

# Are there atheists in foxholes? Study says they're the minority

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A Cornell/Virginia Wesleyan study found the majority of soldiers in foxholes aren't atheists. Brian Wansink, Cornell, shows a Silver Star medal of one such man. Credit: Jason Koski, Cornell Press Office

Ernie Pyle – an iconic war correspondent in World War II – reportedly said "There are no atheists in foxholes." A new joint study between two brothers at Cornell and Virginia Wesleyan found that only part of this is true.

A recent analysis of archived [World War II](#) surveys of Army Infantry after a battle showed a soldier's reliance on prayer rose from 32% to 74% as the battle intensified. "The question is whether that reliance on faith lasts over time," said Craig Wansink, author and Professor of Religion at Virginia Wesleyan College.

To determine this, a second study of 1123 WWII veterans showed that 50 or more years after combat, most soldiers still exhibited religious behavior, but it varied by their [war](#) experience. Those facing heavy combat (versus no combat) attended church 21% more often if they claimed their war experience was negative, but those who claimed their experience was positive attended 26% less often. The more a veteran disliked the war, the more religious they were 50 years later.

The self-funded findings, forthcoming in the *Journal of Religion and Health*, note that no causality is assumed. "We can't claim, for instance, that combat made soldiers religious or, conversely, that religious [soldiers](#) hated combat," said Brian Wansink, study co-author and Professor of Applied Economics and Management at Cornell University.

Still, there may be important implications for counselors, clergy, and health practitioners who work with [combat veterans](#). [Religious involvement](#) may be as particularly meaningful for a combat veteran who has had a negative military experience.

"These are people who had intense, trusting relationships with others under fire," said Brian Wansink, "They recognize both the importance of community and the limitations of their own abilities. A social component

might be more important to healing than we think. One Memorial Day gift you could give to a veteran might just be to say to them 'Thanks.' In the end, saying there are no atheists in foxholes may be less of an argument against atheism than it is against foxholes."

Provided by Cornell Food & Brand Lab

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