

Study suggests bad World War II experiences led vets to church

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

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(RNS) A new study has found that American veterans who had a negative experience serving during World War II attend church more frequently today than those who were less troubled by their service.

The study also found that when service members were fearful in combat, they reported prayer was a better motivator for getting them through it than several other factors, including the broader goals of the war.

Researchers say the study, which will be published in a future edition of the Journal of Religion and Health, has implications for health professionals, counselors and clergy who work with veterans with more recent service in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“The most important thing is that the more veterans disliked the war, the more religious they were 50 years later,” said Craig Wansink, a professor of religious studies at Virginia Wesleyan College and co-author of the study with his brother, Brian Wansink, a professor of consumer behavior at Cornell University.

“And the takeaway is that for people who work with combat veterans, if veterans have had a bad experience, it is clear that one alternative that has helped people understand the world or find a common community has been religion.”

The study, titled “Are There Atheists in Foxholes? Combat Intensity and Religious Behavior,” also found that:

As combat became more frightening, the percentage of soldiers who reported praying rose from 42 percent to 72 percent.

After the war, soldiers who faced heavy combat attended church 21 percent more

often if they felt their war experience was negative; soldiers who described their war experience as positive attended 26 percent less often.

In general, religious behavior was high among all World War II veterans surveyed — approximately 69 percent were church members and reported attending services slightly more than three times per month.

The study was conducted with both old and new data, including data collected from U.S. Army service members in the Pacific in 1944 and from surveys the authors sent to surviving veterans more than 50 years later.

Brian Wansink said that while it is not surprising that service members in the heat of battle prayed — World War II journalist Ernie Pyle made the famous quip about atheists in foxholes that's in the study's name — it is important that those who work with veterans not overlook the impact of faith during and after combat.

“Religious involvement could help these people,” he said. “One reason it may have been so effective in the past is that religion is a very social experience, and that might be healing of itself because these are people who developed strong social bonds with their units and strong commitments to their comrades. That might be missing from current strategies in helping recent soldiers cope with stress.”

The authors spent 12 years working on the study — three times as long as the U.S. involvement in World War II — and were influenced by respect for their father, a member of the so-called “Greatest Generation” who fought in the war.

“The takeaway for us is that the best thing you can do on Memorial Day is call that father or great uncle who is a veteran and wish him a happy Memorial Day,” Brian Wansink said.