Tom Berger, a Vietnam veteran who served as a corpsman, states that, "left untreated, you reinforce the trauma." The concealment and denial of trauma, when it goes beyond the battlefield, can prevent potentially life-saving treatment from ever occurring. Wood further writes that "[two-thirds of] veterans who commit suicide [are] not enrolled in the VA's health care system... [nor have] they ever been diagnosed [with any mental illness]," which is a powerful statistical indicator of how deadly it can be to ignore or otherwise fail to treat trauma. The battle experience burns a taboo on addressing emotional weakness or vulnerability into the minds of combat veterans, who know that the consequences of even a moment's hesitation during a fight might be death or serious harm to themselves or their friends. This expected behavior pattern—the demand to be always wakeful to outside danger at the cost of never looking inward—persists even after service, when the threat of danger is no longer present, when it should be addressed. Captain America's status as a role model, one who toughs out mental harm and continues to serve with that burden, actively encourages and reinforces that dangerous expectation.

In opposition to my viewpoint, Jacob Hall, a

writer for *Screen Crush*, a movie news and review website, hails Captain America as a role model for all Americans to emulate. Hall writes, “The definitive scene in *Captain America: The First Avenger* isn’t Steve Rogers getting super soldier serum injected into his body – it’s him pre-transformation, jumping onto a grenade to save his comrades without a second thought, unaware that it’s a dud.” Hall lauds Captain America for his origins as “a weak guy who became strong without ever forgetting what it was like to be weak... [and] a good guy who set out to do the right thing... even when the world is against him at every turn.” He further claims that “he’s not the Avenger that I’d want to be, but he’s the Avenger that we should all be” (Hall). Captain America’s jumping on a grenade is, indisputably, a heroic self-sacrifice for the sake of protecting his comrades. Émile Durkheim, a French sociologist considered the father of modern social sciences, writes about “altruistic suicide”:

There are no suicides with a more definitely altruistic character. We actually see the individual in all these cases seek to strip himself of his personal being in order to be engulfed in something which he regards as his true essence.... He must therefore consider that he has no life of his own. Impersonality is here carried to its highest pitch; altruism is acute (Qtd. in Blake 49).

Dr. Joseph A. Blake published a study in 1978 that sorted through Medal of Honor recipient data dating from 1863-1973 and confirmed that American culture idolizes and enshrines the self-sacrifice of our warriors – of the 191 Medal of Honor recipients in his data set, 63 (33%) of them received the award for “grenade acts” or “any case of placing

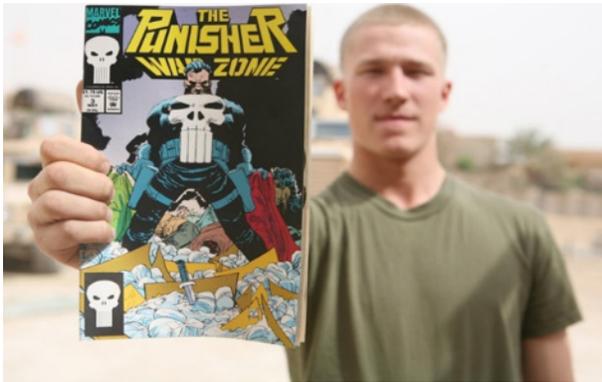
one’s body over an explosive device [to protect others]” (Blake). Captain America’s continued self-destructive behavior, however, goes beyond protective necessity, illustrating an unnecessary desire to display his mental fortitude. This arrogant denial and his selfless status align with Durkheim’s definition of the “optional altruistic suicide,” which is, according to Blake’s paraphrasing, “[a suicide] often involving social prestige... [The self-sacrificial figure is] able to do so because they are so well integrated into the group as to have little thought for their own existence” (Blake).

Captain America is an exemplar of selflessness, but America’s veterans do not need to emulate a model who sacrifices everything he is and takes nothing – not even psychological survival. Our military’s volunteers can be replaced by the next generation of men and women who step up to take the watch, but they cannot be replaced as individuals. The diversity in unique perspectives, thoughts, and actions that our veterans bring to the American diaspora – the diversity that is the core of our nation’s strength – is irreplaceable, and asking veterans who have already made significant self-sacrifices to give more at the cost of their lives – to go down the path of destructively patriotic martyrdom that Captain America has paved – is wildly irresponsible, disrespectful, and harmful. Our veterans cannot be heroes if they do not maintain themselves first, and our war-wounded cannot afford to try to carry their burdens alone.

While Captain America presents a self-destructive model for veterans to follow, *The Punisher* offers only biting commentary on our nation’s treatment of our war-wounded returnees. His antihero model is one based around the punishment

and retribution of those who wronged him instead of recovery and recuperation; in his isolation he has reached an irrecoverable state where he is only capable of wreaking the same destruction upon others that he has inflicted upon himself.

Frank Castle’s loss of humanity is an implicit criticism of how we have handled our veterans in the past, but his story is one that offers only that critique and no vindication for the real people who are suffering the same plight. The Punisher, the opposite of Captain America in morality and coping



Lance Cpl. Brandon M. Barnes, 21, Camp Hit, Iraq.

with his trauma, is a psychotic murderer with villain-punishing intent who abandoned his humanity to confront his trauma instead of outrunning or ignoring it. *The Punisher Born*, the 2003 origin story for The Punisher, places Frank Castle, the super-veteran’s former identity, in a forlorn outpost on the edge of Cambodia during the Vietnam War. He is constantly harried by the voice of his conscience that urges him to kill, telling him that killing is “his last chance [to survive the war]” (*Punisher Born*). When he is the last man standing at the outpost, overrun by waves of Viet Cong fighters, he finally gives in to the voice and kills his humanity, Frank Castle, for the sake of survival, and emerges from the fight as The Punisher. The first three covers of the series display helmet-clad soldiers with their

faces flaking, burning, or chipping away to reveal a bare skull underneath, representing the shedding of the character’s humanity to survive the horrors of war, and to directly reveal The Punisher as a base instinctual desire to live at the cost of human empathy. Becoming numb to the world – whether in the fictional case of Frank Castle’s loss of identity (so deep that it gives him immunity to a supervillain’s psychic attacks in *The Punisher Vol. 2*), or in the case of the very real substance abuse that isolated veterans engage in to survive from day to day – creates a broken state of mind with which our military’s commitment to “leave no man behind” is fundamentally incompatible. But it is a well-known fact of our history that our government – even after promising our wounded that they would not be left behind – harshly betrayed the returning men and women who survived the Vietnam War by abandoning them to live or die by their own devices the moment they reached home soil.

The American public unloaded its frustrations about the Vietnam War onto the veterans who had already shouldered the physical and mental health consequences of the conflict, and the isolation brought on by the social stigma of having served in such a brutal war only acted to worsen their trauma’s symptoms. American society’s homecoming reception for veterans of the war in Vietnam – an unforgiving obstacle that compounded the government’s betrayal – gave little opportunity for the wounded to heal and rejoin society. I interviewed Amy Yee, my mother and a former Marine, who served as a meteorologist’s mate and drill instructor in the Marine Corps at the height of the Vietnam War: “If we went anywhere [in the U.S.]

in uniform, we would be met by protestors. They called us 'baby killers,' spit on us. They would tell



Cpl. Amy Yee using a theodolite to measure winds aloft via weather balloon.

us that we should have been shot for what we had done. We were ashamed of our service. I put my uniform away for a long time, and, when I finally tried to look at it again, it had been so long that moths had eaten everything except the buttons." When I asked if she ever sought assistance from the VHA for her lifelong depression and anxiety, she said, "I didn't know it was available. I thought it was only for the men in combat" (Yee). Dr. Jennifer L. Price, in her analysis of the national Vietnam Veterans' Readjustment Study performed from 1984 to 1988 on Vietnam veterans and their status after the war, found that "a substantial minority of [veterans] were suffering from a variety of psychological problems... [and] only a small number of these veterans actually sought treatment from mental health providers." Price's analysis further found that approximately 830,000 male and female Vietnam veterans, 26% of those serving, "had symptoms and related functional impairment associated with PTSD . . . with four out of five reporting recent symptoms when interviewed 20-25 years after Vietnam" ("Findings"). The Punisher is the ugly face of these disaffected veterans, the

ones who survived in ways that left them with unanswered questions about morality, and they never received absolution, affirmation, or any real answers from society about what we expect of our military. They are a generation of veterans with a gnawing guilt in their hearts and an unresolved feeling of abandonment, proof of which we can see in the founding principle of the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), a congressionally chartered organization that assists Vietnam veterans, which reads, "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another" ("Vietnam").

The Punisher provided a scathing critique of our woeful conduct as a nation, but failed to provide the model of recovery that "Flash" Thompson was finally designed and written to fulfill. Present-day veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan did not have a positive role model in our popular culture until 2008, when Marvel's writer Marc Guggenheim filled that niche (albeit slowly, taking five years after the initiation of the Iraq War to put ink on paper) with Eugene "Flash" Thompson (*Amazing Spider-Man* #574). His origin story is a side story within *The Amazing Spider-Man*, though Guggenheim deemed it important enough to be the main feature of issue #574, in which General Fazekas interviews Thompson in preparation for his nomination for a Medal of Honor, our nation's highest military award, for his actions during an urban assault in Mosul, Iraq. Guggenheim reveals his recognition of the need for a positive role model by motivating Thompson's actions through the character's idolization of Spider-Man. When General Fazekas asks Thompson why he performed certain heroic actions during the assault, Thompson alludes to the character traits of Spi-

der-Man, and panels flash to Spider-Man overcoming the odds, even when they are stacked against him (*Amazing Spider-Man* #574). Guggenheim, at the very end of the issue, reveals that Thompson lost his legs as the physical cost for overexerting himself while in a wounded state, though it was a price he gladly paid — an altruistic self-sacrifice of necessity — to save his battle-buddy's life.

Thompson was left harmed both in body and in mind after the ordeal, but his trials and pains were not conveniently written away or considered entirely insurmountable — an affirming message that wounded veterans desperately need to hear. Later, in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #622, writer Fred Van Lente revisits Thompson, now in a VA rehabilitation center, showing him going through the stages of grief (though humorously in reverse, a circumstance brought on by his bull-headedness), but his recovery slips several times. Because of these slips, his recovery is not simply a matter of "getting over it," as Captain America advocates; instead, it is a struggle. In the stage of denial, the final stage of his grief, he comes dangerously close to numbing his pain by dehumanizing himself — similarly to The Punisher — by reaching out to a company called REABILIFY that offers to give him a set of cybernetic legs while also replacing his still-healthy arms with cyber-limbs, solely for the purpose of increasing his combat prowess, with the promise that "He'll be glad he did." In return, the dubious company would get to utilize his "training and experience" after he is enhanced (*Amazing Spider-Man* #622). Thompson's slip into numbness and despair, however, is interrupted just in time by his friends and family — who often are a safety net for real-life veterans. Veterans facing trauma

must reach out for this safety net to initiate their healing. "Flash" Thompson's origin story marks him as a mortal man, and, even prior to that, in his canonical backstory in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, an imperfect man — Peter Parker's high school bully, stubborn, grappling with alcoholism, and an adulterer — which makes him easy for some readers to identify with. He shows that even someone with flaws can have heroic qualities, and even with those qualities, there is no shame or weakness in reaching out to others for help. The Marvel writers' attempt at using Thompson to break the veteran's taboo about reaching out instead of concealing war wounds with shame models a huge step forward in the healing process. The fruits of Thompson's efforts are eventually revealed in *Venom* Vol. 2, where we discover that, after facing his traumas and achieving some recovery, he has taken on the Venom symbiote and its powers to fulfill the responsibilities of superheroism (*Venom* Vol. 2). He heals, he reintegrates, and he returns to face other conflicts for the sake of our society.

Our nation's veterans desperately need a place to reach out to that can provide professional help. This is especially true for the most at-risk men and women who are socially isolated, much as Captain America was frozen in ice for seventy years and thawed to a world without anyone he knew, or as The Punisher faced a lone survivor situation and later lost his family. Guggenheim and Van Lente's highlighting of Thompson as a role model to break the taboo of reaching out for help, however, has not made up for the VA's real-world shortcomings. In April 2016, journalist Dave Boyer wrote in *The Washington Post*:

The agency's inspector general... [revealed]

that seven [VA health care systems in Texas] have scheduling mismanagement that led to extended wait times for veterans... [due to a] lack of supervision, poor training of employees and weak management controls for data manipulation... [and further, of] 73 VA facilities across the country, [the inspector] found scheduling problems in 51 cases. (Boyer)

Boyer describes problems with absentee employees, huge cost overruns to the tune of “1.7 billion [for a facility under construction],” and a lack of oversight of misbehaving employees. According to Curt Devine, writing for CNN, these oversights and failures by the VA may have translated to a situation in which “of about 800,000 records stalled in the agency’s system for managing health care enrollment, there were more than 307,000 records that belonged to veterans who had died months or years in the past.” Mental health maladies, much like physical ones, must be treated early and thoroughly, and having 307,000 veterans die while the VA processed their records is testimony to how deadly a stalled health care system is. Comics writers may be able to address relevant social issues and bring them to light, but their efforts will be squandered if our federal government’s administrative incompetence prevents progress in treating our wounded warriors.

War-wounded veterans are a small, weakened minority in our nation, one that needs a positive role model to know that there is value in their lives, despite their scars, that recovery can happen, and that our nation and humanity as a whole—sitting on the day-to-day brink of self-destruction—still needs their insights, their horrifying testaments to humanity at its worst, if we wish to find and main-

tain lasting peace abroad. Our nation has faced three disastrous, long, inconclusive wars of occupation—the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, and the War in Afghanistan—involving the two veteran-age demographics most prone to suicide (*Suicide*). We damn ourselves to make the same destructive mistakes of our past when our returning veterans remain estranged and silenced in the present. If the superveterans of our American myths can offer these wounded men and women beacons in the darkness with which to find their homes and their voices once again, we must make sure that they burn as brightly and resolutely as Eugene “Flash” Thompson, and brighter.

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