Peter Molin’s “Strike Through the Mask!”: The Clock Strikes Twelve

My year-long run as guest-columnist for The Wrath-Bearing Tree comes to an end this month. I’m not sure if WBT founders Adrian Bonenberger and Mike Carson planned for my stint to last only twelve months, but in my mind it was always the goal. Twelve months, twelve Strike Through the Mask! columns, each with a different subject, obviously, but more personally, each with a different tone or style. My goal was variation within similarity, like a record album of yore: some songs fast, some slow, some mournful, some more upbeat, but all recognizable as the unified work of the creator.

I also welcomed the pressure of a monthly deadline. On my blog Time Now, I publish when I please. But I grew up loving the daily, weekly, and monthly columns of writers I admired in the newspapers and magazines I read—thinkers who wrote lively, interesting columns on a regular schedule. Finally, I realized I could use Strike Through the Mask! to range wider and dive deeper than I typically did in Time Now. Subjects I might not touch in Time Now, such as soldier memoirs and current events, I have explored at length in Strike Through the Mask! Most of all, I wanted to show Time Now readers a little more of the “real me”—my opinions, thoughts, and interests apart from the focus on other peoples’ books and artworks in Time Now.

I couldn’t have asked for better editors than Adrian and Mike. They have allowed me to write almost without suggestion or guidance, for better and for worse, and their infrequent edits and comments have always been on-point and encouraging. The war-writing community is lucky to have such thoughtful and generous leaders.

So what lies ahead? Time Now seems to have run its course, as well. I won't definitively declare it's over, but it does seem time for other writers more in-tune with the spirit of the 2020s to carry on its work. But who knows? I've read John Milas's *The Militia House* and watched *The Covenant* and I have thoughts…. Navy veteran Jillian Danback-McGhan's short-story collection *Midwatch* is on the way. A movie titled *Fremont*, about Afghan interpreters in America, and *Northern Shade*, about PTSD, are highly recommended and I look forward to watching them. Entire genres related to war-writing, such as YA and romance, lie mostly untouched, awaiting analysis….

I started Time Now in 2012 when it seemed clear that a vibrant writing-and-publishing scene centered on the work by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was emerging. One precipitating event was the 2010 War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air Force Academy. I was fortunate to attend and it was there I first met or heard read authors such as Siobhan Fallon, Matt Gallagher, and Benjamin Busch. Another catalyst was the publication in 2012 of Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, David Abrams' *Fobbit*, and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*—novels published by major houses and widely reviewed and largely celebrated. At the time, I was teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where I had already sponsored a reading by Brian Turner. That had been an early-on, isolated event, however, and now I sensed a cohort of vet-writers and affiliated family members and interested authors with no formal military affiliation coalescing. I also intuited that I, an infantry veteran of Afghanistan with a PhD in English Literature, was in a position to document and promote the emerging work.

Scenes need events, outlets, and platforms to thrive. From that first 2011 WLA conference to the next one, in 2018, a number of events and publishing venues, infused by a sense of community, shared endeavor, and a do-it-yourself ethos, made being a vet-writer exciting and fulfilling. Online publishing

sites a-plenty were available, and publishers and general readers were reasonably open to vet memoir, fiction, and poetry. Seemingly every large city and college campus was hosting vet-writing workshops and the vet-writer presence at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference (AWP) was robust. I regularly attended AWP between 2014 and 2018, where I hosted several panels and met and mingled with many writers in the scene. And until 2015 I had a position at the United States Military Academy at West Point that allowed me to stage events for vet writers and artists to read and perform for cadets.

That physical sense of community has largely faded, and vet-writers now rely on social media to promote, connect, and opine. That's OK, but if writers and artists now coming into print feel isolated rather than connected by the digisphere, I remind them that the cohesion of 2010-2018 was largely generated by the initiative of the participants themselves. If recreating that energy seems desirable, then the answer is to stage readings, host events, create platforms, reach out, form alliances, and keep knocking on doors. I'm not a position to help make that happen much anymore, but I love the spirit and energy when I see it.

To end here, I'll offer some photos of prominent authors in the scene I've taken over the years. Some I've already published on Time Now, but they're too good not to be given another airing. Salute to all the writers and their works!

Brian Turner, author of *Here, Bullet*, *Phantom Noise*, and many others, Red Bank, NJ, 2018

Siobhan Fallon, author of *You Know When the Men Are Gone* and *The Confusion of Languages*, West Point, NY, 2018

Phil Klay, author of *Redeployment* and *Missionaries*, Highland Falls, NY, 2014

Matt Gallagher, author of *Kaboom*, *Youngblood*, and *Empire City*, Camden NJ, 2016. (This picture was supposed to be taken in front of Walt Whitman's house, but what can I say? We screwed up and took the photo a few doors down from the Good Gray Poet's residence.)

Hassan Blasim, author of *The Corpse Exhibition* and others, West Point, NY, 2014

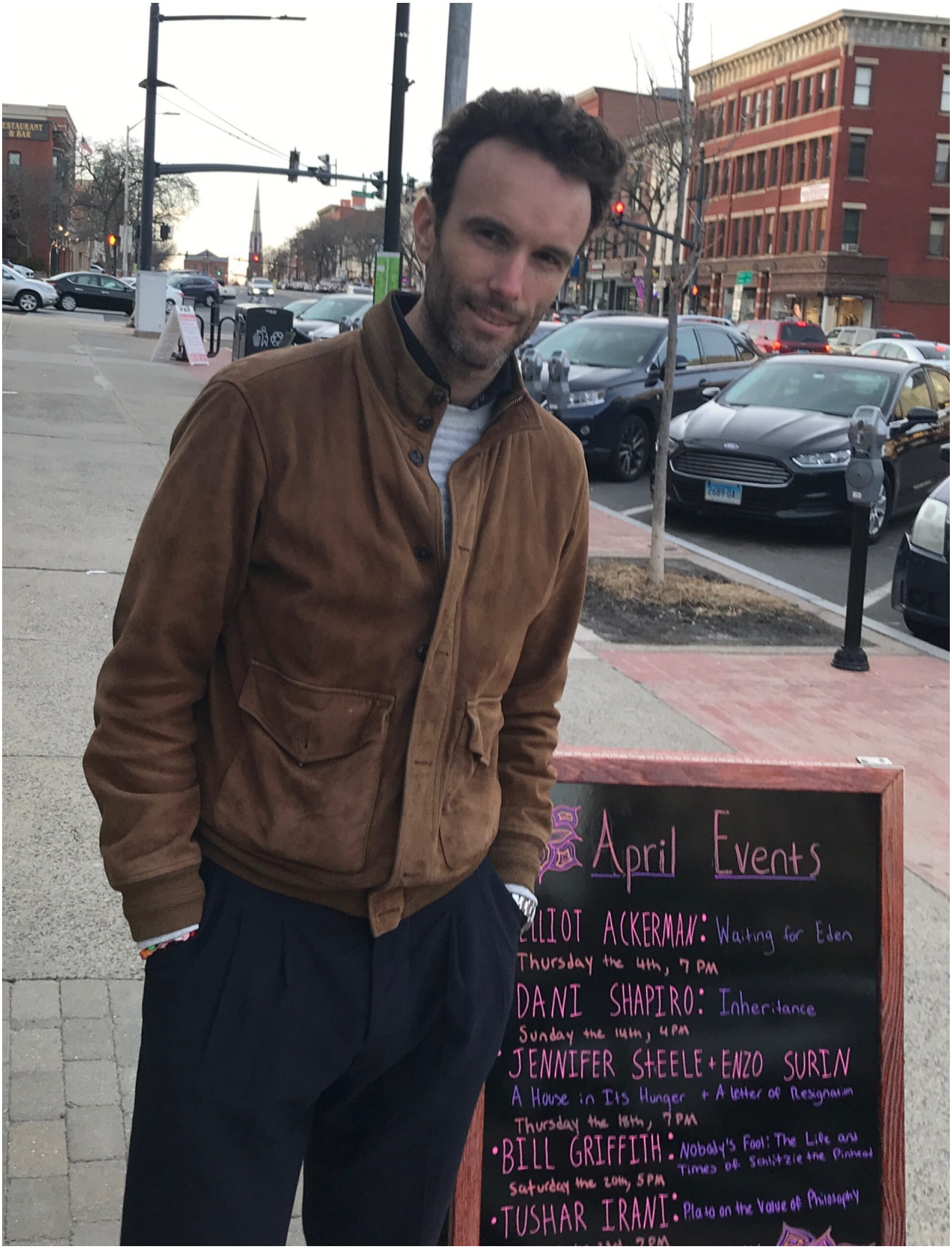
Elyse Fenton, author of *Clamor*, Dodge Poetry Festival, Newark,

NJ, 2014

Brian Van Reet, author of *Spoils*, Austin, TX, 2016

John Renehan, author of *The Valley*, Arlington, VA, 2018

Elliot Ackerman, author of *Green on Blue*, *Dark at the Crossing*, and many others, Middletown, CT, 2019



Adrian Bonenberger, author of *Afghan Memoir* and *The Disappointed Soldier*, Branford, CT, 2021

Brian Castner, author of *The Long Walk* and *Disappointment River*, among others, New York, NY, 2020

Playwright Jay Moad and fiction author Jesse Goolsby, New York, NY, 2017. Moad and Goolsby were two of the driving forces behind the United States Air Force Academy’s War,

Literature, and the Arts journal and conferences.

Roy Scranton and Jacob Seigel, Brooklyn, NY, 2018. Scranton is the author of *War Porn* and Seigel is the author of the short-story "Smile There Are IEDs Everywhere," from the seminal vet-writing anthology *Fire and Forget* edited by Scranton and Matt Gallagher.

Jennifer Orth-Veillon and Benjamin Busch, New Haven, CT, 2018. Orth-Veillon edited the anthology of writing about World War I *Beyond The Limits of Their Longing* that features a who's-who of vet and vet-adjacent writers. Busch is the author of the memoir *Dust to Dust*, as well as a poet, actor, filmmaker, photographer and illustrator.

Peter Molin’s “Strike Through the Mask!”: The Great Contemporary War-Writing Quiz

30 questions; let’s see who knows their stuff. Answers below.

27-30 Correct: Expert

23-26: Sharpshooter

19-22: Marksman

Less than 19: Bolo

Ready, go!

1. “The war tried to kill us in the spring.” This is the opening line to what 2012 novel by an Army veteran about two buddies deployed to Iraq?

2. “We shot dogs.” This is the opening line to what 2014 short-story by a former Marine?

3. The author of the 2011 short-story collection *You Know When the Men Are Gone* is _____.

4. In 2012, this novel about an Army Iraq veterans attending a Dallas Cowboys football game was a finalist for the National Book Award.

5. Match the author with the title of his or her story in the 2013 short-story anthology *Fire and Forget*:

Jacob Siegal “The Train

Brian Van Reet “Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek”

Mariette Kalinowski “Smile, There are IEDs Everywhere”

6. What are the names of the Iraq Army veteran and Afghanistan Navy veteran who started the NYC non-profit war-writing organization Words After War?

7. This 2012 novel set in Afghanistan drew inspiration from the Greek classic “Antigone.”

8. Match the title and author name of these GWOT war novels written by civilian women:

Roxana Robinson *We All Come Home*

Helen Benedict *Carthage*

Joyce Carol Oates *Sand Queen*

Katey Schultz *Be Safe I Love You*

Cara Hoffman *Sparta*

9. Name the titles of the two graphic novels written by Maximillian Uriarte, one set in Iraq and the other in Afghanistan.

10. This novel by Marine veteran Elliot Ackerman takes its title from a phrase used to describe American casualties suffered at the hand of their Afghanistan allied partners.

11. Match the author and title of these novels written in the early years of the GWOT veteran-writing boom:

Benjamin Buchholz *The Sandbox*

David Zimmerman *Last One In*

Nicholas Kulish *One Hundred and One Nights*

12. Match the names and titles of these novels and short-story collections written by male civilian authors:

Luke Mogelson *A Big Enough Lie*

Eric Bennett *These Heroic, Happy Dead*

Jonathan Chopra *The Good Lieutenant*

Aaron Gwyn *Veteran Crisis Hotline*

Whitney Terrell *Wynne's War*

13. The name of Marine veteran Atticus Lish's novel about a former Marine adrift in New York City is ____.

14. Match the names of the Iraqi authors with their works:

Sinan Antoon *The Corpse Exhibition*

Hassan Blasim *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

Ahmed Saadawi *The Corpse Washer*

15. Match the name of the war-writing collective/seminar/journal and its founder:

The Wrath-Bearing Tree Lovella Calica

Veterans Writing Project Adrian Bonenberger

Voices from War Travis Martin

Military Experience and the Arts Kara Krauze

Warrior Writers Ron Capps

16. Which military academy sponsored the War, Literature, and the Arts conferences in 2011 and 2018?

17. In what branch did vet-writers Brian Castner, Jesse Goolsby, Eric Chandler, and J.A. Moad serve?

18. In what year did Phil Klay's short-story collection *Redeployment* win the National Book Award?

19. This Navy veteran's short story "Kattekoppen" first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 2013 and then in the author's short-story collection *Bring Out the Dog* in 2018.

20. The proprietors of MilSpeak Foundation and Middle West Press are _____ and _____, respectively.

21. The title of this poem by Brian Turner was later used as the title for an Academy Award-winning movie. What is the title?

22. What are the names of the memoirs written by the following veterans:

Brian Turner ____

Benjamin Busch ____

Ron Capps ____

Kayla Williams ____

23. Match the author with a volume of poetry they have written:

Colin Halloran *Sand Opera*

Hugh Martin *Lines Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*

Kevin Powers *The Stick Soldiers*

Phillip Metres *Shortly Thereafter*

24. Match the author with a volume of poetry they have written:

Lisa Stice *The Iraqi Nights*

Jehanne Dubrow *Clamor*

Elyse Fenton. *Stateside*

Dunya Mikhail *Forces*

25. The Army veteran author of the novels *Fobbit* and *Brave Deeds* is _____.

26. The two novels set in Afghanistan written by Pakistani-British author Nadeem Aslam are _____ and _____.

27. “The Trauma Hero” is a concept associated with which Army veteran writer? _____

28. What are the names of the war-writers portrayed in this photo accompanying a 2014 *Vanity Fair* article titled “The Words of War”?

(*Vanity Fair* photograph by Jonas Karlsson)

29. What are the names of the authors featured in this 2015 Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) panel?

30. What are the names of these war-writing luminaries, taken at a reading at The Strand Bookstore in NYC in 2014?:

BONUS (2 points): Benjamin Busch wrote the introductions to one of the following anthologies and Ron Capps wrote the other. Match the author with the anthology:

Retire the Colors

Incoming

Answers:

1: Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds*

2: Phil Klay, “Redeployment”

3: Siobhan Fallon

4: Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*

5: Jacob Siegal: “Smile, IEDs Are Everwhere.” Brian Van Reet: “Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek.” Mariette Kalinowski: “The Train”

6: Matt Gallagher and Brandon Willetts, respectively

7: Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya’s *The Watch*

8: Roxana Robinson: *Sparta*. Helen Benedict: *Sand Queen*. Joyce

Carol Oates: *Carthage*. Katey Schultz: *We All Come Home*. Cara Hoffman: *Be Safe I Love You*

9: *The White Donkey* (Iraq), *Battle Born: Lapis Lazuli* (Afghanistan)

10: *Green on Blue*

11: Benjamin Buchholz, *One Hundred and One Nights*; David Zimmerman, *The Sandbox*; Nicholas Kulish, *One Hundred and One Nights*

12: Luke Mogelson, *These Heroic, Happy Dead*; Eric Bennett, *A Big Enough Lie*. Jonathan Chopra, *Veteran Crisis Hotline*; Aaron Gwyn, *Wynne's War*; Whitney Terrell, *The Good Lieutenant*

13: *Preparation for the Next Life*

14: Sinan Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*; Hassan Blasim, *The Corpse Exhibition*; Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

15: The Wrath-Bearing Tree: Adrian Bonenberger; Veterans Writing Project: Ron Capps; Voices from War: Kara Krauze; Military Experience and the Arts; Travis Martin; Warrior Writers: Lovella Calica

16: The United States Air Force Academy

17: United States Air Force

18: 2014

19: Will Mackin

20: Tracy Crow and Randy Brown (Charlie Sherpa)

21: Brian Turner's *The Hurt Locker*

22: Brian Turner, *My Life as a Foreign Country*; Benjamin Busch, *Dust to Dust*; Ron Capps, *Seriously Not All Right*; Kayla Williams, *Loved My Weapon More Than You* (or, *Plenty of Time*

When We Get Home)

23: Colin Halloran, *Shortly Thereafter*; Hugh Martin, *The Stick Soldiers*; Kevin Powers, *Lines Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*; Philip Metres, *Sand Opera*

24: Lisa Stice, *Forces*; Jehanne Dubrow, *Stateside*; Elyse Fenton, *Clamor*; Dunya Mikhail, *The Iraqi Nights*

25: David Abrams

26: *The Wasted Vigil* and *The Blind Man's Garden*

27: Roy Scranton

28: Left to right: Maurice Decaul, Phil Klay, Elliot Ackerman, Kevin Powers, Brandon Willetts, Matt Gallagher

29: Left to right: Brian Turner, Katey Shultz, Siobhan Fallon, Benjamin Busch, Phil Klay

30: Left to right: Adrian Bonenberger, Roxana Robinson, David Abrams, Matt Gallagher

BONUS: *Retire the Colors*: Ron Capps; *Standing Down*: Benjamin Busch

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Peter Molin's Strike "Through the Mask!": Three Vignettes

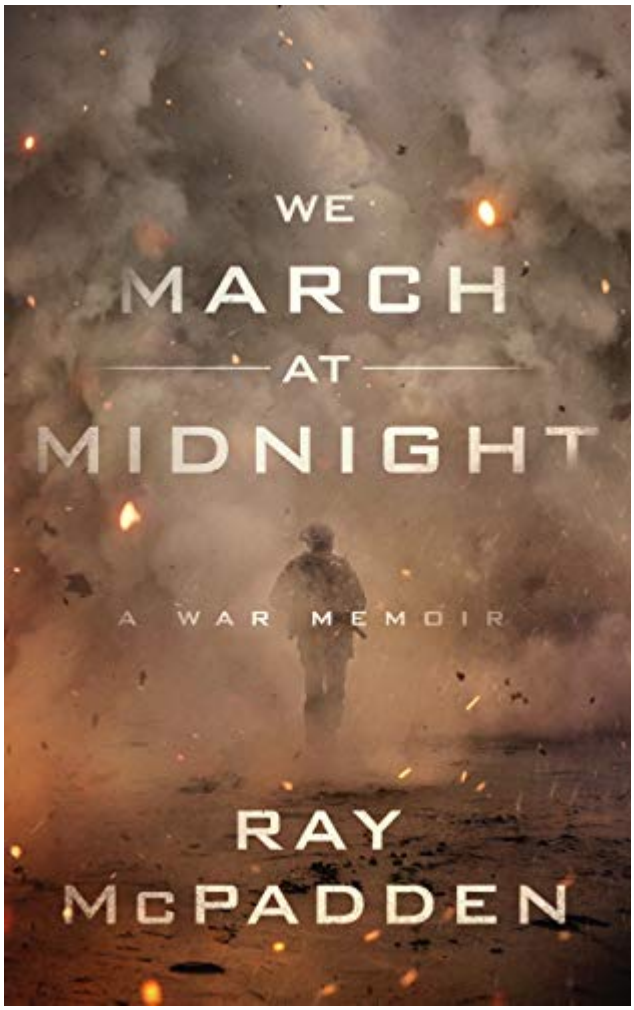
Memoirs written by soldiers and Marines who fought in the Second Battle of Fallujah in Iraq and the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan portray many events that caused their authors anguish. Below I describe three particularly wrenching episodes. More than narratives of harrowing combat action,

they illustrate the emotional strife wrought by war.

The first two episodes are from Ray McPadden's memoir *We March at Midnight*. McPadden served as a US Army platoon leader in 1-32 Infantry, 10th Mountain Division, on a 15-month deployment to the Korengal and then on a subsequent redeployment there with the 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment.

The third episode is from Alexander Saxby's *Fallujah Memoirs: A Grunt's Eye View of the Second Battle of Fallujah*. Saxby, a rifleman in 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, recounts his participation in the house-by-house fighting in Fallujah in November 2004.

As you read my summaries of the events, consider what would you have done if you were in the authors' boots and how would you feel about the events now.



The Powerless Lieutenant

Late in McPadden's first tour in the Korengal, he and his platoon are visited by their battalion commander (a lieutenant colonel) and command sergeant major (the senior enlisted soldier in the battalion). McPadden and his men have been in the field throughout their deployment, seeing much fighting and also engaging extensively with local nationals on more peaceable terms. They have endured a long, cold winter without many amenities, and as McPadden puts it, "climbed every mountain in Kunar twice." McPadden and his men clean-up as best they can for the visit, for they sense it is as much an inspection as a friendly chance to thank the platoon for a long, hard job well-done. Throughout *We March at Midnight*, McPadden recounts a love/hate relationship with his chain-of-command. On one hand, he idealizes his company commander and battalion commander as soldier-warriors he hopes to impress. However, he also often finds them out-of-touch with the actual circumstances he and his men face and prone to issuing orders that are impossible to fulfill.

The visit begins well, but then goes horribly wrong. A soldier in McPadden's platoon attempts a funny retort to a question from the sergeant major and the sergeant major, a by-the-book stickler for order-and-discipline, is not amused. He rips the soldier a new one, and then orders the soldier to pack his bags; the soldier is unceremoniously being removed from the platoon. By the sergeant major's book, an insubordinate wise-ass given to pop-off answers has no place in the unit, no matter how good a fighter he has been or how entrenched he is in the platoon family. The platoon, already short-handed as a result of combat death and injury, must now endure the last few weeks of deployment without one of their beloved members and a trusted fighter.

The soldier is crushed, and McPadden stands there dumbfounded. He appeals to the battalion commander, but the colonel is anything but sympathetic. "It's decided," he retorts, "Trust

me, we are doing you a favor," as if he too believed the soldier was a cancer that needed excising for the good health of the platoon. McPadden, suddenly aware how powerless he is and how capricious is his chain-of-command, stands paralyzed as the soldier packs his gear and stows it in one of the colonel's trucks. McPadden writes:

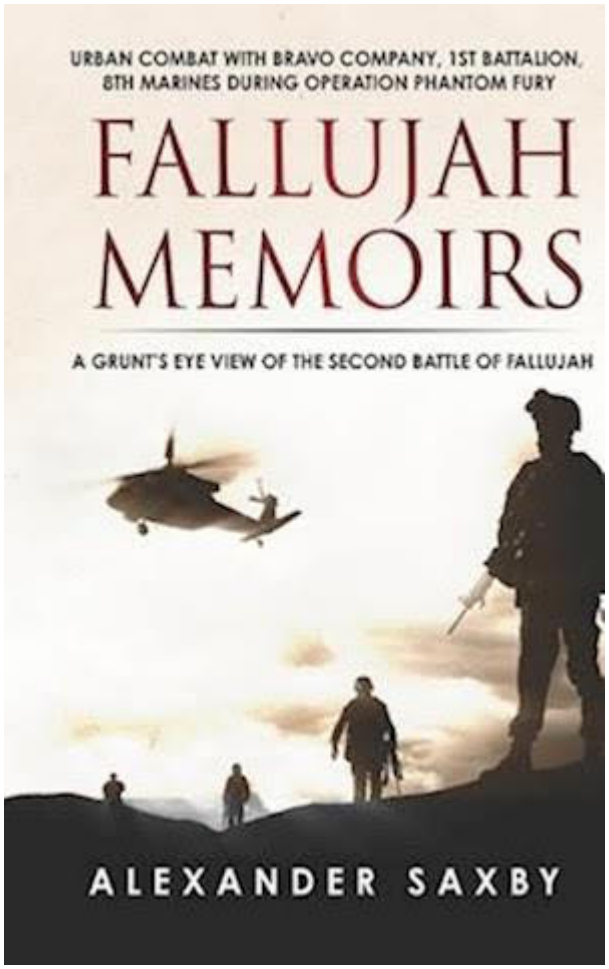
Minutes later the colonel's convoy departs with [the soldier] crying in the back seat of the second Humvee. I cannot stop thinking about this little warrior, crying at being removed from his platoon and squad, destroyed at being forced off the battlefield.

Former Friend, Now a Foe

Toward the end of his tour in the Korengal with 1-32 Infantry, McPadden befriends a local policeman named Abdul, who then becomes McPadden's partner in several military, infrastructure, and governance projects. McPadden and his men are invited into Abdul's home for meetings and meals, where they meet his family and are always extended hospitality. All good, but two years later McPadden returns to the Korengal as part of a Ranger strike-force charged with killing-or-capturing Taliban leaders. As one mission unfolds, McPadden finds himself and his Rangers lined up outside Abdul's residence. An Afghan male emerges from the compound and is shot dead by the Rangers. McPadden makes a funny quip about the man's death rattle, but upon inspecting the body recognizes the man as Abdul's father. The Rangers then raid the residence and McPadden follows his men inside. There, he sees Abdul lined up against the wall with the other detainees. McPadden writes:

His aquiline nose I will never forget. If this were a movie, at this point, we would lock eye and one of would say something with tremendous gravity. In reality I freeze, then

spin away and duck out of the house, fearing Abdul has seen my face. I do not know what he would say to me, whether he'd insist this is a mistake and plea for release or maybe admit to being bad. Perhaps he will blame me for everything that afflicts his homeland: poverty, lack of social mobility, decades of civil war, scarce natural resources, corruption, economic instability, and religious fanaticism. I don't really know. I do know that when we shot Abdul's dad, I mimicked his death sound perhaps to convince myself that I didn't care about these people. In any case, I decide the worst thing would be Abdul failing to remember me at all.



Death in a Minaret

A week into the Second Battle of Fallujah, on Alexander Saxby's birthday, a good friend of Saxby's is killed. Saxby's unit fights on, and later they assault a mosque from which they are taking fire. They return fire and then enter the

mosque and climb to the top of the minaret. At the top, they discover the now-dead bodies of two insurgents who are obviously not Iraqi nationals. Confirming the presence of foreign fighters is a high priority information request from Saxby's higher headquarters and also of interest to two *New York Times* journalists embedded with Saxby's platoon.

A few hours later, Saxby describes to the two journalists the foreign fighters lying dead in the minaret. The journalists want to see the bodies for themselves, and the fighting calm for the moment, they convince Saxby's platoon leader to assign a squad to escort them back to the mosque for photographic documentation. Saxby doesn't go, but another of his good friends, Bill Miller, is part of the journalists' escort. Unbeknownst to the patrol, the mosque has now been reoccupied by insurgent fighters. As Miller leads the journalists to the top of the minaret, he is shot and killed.

That evening, Saxby and one of the journalists are on the roof of a house the Americans have occupied. Saxby writes:

The New York Times reporter was sitting near us, trying to get a signal to send out his stories. He looked at me and asked what I had gotten for my birthday. I didn't even look at him when I said, "Two dead friends." I knew it would be many years before I celebrated my birthday again, assuming I made it past the next few weeks.

I have described the scenarios starkly and solely from the point-of-view of the authors. McPadden's colonel and sergeant major may have seen more troubling signs than McPadden realized. Abdul, as McPadden notes, may have been a Taliban or Taliban sympathizer all along. The two journalists in Saxby's account actually do have their say in later pieces (links below).

That's all fair, and the confluence of perspectives have potential to change the thrust of the stories I have

described. But that's not work I will do here, and would probably be of little use to McPadden and Saxby. In the moment, and for years after, events occur on the battlefield that forever impress themselves on the participants without easy or satisfactory resolution. The average ordinary circumstances of deployment and combat are challenging enough, but sometimes an extra-added quirk or fillip of circumstance elevates the average and ordinary into the overwhelming and unfair. Soldiers rely on training, their mission orders, their instincts, and their sense of what their rank-and-duty role entails to see them through, but nothing prepares McPadden and Saxby for the events described above. Power, or powerlessness, is at the heart of the issue in each vignette, but not simply in the form of being subject to the cruelty of rank. The vignettes speak to the powerlessness of soldiers in the face of circumstances they couldn't have seen coming and whose unintended consequences place undue demands on their ability to make sense of them.

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The *New York Times* reporter in Saxby's vignette is Dexter Filkins, the author *The Forever Wars*, an excellent journalistic account of the Global War on Terror campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. With Filkins is photographer Ashley Gilbertson. They offer their version of Bill Miller's death in a recent PBS Frontline interview titled "Once Upon a Time in Fallujah":

https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/once-upon-a-time-in-iraq-fallujah/transcript/

In 2008, Filkins wrote at length about the event in a *New York Times* article titled "My Long War."

https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/24/magazine/24filkins-t.html

Ray McPadden, *We March at Midnight*. Blackstone, 2021.

Alexander Saxby, *Fallujah Memoirs: A Grunt's Eye View of the Second Battle of Fallujah*. 2021.

For all Strike Through the Mask! columns and especially this one, thanks to Wrath-Bearing Tree editor Michael Carson for suggestions and inspiration.

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": Fallujah-Korengal/Korengal-Fallujah

In my blog Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature I rarely reviewed memoir and non-fiction. I also tried to promote stories about war other than those by infantrymen and stories about war that encompassed more than the battlefield.

In Strike Through the Mask! I've expanded my reach to address memoir, non-fiction, and actual events. In some columns, including this one, I have also begun exploring stories of fighting men and women in combat.

Two locations dominate the Iraq and Afghanistan "booksphere." In both cases, the locations were scenes of intense fighting. In Iraq, it's Fallujah, particularly the Second Battle of Fallujah, which was fought in 2004. For Afghanistan, it's the Korengal—the river valley and surrounding mountains in Kunar province that featured some of the biggest battles of Operation Enduring Freedom and arguably the longest, most sustained effort by Americans to fight the Taliban.

The Second Battle of Fallujah saw a large combined-arms force, led by Marines, fight insurgent house-by-house through a city known for its many beautiful mosques. In the Korengal, US forces, led by the Army, strove to rid a remote, mountainous region of Taliban fighters and Taliban influence on the local populace.

Fallujah and the Korengal each generated a large number of memoirs, non-fiction accounts, and in the case of the Korengal, movies. Judging by the numbers they seem to be the places where the fighting that mattered most in the Global War on Terror took place. What do I mean by "matter"? Here I'm not thinking about strategic importance or overall mission success-or-failure, but in terms of geographically-centered experiences that seems to have deeply impressed themselves on veterans, interested commentators, and reading audiences. By this point, the very names Fallujah and Korengal inspire a certain reverence, as if any story told about them is sure to

be momentous.

On my bookshelf, I have the following books about the Second Battle of Fallujah: Bing West's non-fiction account *No True Glory*, Nathaniel Helm's biography *My Men Are My Heroes: The Brad Kasal Story*, David Bellavia's memoir *House to House*, and Alexander Saxby's memoir *Fallujah Memoirs*. Elliot Ackerman's *Places and Names* also describes the author's experience fighting in Fallujah, where he won a Silver Star as a Marine platoon commander. Interestingly, I don't know of a novel that portrays Marines and soldiers fighting in Fallujah. And though there are several documentary movies about Fallujah, it has not yet been portrayed by Hollywood, as far as I know. A movie based on *No True Glory* starring Harrison Ford was once announced, but seems to have never been made. Still, the opening lines of Saxby's memoir illustrate the allure of Fallujah:

I've been told you never forget your first time. Your first kiss, your first love, your first car. My first time overseas was an experience that I will never forget. I experienced something that many people only read about in history books. The Second Battle of Fallujah is a watershed moment in my life. It serves as a frame of reference for many memories; before Fallujah and afterward.

Regarding the Korengal, for non-fiction I've read Sebastian Junger's *War*, Wesley Morgan's *The Hardest Place*, and Jake Tapper's *The Outpost*. I've watched the movie based on *The Outpost*, as well as Junger's *Restrepo*. I've read Ray McPadden's memoir *We March at Midnight*, and also Medal of Honor winner Dakota Meyer's memoir *Into the Fire*. This list might be expanded by inclusion of books such as *Lone Survivor* about special operations in Kunar in the early years of Operation Enduring Freedom. The novels *And the Whole Mountain Burned* by the aforementioned Ray McPadden and *The Valley* by John Renehan are coy about actually mentioning the Korengal, but it seems clear both are either set in or inspired by the

Korengal. The dust-jacket blurb for *The Valley* reads:

Everything about the place was myth and rumor, but one fact was clear: There were many valleys in the mountains of Afghanistan, and most were hard places where people died hard deaths. But there was only one Valley. It was the farthest, and the hardest, and the worst.

Scholars tell us that such places of lore and implication are tightly bound up with their geographical and physical setting. The idea is that the significant events were fated to take place on sites that lay waiting through the centuries for historical amplification. However that may be, the sense of the material look of Fallujah and the Korengal greatly impressed themselves on the participants who fought there as the right-proper backdrop for the events that subsequently unfolded. This heightened sense of possibility is reflected in the prose written by combatants.

Elliot Ackerman, in *Places and Names*, writes of Fallujah: *We are four kilometers outside of Fallujah, the city of mosques: a forest of minarets rising from kaleidoscopic facades, all mosaicked in bursting hexagonal patterns of turquoise, crimson and cobalt.*

Roy McPadden, in *We March at Midnight*, describes his first encounter with the Korengal: *A six-hour voyage brings us to the maw of the Korengal Valley, a gateway of rock into more rock. Slicing out of the mountains here is a protean stream of the same name, which in spring and early summer is a ribbon of whitewater fed by a massif of twelve-thousand-foot peaks. By summer's end, the peaks are naked of snow, and the stream slows to a dribble. I am no lover of rivers, only a field commander who has to cross them.*

Later, McPadden writes: *Of all the provinces, I shudder at the word Kunar, for its black heart is the Korengal Valley. I harbor secret thoughts of a collision with it and confess that*

in this interlude of life, the valley has grown into a phantom of gigantic proportions.

As the quotes suggest, the upshot of this author-and-audience interest in Fallujah and the Korengal is that both places now resonate with higher orders of meaning. Through what one scholar calls “the complex alchemy of nature, history, and legend” books and films about Fallujah and the Korengal participate in a “collaborative process of creating significant places by means of story.” In other words, there are the things that actually happened in Fallujah and the Korengal, and the “textualizing” of spaces by which they have assumed prominence in veteran and public memory. The geographic “spaces” of Fallujah and the Korengal have become hallowed “places” that dominate and even define the two separate theaters. As a result, other places and other narratives struggle to command attention.

I know this is true in regard to Afghanistan. My own deployment to Afghanistan taught me that the Khost-Paktika-Paktia region was home to much fighting and many events central to the American story in Afghanistan. Those who fought in Kandahar might say much the same thing. But Khost and Kandahar do not loom large in American thinking about Afghanistan, and other provinces where Americans deployed such as Herat and Zabul even less so. Stories about those places just plain don’t excite readers as much as do those set in the Korengal. They fight uphill to assert their importance.

Taken together, books and movies about Fallujah and the Korengal accrue a momentum and logic of their own. To have fought in those places is one thing, to tell a story about them is another, and to read about them is another. The relation of stories to actual events and stories to other stories are both dynamic and reifying, with the underlying themes and structures of the events and narratives reverberating in odd correspondences. Events and description of events are related by layers of meaning that transcend

simplicity. An event casually mentioned in one narrative become central in another; some events are examined in prismatic detail in multiple accounts. One story begets another, and though individual narratives may differ, together they constitute a distinctive collective memory and pattern of thinking about their subjects. To participate in the story-telling flow either as a writer or a reader is to further instantiate their legendary status. Doing so implicates the author and reader in the enterprise not so much of truth-telling as myth-making.

The objection, or fear, is that the men and women who fought in either Fallujah or the Korengal have accrued a superior wisdom predicated on what's been termed "combat-gnosticism": their participation in events gives them wisdom not available to the rest of us. If anything, though, each new narrative about Fallujah or the Korengal now has trouble transcending conventional themes and takes, adding only the idiosyncrasies of personal experience. As a quote from a reader of one of the books mentioned above puts it on Amazon: "30 different people, 30 different stories." Some of the narratives emit a self-important aura, or verge on romanticizing death and carnage. But it is also true that each new story-telling variant piques the interest. And why not? The textual hegemony of Fallujah and the Korengal is not salutary in all aspects, but it is by now very real. I know there will be more books about these places, and I know I'll read most of them. If conditions ever permit, I would like to visit Fallujah and the Korengal in the company of veterans who fought there, or the journalists and historians who have written about them, and listen to their stories on the ground they took place.

***

The quotes from academic sources came from the following scholarly studies of links connecting geographic places,

historical events, and narrative memory:

Nile Green, *Making Space: Sufis and Settlers in Early Modern India* (2012): “booksphere” “textualizing space”

Virginia Reinburg, *Storied Places: Pilgrim Shrines, Nature, and History in Early Modern France* (2019): “complex alchemy of nature, history, and legend” “the collaborative process of creating significant places by means of a story”

Hulya Tafli Duzgun, *Text and Territories: Historicized Fiction and Fictionalized History in Medieval England and Beyond* (2018) was also consulted.

James Campbell, in “Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry” (1999) argues that critics buy too readily into the idea that literature about war reflects “a separate order of wisdom.”

Peter Molin’s “Strike Through the Mask!”: Memory and Memoir in Afghanistan

The opening of this month’s column repeats much of a Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature post I wrote in 2018. The rest updates and expands upon that post by reflecting on two recent Afghanistan memoirs by veterans who served in the same area of Afghanistan as I did in 2008-2009. Reader, read on!

***

My tour in Afghanistan as an advisor to the Afghan National

Army was not over when I returned to the States in November 2009. Many things have happened since that have extended its reach deep into my post-deployment life. The list includes:

-the infiltration bombing of Camp Chapman in Khost Province in December 2009, a FOB I often visited before leaving Khost in July 2009.

-the awarding of the Medal of Honor to a fellow US Army advisor I knew from our train-up together at Fort Riley.

-a long article in a major weekly profiling the commander of the advisor unit two or it that referenced many people and places I knew well.

-the WikiLeaks release of classified combat reports, several of which recounted by the advisor team I led.

-a visit from Army Criminal Investigation Command (CID) telling me that they had detained a Russian-born jihadist who had attacked us in Khost in June 2009, killing one of the members of my team, who was the gunner in a truck in which I was a passenger. (The last I time I checked, the jihadist was still in jail in America.)

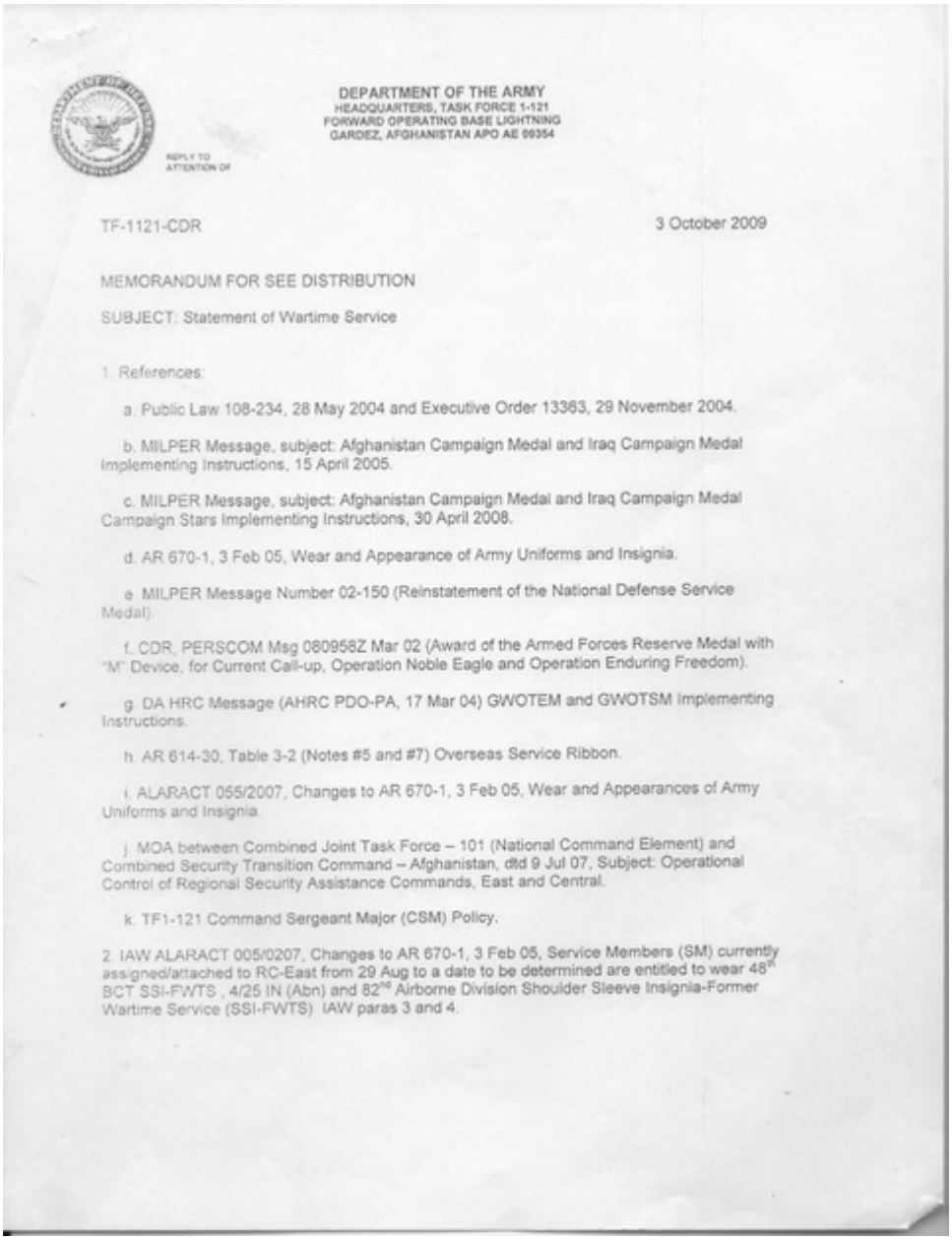
-a visit from another CID agent doing a background check on one of my linguists who was now translating for an American one-star general—this after emigrating to the United States, serving a tour in our Army, earning an Associate's degree, and gaining his citizenship.

-a visit from two lawyers on Bowe Bergdahl's defense team, because my name figures in the Army investigation report of the severe wounding of one of the soldiers involved in the search for Bergdahl.

-a profile in a major media venue of an Afghan National Army officer whom I knew in Khost who has since emigrated to the United States.

-the chance to offer comments at the dedication of the Chicopee, Massachusetts, War on Terror Monument, a chance that arose because one of the six men honored by name on the Monument had been a member of my advisor team.

-efforts in August 2021 to secure the evacuation from Afghanistan of Afghans with whom I had served, efforts that largely failed but which continue today.



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS, TASK FORCE 1-121
FORWARD OPERATING BASE LIGHTNING
GARDEZ, AFGHANISTAN APO AE 09354

REPLY TO ATTENTION OF

TF-1121-CDR

3 October 2009

MEMORANDUM FOR SEE DISTRIBUTION

SUBJECT: Statement of Wartime Service

1. References:

a. Public Law 108-234, 28 May 2004 and Executive Order 13363, 29 November 2004.

b. MILPER Message, subject: Afghanistan Campaign Medal and Iraq Campaign Medal Implementing Instructions, 15 April 2005.

c. MILPER Message, subject: Afghanistan Campaign Medal and Iraq Campaign Medal Campaign Stars Implementing Instructions, 30 April 2008.

d. AR 670-1, 3 Feb 05, Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia.

e. MILPER Message Number 02-150 (Reinstatement of the National Defense Service Medal).

f. CDR, PERSCOM Msg 080958Z Mar 02 (Award of the Armed Forces Reserve Medal with "M" Device, for Current Call-up, Operation Noble Eagle and Operation Enduring Freedom).

g. DA HRC Message (AHRC PDO-PA, 17 Mar 04) GWOTEM and GWOTSM Implementing Instructions.

h. AR 614-30, Table 3-2 (Notes #5 and #7) Overseas Service Ribbon.

i. ALARACT 055/2007, Changes to AR 670-1, 3 Feb 05, Wear and Appearances of Army Uniforms and Insignia.

j. MOA between Combined Joint Task Force – 101 (National Command Element) and Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan, dtd 9 Jul 07, Subject: Operational Control of Regional Security Assistance Commands, East and Central.

k. TF1-121 Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Policy.

2. IAW ALARACT 005/0207, Changes to AR 670-1, 3 Feb 05, Service Members (SM) currently assigned/attached to RC-East from 29 Aug to a date to be determined are entitled to wear 48th BCT SSI-FWTS , 4/25 IN (Abn) and 82nd Airborne Division Shoulder Sleeve Insignia-Former Wartime Service (SSI-FWTS) IAW paras 3 and 4.

a. SM's assigned to ARSIC-E between 29 Apr 08 and 19 Dec 08 are entitled to wear 27th BCT SSI-FWTS.

b. SM's assigned to ARSIC-E between 29 Apr 08 and 31 Mar 09 are entitled to wear 101st Abn Div SSI-FWTS.

c. SM's assigned to ARSIC-E between 18 Dec 08 and 28 Aug 09 are entitled to wear 33rd BCT, SSI-FWTS.

d. SM's assigned to ARSIC-E from 01 Jan 09 to present are entitled to wear Combined Security Transition Command - Afghanistan (CSTC-A) SSI-FWTS.

e. Only SM's assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas (FRKS) for and completed MiTT/ETT Training are entitled to wear the 1st ID SSI-FWTS.

3. IAW ALARACT 055/2007, Changes to AR 670-1, 3 Feb 05, Wear and Appearances of Army Uniforms and Insignia, all Soldiers organic to TF 1-121 are only authorized to wear the current Task Force 1-121 (48th IBCT) Shoulder Sleeve Insignia (SSI) or an authorized SSI-FWTS from a previous deployment.

4. IAW TF 1-121 CSM Policy, all Soldiers assigned or attached to TF 1-121 will wear the current Task Force 1-121 (48th IBCT) Shoulder Sleeve Insignia (SSI), an authorized SSI-FWTS from a previous deployment, or no SSI-FWTS while assigned or attached to TF 1-121.

5. This memorandum also certifies that the SM's assigned/attached to ARSIC-E /TF 1-121 served the required period of service in the Central Asian Combined Joint Operations Area in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM for award of the indicated service medals:

a. Afghanistan Campaign Medal with Bronze Service Star (ACM w/1BSS)

b. National Defense Service Medal (NDSM)

c. Global War on Terrorism Service Medal (GWOTSM)

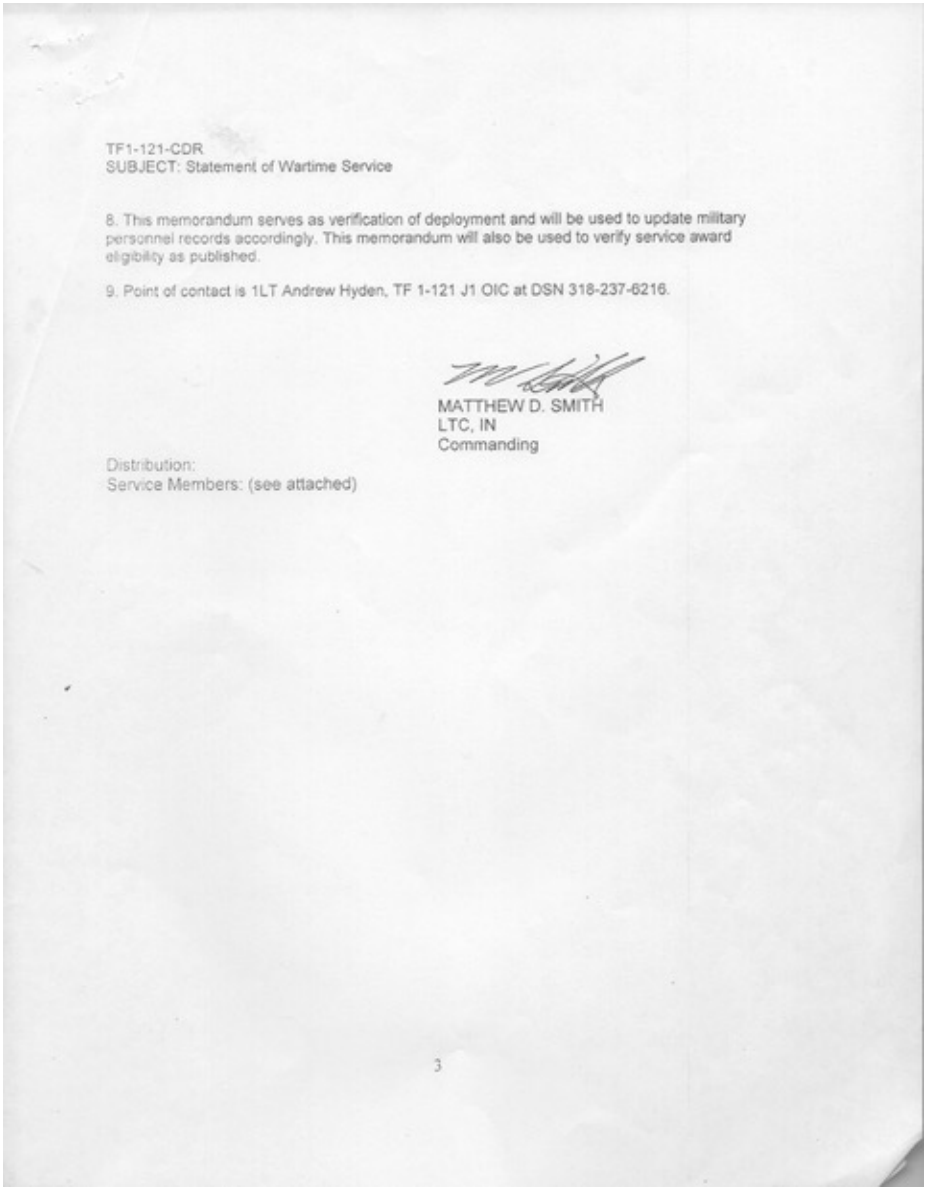
d. Overseas Service Ribbon (OSR)

e. Armed Forces Reserve Medal w/M Device (AFRMw/Mdvc)

f. Non Article 5 NATO (ISAF) Medal

6. SM's are only authorized to wear these awards IAW Service and Component regulation.

7. TF 1-121 is assigned to Combined Joint Task Force 82nd with duty in Afghanistan.



TF1-121-CDR
SUBJECT: Statement of Wartime Service

8. This memorandum serves as verification of deployment and will be used to update military personnel records accordingly. This memorandum will also be used to verify service award eligibility as published.

9. Point of contact is 1LT Andrew Hyden, TF 1-121 J1 OIC at DSN 318-237-6216.

MATTHEW D. SMITH
LTC, IN
Commanding

Distribution:
Service Members: (see attached)

3

According to this Statement of Wartime Service, I could wear any one of eight different patches on the right sleeve of my uniform to signify the unit I belonged to while in Afghanistan. Just knowing your chain-of-command, let alone supporting them, was difficult.

Now, within the last two years, I've become aware of memoirs written by two veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom in the Paktika-Paktia-Khost ("2PK" in military-speak) region at the same time I was there. One is by an Army sergeant who was a member of my Embedded Transition Team (ETT) in Khost province:

Sergeant Major (retired) Chad Rickard's *Mayhem 337: Memoir of a Combat Advisor in Afghanistan*. The other is by an Air Force lieutenant who served on the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Paktia province where I served out the last five months of my tour on a nearby FOB: Lauren Kay Johnson's *The Fine Art of Camouflage*. Together, Rickard and Johnson superbly describe the two spheres of activity that concerned me most: fighting the Taliban and supporting Afghan governance.

I offered glimpses of my day-to-day activities in Afghanistan in my first blog 15-Month Adventure: Advisor Service in Eastern Afghanistan. But those blog posts were written in the heat-of-the-moment and suffer from lack of detail and insight on the events I experienced. Further, I seem to lack the instinct—or the courage—for memoir, and I've never since tried to deepen and thicken the narrative of my own deployment or link the many separate episodes into a cohesive whole. Both *Mayhem 337* and *The Fine Art of Camouflage* do that for their authors in ways that bring my own memories rushing back and help me understand them better. Rickard and Johnson recount many events of which I was aware and sometimes those in which I also participated. Each does a great job establishing the overall ambiance of the mission and the physical characteristics of the operating environment. Both authors write perceptively about the factors that made success in Afghanistan difficult (and ultimately doomed it), while conveying a welcome lack of self-righteousness and self-aggrandizement in the face of the challenges we encountered.

Sergeant First Class Rickard (as I knew him then) impressed me from the minute we met in my first week as advisor team chief on Camp Clark in Khost in 2008. A rawboned former college football player who was now a member of the California National Guard, Rickard exuded competence and a quiet can-do spirit. He was an infantry veteran of two tours in Iraq, and my team lacked both infantry grit and combat experience. We were all willing, but I knew the coming months would be tense.

Rickard immediately volunteered for our toughest mission—serving on a much smaller very remote combat outpost on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border—and as the next few months transpired, I learned to ensure he was in the thick of whatever fighting was to be had throughout our sector. It was an unfair burden for Rickard to shoulder, but my thought was that our operations stood little chance of success without his presence. And as *Mayhem 337* recounts, Rickard eagerly embraced these challenges, with little thought at the time of the consequences on him and his family in the years afterwards, which *Mayhem 337* also documents.

Speaking frankly, and perhaps enviously, Rickard had the kind of tour most infantryman could only dream of. Duty on Spera Combat Outpost brought near-daily engagement with the Taliban enemy, and Rickard's account of working alongside Brigade Combat Team soldiers, Special Forces units, and most of all the Afghan National Army are both riveting and highly instructional for any infantryman who might face similar circumstances in the future. Many episodes stand out, but for me most illuminating were accounts of in-battle coordination with Air Force jet pilots and Army attack helicopters, along with Army artillery, to bring American firepower to bear upon wily and determined foes. While in Khost, I often sat by the radio tracking Spera COP battles, feeling mostly helpless and anxious—reports of small Army outposts being overrun elsewhere in Afghanistan were never far from my mind. As I monitored radio reports, I was aware of how crucial air and artillery support were for saving Rickard and his men from death, but *Mayhem 337* reinforces the point that for those in action their lives depended on allies in the sky. But don't take my word for it, here's Rickard's account from his Acknowledgement:

I want to personally thank each and every pilot and aircrew member who flew in support of combat operations I was involved in throughout my time in Afghanistan. I would not be here today if were not for the daring courage of the pilots who

supported our ground combat operations.

And here's an excerpt illustrating that support in action:

Soon after the departure of the Kiowa's, two F-15 fighter jets reached our location. The pilots conducted their fighter check-in as soon as they arrived. They let us know their call signs, what planes they flew and what weapons they had available. They also told us how long they could stay and help. This team flew a pair of F-15s; their call-signs were Dude 1-1 and 2-1. Dude 2-1 was actually a female fighter pilot, not a "dude" per se; she operated as the flight lead that night… We confirmed that all US and Afghan forces were within the [infrared] glowing perimeters on the mountaintops. After confirmation we said "Roger Dude 2-1, you are cleared to engage." And engage she did. She dropped a 500 pound [Guided Bomb Unit] and scored a direct hit on that group of enemy fighters….

Lieutenant Lauren Johnson was Air Force, too, though by her own account anything but a hot-shot fighter pilot. Rather, she served as the "information operations" staff officer on a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Paktia province. I make small cameos in *Mayhem 337* (Sergeant Rickard thankfully goes easy on me), and though I'm not in *The Fine Art of Camouflage*, I may well have been in the same meetings as Johnson at many points. Provincial Reconstruction Teams were composed of military and civilian specialists charged with governance and infrastructure projects meant to enhance the "legitimate government of Afghanistan." During my last few months in Afghanistan, I was one FOB over from Johnson and largely involved in much the same business. Specifically, our time in 2PK was marked by the run-up to the 2009 Presidential election. We all worked hard and worried endlessly about ensuring the elections were safe and fair, even as we strove to let Afghans "take the lead" as a measure of our faith in their capability and independence. That didn't happen, unfortunately, and the disappointments and vexations

associated with the endeavor foreshadowed the complete collapse of western-style Afghan governance in 2021. They also proved personally devastating to Johnson. The projects she was in charge of came to naught, and several experiences destroyed her idealistic attitude toward the overall mission and general faith in the competence and integrity of the military.

Among its other virtues, *The Fine Art of Camouflage* nails descriptions of the FOB, FOB daily life, and the stultifying and claustrophobic nature of staff work within Army headquarters. Johnson ventured off the FOB occasionally, sometimes for good, sometimes for worse, but the majority of her tour was spent in front of a computer generating the same reports she had filed the day before and in meetings with the same people she sat in meetings with every other day of the week. That business was my business, too, to a large extent. As a middle-aged middling rank officer, I did it all as well as I could and understood, kind of, its necessity. For an idealistic junior officer eager to lead troops and make things happen, such existence was spirit-killing. Though I was more senior to Johnson by far, I identified at many points with her recounting of staff-work trials-and-tribulations, and in particular the disconnected experience of trying to serve a Brigade Command Team whose commander—whom I also served—barely knew of her existence. A key episode in *The Fine Art of Camouflage* describes how a project of Johnson's on which she worked for weeks goes to shit, and how on the nightly radio staff meeting, the Brigade Commander professes to not even knowing about it. For Johnson, being chewed out would have been better than the bemused nonchalance with which the colonel dismisses not just the project's failure, but its worth and all her hard work:

The commander admonished the room to do a better job supporting the others and coordinating on missions, and then dismissed me with a brusque, "Lesson learned. These things happen."

To my mid-ranks career-officer self, I kind of get where the colonel is coming from—he's trying to be nice and not publicly crush a very junior office—but I also understand how condescending and demoralizing the experience must have felt for Johnson. Johnson also has a larger point to make, about how dysfunctional and uncoordinated was almost everything the military tried to accomplish in Afghanistan:

…how had the brigade commander been so unaware? The directive had come from brigade in the first place, and the plans had been in my report for a month, all the BUBS and CUBS and SITREPS and daily/bi-daily/weekly updates. As an official brigade tasking, the training had been monitored on …[the] PRT operations tracker too. I'd worked with the Department of State representative and with Army contacts at each of Paktia's five combat outposts to finalize the attended list. I'd coordinated with pay agents, air transport, security, intelligence, convoy operations, and the mission commanders…. the crossed lines of communication were worse than the tangle of network wires winding through my office….

As the leader of a small element operating in support of the same large brigade, I also often felt marginalized and only intermittently supported. My remote perch led me to observe the internal machinations of the brigade with wry detachment that sometimes flared into frustrated outrage. My own dealings with the brigade commander were also characterized by paternalistic indifference on his part (though in all fairness, an episode toward the end of my tour in Khost rendered a more favorable impression). Along with Johnson, for me it was and is impossible not to think that our own travails mirrored in miniature the uncoordinated and un-sustained American effort throughout and over-time in Afghanistan.

There is much more to be said about each book and both books in tandem. While in some ways the two memoirs are juxtaposed—one a combat narrative by an infantry sergeant, one a story of nation-building staff-work by an Air Force officer

with an eye on how tours in Afghanistan were experienced by women—there is also much that connects them. Each book, for example, situates the author's story in the context of their personal and family histories before and after deployment; both works suggest that one reason it takes so long for memoirs to gestate is that their authors need time to measure the reverberations of their actions across the range of their closest social relationships. Also, I appreciate the authors' even-handed depictions of the Afghans with whom they partnered. Neither Rickard nor Johnson had idealistic expectations nor perfect experiences, but neither were they reduced to sputtering contempt by their Afghan partners' lack of military discipline, their potentially suspect loyalty, or their personal habits grounded in off-putting cultural and religious convictions. Finally, I've only touched on how emotionally debilitating their tours were for both Rickard and Johnson in their own long years after deployment.

There is also much more to be said about the overlaps between my own experiences and Rickard and Johnson's descriptions of places, people, and events and my own. For readers interested in my own experience of combat, the 15-Month Adventure post titled "Gun Run" describes a mission in which I too relied on life-saving air support. I describe the staff-work misery I experienced and observed in a Wrath-Bearing Tree story titled "The Brigade Storyboard Artist." Reflecting on the genre of memoir, I've always been hesitant to criticize the "self-writing" of fellow men-and-women in uniform. Every story is important, and who am I to judge?

Here though, I'll say that though I'm sorry that the authors had to live through the hells they experienced, I'm glad Rickard and Johnson have written the books they have. They will long sit on my bookshelf as narratives that describe in familiar terms an intense period in my own life. Especially since I know (somewhat) both authors, I am happy that they have written such good books and that by their report writing

them has helped them make sense of their own time in Afghanistan. Further, the appearance of the two memoirs makes me wonder how two such fine writers came to serve within my ken during my own deployment. It was obviously coincidence, but it seems like fate. The appearance of their memoirs now reminds me that my year in Afghanistan will never really be completely behind me.

Chad Rickard, *Mayhem 337: Memoir of a Combat Advisor in Afghanistan*. 2019.

Lauren Kay Johnson, *The Fine Art of Camouflage*. MilSpeak Foundation, 2023.

https://petermolin.wordpress.com/2010/07/17/gun-run/

https://www.wrath-bearingtree.com/2020/01/fiction-from-peter-molin-the-brigade-storyboard-artist/

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": Interment at Arlington

The vet read that the hero’s burial ceremony in Arlington Cemetery was taking place the following Tuesday. As it happened, the vet was going to be in Arlington, the county in Virginia, that day and he had known the hero. They had taught together at West Point, and thought the vet was senior to the hero and they didn’t socialize outside of department functions, a couple of episodes had offered closer looks at him. Among other things, the hero was on the softball team coached by the vet in their last summer together.

The hero played left field, an important position in softball. The leftfielder has to catch the long drives hit by the opposing team’s best right-handed hitters. That summer, the hero chased down those towering shots, or circled under them, until he reared them in. It never seemed like a sure thing, honestly, but the hero almost always got them. The hero was fast, too, so he batted lead-off or second in the line-up. He was not a home-run hitter, but could easily turn a single into

a double if the opposing team did not field the ball cleanly or hesitated for a moment.

But the hero was not a hero for his softball ability. Early in the post-9/11 wars he had protested the interrogation tactics used by members of his platoon when they questioned detainees in Afghanistan. Brutality, let's just say torture, was forbidden by policy and regulation, but now appeared to be a tolerated standard practice. The hero sought clarification first from his chain-of-command and then from the highest governmental levels in Washington. He then took his concerns to a human-rights watchdog group in New York. The hero had been celebrated for doing so by many and was even been named a "Man of the Year" by Time magazine. Others, however, considered him a troublemaker. Couldn't he have addressed the problem other than by writing politicians and advocacy groups? The vet wondered how he might have handled the same situation.

At West Point, the vet had seen the hero lead a philosophy workshop. He was laser focused, deeply logical, and profoundly aware of competing factors and viewpoints, which he would unpack in detail in front of the workshop attendees. As he spoke, he paced back and forth like a caged tiger. The furious physical expenditure of mental energy was endearing. The vet had read comments by the hero's former students and it was clear the hero's students had been in awe of him. In the workshop, watching him give birth to the intricacies of an argument, it was easy to see why. The vet also understood why a woman, a colleague, loved the hero and eventually married him.

At the end of his tour at West Point, the hero left the Army after 15 years on active duty. He said he had enough of the military and now wanted to study philosophy as a civilian.

But the years after the Army did not go well. First gradually, then quickly, the hero's life disintegrated. In the beginning, he excelled in graduate school, but then his work grew erratic

and unsubtle. He picked fights with other scholars and his marriage fell apart. Eventually the hero lost his apartment and was several times detained by the police for public outbursts of craziness. He was hospitalized more than once, but because he had left the Army before retiring, and it was not clear that his present maladies were service-related, the VA was slow to assume care for him. Subject to the vagrancies of state-provided mental care, he was in-and-out of institutions.

Friends from the military tried to help. So did childhood friends and distinguished professors who had been impressed by the hero's early work and potential. The decline continued, however, and as so often happens, the hero resisted efforts by others to help him. Toward the end, his grip on what Poe once called "the precincts of reality" was tenuous. In 2021, he was found dead in his room at a mental hospital. The exact cause of his death remains unclear. Was it too much or the wrong kind of medication? Was it suicide? Did his mind and body just give out?

Now the vet sat in his car alongside other cars lined up outside the burial office at Arlington Cemetery. He knew how these interments happened, because the previous summer he had been in attendance for the interment of a childhood friend's mother alongside her husband, a Korean War-era vet, who had died years earlier. The vet had known his friend's father well and knew how much his Army service meant to him, along with the prospect of burial at Arlington. He also knew the interment process to be an orderly and dignified one that respected the deceased and his or her family members. Still, that interment had been a markedly casual event, with little ceremony or eulogizing of the departed. The vet had enjoyed the company of his friend and his two children, who were now adults and whom he had not seen in decades. The cemetery official was a retired Army paratrooper, and the vet, who had also been a paratrooper, bandied with the official about their

airborne days. Only when the cemetery official opened the columbarium “niche,” as the square burial vaults are called, where the ashes of his friend’s father lay waiting for his wife to join him, did the vet feel the momentousness of the event.

On cue, the procession of cars began to snake through the cemetery to the burial location. The hero was also to be interred in a columbarium niche, but there would be a service before the interment. A tent was set up among the gravestones to provide shade for the hero’s immediate family, along with chairs for them to sit in. Others in attendance, about fifty, stood in the sun, though for a summer day in Virginia it was neither hot nor humid. Off in the distance, the vet could see the Pentagon, which seemed ironically appropriate. An Army chaplain, a woman, stood waiting, along with a small detail of uniformed soldiers poised to fold the flag covering the hero’s burial urn. About 100 yards away stood a platoon-sized honor guard and a military band. Also present was a firing squad and bugler. The vet recognized a couple of teachers from West Point with whom he and the hero had taught, but not anyone else he knew. The attendees seemed composed equally of family and friends who looked like they might have either served with the hero or been his students. Only a couple of attendees were in uniform—none especially high-ranking.

The chaplain called the service to order. She said kind words about the hero without shying away from the controversies that marked his service and his sad final days. She read from Romans 8:28: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” When she finished, the detail folded the flag and presented it to the hero’s father. The bugler played Taps and the firing squad fired a three-round salute. Then the chaplain asked for a volunteer to carry the urn containing hero’s ashes to the columbarium. At first no one volunteered, and the vet wondered if it was appropriate if he stepped forward. Then the hero’s father said that he would carry his son’s remains.

The vet had read that the hero's father was a former Marine Corps machine-gunner and a Vietnam veteran. He had also read that the father hated the military and had been a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He was the only male at the ceremony not formally dressed or in military attire. Confined to a wheelchair, wearing a plaid lumberjack shirt, the hero's father exuded determination that his son's life was worthy of military honor.

As the procession walked to the columbarium, the band played a song that sounded like the Elvis Presley classic "Love Me Tender." It's a sweet song, but the vet wondered at the selection. Only later did he learn that the melody belonged first to a song called "Army Blue" that predated "Love Me Tender" and was long associated with West Point.

The columbarium at Arlington Cemetery has its own kind of dignity, but it's narrow for the purposes of a ceremonial gathering. The previous summer, at the vet's friend's mother's interment, there was only the cemetery official, the friend, and the friend's son and daughter. Now the attendees squeezed into the row between the walls of burial niches or looked on from the ends of the rows. More words were said, but from the vet's position it was hard to hear them. After final remarks were completed, attendees filed past the niche and paid their last respects.

The vet had so far viewed the day's events abstractly, almost without emotion or consolidated articulation of his thoughts about the hero. But when his turn came to stand before the urn in its dark square final resting place, tears welled up and the vet suddenly found himself both short of breath and short of words. Conscious that others were waiting in line behind him, he stammered under his breath, "Good job man, good job" and moved on.

Following the ceremony, the vet spoke with his friends from West Point and a couple of others present. Someone pointed out

former students of the hero's. Another pointed out the childhood friend who had gone to the most length to organize help for the hero in his troubled final days. No ready opportunity to speak with the hero's family presented itself, and the vet was hesitant to force the issue. A reception was announced, but the vet didn't get the location and had already decided he would not attend.

An official announced it was time to for the procession to depart and the attendees in their cars drove slowly toward the cemetery gates.

On the way out of the cemetery, the vet saw signs directing traffic to the Marine Corps War Memorial. It had been a long time since he had visited the memorial, so he followed the signs to the parking lot. He walked around the grounds, read the signage, and contemplated the magnificent statue of the six soldiers raising the flag on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima. The crowd was sparse: a few casually-attired tourists and some vet old-timers wearing ball-caps adorned with patches and pins representing military units. Unexpectedly, a wedding party, dressed in their finest, strolled by from a site farther off from the statue where they had gathered for pictures.

After taking it all in for a while, the vet walked back to his car.

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Biographical details about the life of Ian Fishback not recounted from memory were obtained from C.J. Chivers, "Ian Fishback's American Nightmare." *New York Times*, February 21, 2023.

https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/21/magazine/ian-fishback.html

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Afterlife of Words and Deeds

A recent *Los Angeles Times* review of *A Line in the Sand*, the latest novel by Kevin Powers, the author of seminal Global War on Terror novel *The Yellow Birds*, proposes that GWOT fiction written by veterans, which was much celebrated on its arrival, has lost its luster. Author Mark Athitakis writes, "Two long wars, clumsily entered into and clumsily exited, won't capture the hearts and minds of readers the way they did in 2012." Even more pointedly, Athitakis writes that *A Line in*

the Sand "delivers a sense that amid the literary battles of the last decade, the war novel lost. For all its accolades, *The Yellow Birds* and its compatriots aren't much discussed now."

The argument that GWOT fiction and film was once in ascendancy and is now a sideshow intrigues me. I'm on the record for calling the initial flurry of post-9/11 fiction and movies circa 2012 a "Golden Age." In 2018, however, I wrote a *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature* blogpost titled "Does Anyone Remember *American Sniper*?" I had in mind both the book and the movie, but sticking here with the movie, I described watching it on Sunday afternoon network television while channel surfing. Half-paying attention in between naps, commercials, and trips to the kitchen, my impression was that the movie's resonance was now deflated, almost flat, as compared to the fever pitch of media commentary occasioned upon its release in 2014. I didn't state it in the blogpost, but I was also wondering if the cluster of vet-authored fiction, including *The Yellow Birds*, that inspired me to start *Time Now* in 2012, was now past its prime, too.

Musing on the reception and afterlife of GWOT artistic expression, I revisited a 1989 essay by none other than French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. Reading Derrida is never a walk-in-the-park, but this essay, titled "Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments" is reasonably accessible and full of interesting things, beginning with the title, which for some reason omits the expected colon between "Biodegradables" and "Seven." In graduate school, I mined the essay often while writing papers on how literature lingers (or doesn't) in the cultural memory after initial publication.

In "Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments," Derrida first considers biodegradability as an ecological construct, in keeping with burgeoning worry about the ability of man-made materials to decompose over time. The quote below suggests

some of the complexities Derrida finds inherent in biodegradability. The uneven line spacing is not in the original essay, but resulted from my cutting-and-pasting words from a PDF copy of the essay into a Word document. The jaunty result seems to do justice to the often-playful dissonance inherent in Derrida's thinking and writing:

Jacques Derrida's description of a biodegradable object (from "Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments," *Critical Inquiry* 15.4, Summer 1989):

On the one hand, this thing is not a thing, not-as one ordinarily believes things to be-a natural thing:

in fact "biodegradable," on the contrary, is generally said of an artificial product, most often an industrial product, whenever it lets itself be de-

composed by microorganisms. On the other hand, the "biodegradable" is hardly a thing since it remains a thing that does not remain, an essentially

decomposable thing, destined to pass away, to lose its identity as a thing

and to become again a non-thing.

The issue of biodegradability of course is still with us. Just this week I read an article about the danger of "micro-plastic" particles—the residue of bazillions of water bottles and plastic bags, tires and food packaging—that infect even the most fervent plastic recyclers and abstainers. The import is that even as, say, a milk jug dissipates over time, its alteration of the environment persists. And as with milk jugs, even more so with nuclear waste and other more toxic chemical residue.

Riffing on biodegradability, Derrida suggests that the concept of biodegradability might be applied to books, magazines, and newspapers. His fancifully proposes that the processes of biodegradation corresponds with what might be said to be the "shelf-live" of publications in libraries. Left to themselves, texts, especially ephemeral ones such as newspapers, lie largely ignored while they disintegrate slowly into oblivion. The question, Derrida intuited in 1988, was becoming massively complicated by the creation of digital libraries and archives,

which chart a similar-but-different path from first appearance to obscurity. But Derrida wonders whether the ideas and sentiments contained in texts, like micro-plastic particles, ever really disappear. Perhaps they still circulate in diluted, but still potent or even toxic form throughout culture and the lives of people. Or, perhaps the process of biodegradation can be interrupted or manipulated, and old ideas and texts given new life.

Playful as Derrida's musing might be, the larger context of "Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments" is serious. It has more connection with war and war-writing than I have made clear so far.

Derrida's inspiration for writing was a controversy over the discovery that the World War II journalism of another prominent deconstructionist, Paul de Man, was sympathetic to Nazi Germany's attitude and actions to oppress Europe's Jewish population. Derrida does not defend de Man, but implies that the long-neglected physical copies of the newspapers in which de Man's journalism appeared might well have been left to rot. To resurrect them forty years later and hold them afresh for more debate than they received in their own time, Derrida implies, is an abrogation of a "natural" process and thus somewhat unfair to de Man.

That's a curious way of looking at things, for what else are library archives for but to serve as repositories for future scholars to study artifacts of days gone-by? But Derrida does not stop there. Drifting from consideration of physical objects, he proposes that there is such a thing as "cultural biodegradability" that structures the dissolution of a publication's ideas and import into culture over time. He asks, "Can one transpose onto 'culture' the vocabulary of 'natural waste treatment'—recycling, ecosystems, and so on, along with the whole legislative apparatus that regulates the 'environment' in our societies?" In Derrida's formulation, ideas, like micro-plastics, do not achieve maximum potency

only in their original expression, but through a process of permeation of general outlooks and attitudes in what he calls “the great organic body of culture.”

For example, upon publication, a book might be read by many and its ideas publicly debated. With time, in most cases, fewer people read the original book, and the book and its ideas begin to fade. Or, though fewer people might read the actual book, knowledge of the book continues to circulate and its ideas seep into the cultural mainstream, where they influence other ideas and in turn are influenced by them. Specific examples (mine, not Derrida’s) might include The Bible; not so many have read it cover to cover, but its stories and tenets have been imbibed by all. Or, we might consider the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1854. In its time, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was hugely popular and influential in galvanizing abolitionist sentiment in the North. Over the ensuring decades, however, fewer people actually read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but many knew of it, and colorful characters such as Uncle Tom and Topsy became cultural touchstones, as did the anti-slavery sentiment it promoted. Or, to use examples from the literary theory realm, Thomas Kuhn first proposed and explained his theory of the scientific “paradigm” in a 1962 book titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, while Laura Mulvey promulgated the idea of the “male gaze” in a 1975 essay titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Not-so-many read these essays today, but the concepts of the paradigm and the male gaze are generally understood by most educated readers.

The concept of cultural biodegradability is interesting to think about in terms of my own area of interest: books, movies, and art about America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Returning to Mark Athitakis’ article, we can wonder about the process by which the attention a book such as *The Yellow Birds* commanded upon publication withers over time. Per de Man, we can also think about stories, books, and movies that were

overlooked on arrival, but which now possess significance unaccounted for at the time. Also per de Man, we can think about the early writings of now-prominent authors and consider what might happen if we gave them more scrutiny now than when they first appeared.

For example, though the movie version of *American Sniper* now lies fallow in various streaming services, some future critic or scholar might mine it for purposes not apparent now. Or a devotee or devotees will find new ways and new energy to proclaim its importance. However things play out, certain ideas promulgated by *American Sniper* have not stopped resonating, and in fact many have gained valence and saturate thinking about America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among these ideas are the "good man with a gun" sentiment. Or, that special operations represented the most effective means of waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan. And another, the idea that soldiers have difficulty transitioning to civilian life after military service.

Whether "biodegradability" or "cultural biodegradability" best describes the processes of public reception and historical reckoning I'm describing, I'm not sure, but I don't know what the better words are. Derrida doesn't clearly explain whether an important work (a "classic") resists biodegradability by continuing to be read in its original form or whether it exemplifies the way the spirit and messages of a work permeates society through a process of dissolution. He also does not clearly distinguish whether cultural biodegradability is an agent-less process—a function of an organic or structural occurrence—or if it can be manipulated by scholars, critics, audiences, marketers, or the creators themselves. I like the idea that worthy books will find their readers as they will, but there's also plenty of evidence that a book's reception and long-lasting esteem can be manipulated and is often contested. We see it all the time on social media, for instance, where posts frequently proclaim the overlooked

greatness of this-or-that war novel or film.

Still, the ideas in “Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments” are suggestive, even provocative. In Derrida’s formulation, every act, once committed, and every text, once published, commences a process of dynamic interaction with the culture into which it is born. Most works contribute only slightly to the prevailing milieu, either immediately or over time. Other, more highly charged works retain their influence longer. Some possess a radioactive-like toxicity.

De Man (who died in 1983) probably had little reason to think that his World War II journalism would resurface after his death and to a large extent define his legacy. An early example of today’s cancel-culture wars, the rediscovery of his journalism opened consideration of whether de Man’s expressed views in 1941 negated appreciation of his later contributions to literary theory. Or worse, whether hostility to Jews and sympathy for fascist Germany was part-and-parcel with the philosophy and techniques of deconstruction, with the two sets of ideas congruent with each other. In other words, you can’t have one without the other. As Derrida writes, “the actual stakes, the enemy to be destroyed in these simulacra of trial proceedings, is doubtless not only and not principally the de Man of 1940-42, but ‘the Deconstruction’ of 1989.”

A similar recent case involves the former president of Stanford University. Marc Tessier-Lavigne stepped-down when Stanford students discovered that there was manipulated data in research he published between 2001 and 2008. Tessier-Lavigne has denied the charges and apparently was not the member of his research team responsible for the fraudulent data. But he was listed as one of the authors of the research and thus could not avoid the tarnish of scandal.

What would such a case look like for vet-writers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan? Thoughtless or even shameful early publications, or ones that didn’t jibe with the values held by

the later and presumably wiser and more mature author? Dishonorable or incompetent service while in uniform, on deployment, or in combat? Disreputable personal conduct? For myself, I've got a string of publications dating back to the 1980s. I think they hold up pretty well, and I've made at least a token effort to rescue some of them from oblivion, in the form of a *Time Now* post that reprinted my contributions to *Military Review* from 2001-2009. My two blogs, *Time Now* and *15-Month Adventure*, are still online for anyone to peruse, and a few scholarly articles are available to those with access to a university library digital archive. I cringe when I think about places in each blog where I might have been unfair or mean to a real person. Fortunately, those places aren't many or particularly egregious, though I still dread the day that I am called on them. My military record is nothing spectacular, but there's also not much to hang me for either, at least not from the highest of trees.

As for my personal life, I like the line from a great Drive-By Truckers song called "The Righteous Path": "I've got a couple of big secrets / I'd kill to keep hid." My intent is to take my "big secrets" to the grave, but we'll see—secrets are hard to keep buried. Like decades-old journalism and obscure scholarly articles, the particulars of anyone's life are rarely scrutinized until reasons emerge for doing so. The import of cultural biodegradability is that once something is done, it can't be undone, and once something is written, it can't be unwritten, and it all counts.

Mark Athitakis, "What Happened to All the War Vet Novelists? They've Moved On and So Have We." *Los Angeles Times*. May 12, 2023.

https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2023-05-12/what-happened-to-all-the-war-vet-novelists-theyve-moved-on-and-so-have-we

Jacques Derrida, “Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments.” *Critical Inquiry* 15.4, Summer 1989. Peggy Kamuf, a frequent translator of Derrida, is here named as co-author.

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Peter Molin’s “Strike Through the Mask!”: Spotlight on MilSpeak and Middle West Presses

Major publishing house enthusiasm for war, mil, and vet-themed books has noticeably waned in the past few years, but two small presses, MilSpeak Foundation and Middle West Press, have emerged to fill much of the void. Between them MilSpeak and

Middle West have recently published a remarkable number of interesting titles by new and established vet and vet-adjacent authors: MilSpeak published six titles in 2022 alone, with more coming this year, while Middle West has been nearly as prolific. The energetic output reflects the passion and vision of MilSpeak and Middle West's current executives, Tracy Crow and Randy Brown, respectively, both veterans and accomplished authors themselves. The vet-writer community is something of a subculture and vet-writing is something of a genre, but subcultures and genres require material manifestation. In this regard, MilSpeak and Middle West are carrying far more than their fair share of the load by publishing so much mil-writing. Frankly, their presence, let alone their accomplishment, within the contemporary war-writing scene has been a blessing. We are lucky to have them.

Tracy Crow is a former Marine and college writing instructor whose memoir *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine* and craft-guide *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Memoir* are well-worth pursuing. As good as these books are, I'm even more struck by Crow's publishing vision and eye for talent—she seems motivated by recognition that there is a surfeit of talent in the war-writing community that is underserved by the publishing industry. I first met Crow in 2018 at the War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air Force Academy, which featured an astonishing number of contemporary vet-and-mil authors. Crow may well have been recruiting, for a number of authors present at the conference have since been published by MilSpeak or have books on the way.

Randy Brown, aka "Charlie Sherpa," is also a contemporary war-writing plank-holder, early-on offering war-writing commentary on his blog Red Bull Rising and frequently organizing panels at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference. In those early years, Brown was still in uniform in the Iowa National Guard, with whom he later deployed to

Afghanistan post-service as an embedded journalist. Along the line, Brown stood-up Middle West Press as an outlet first for his own writing. Soon came his poetry volume *Welcome to FOB Haiku* and then *Twelve O'Clock Haiku*, as well as the vet-writing anthologies *Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War* and *Our Best War Stories.* Later came titles by other vets and fellow-travelers, with an emphasis on poetry, and more vet-centric anthologies.

I recently asked Crow and Brown to answer a short set of questions about their enterprises, and each responded fulsomely with shrewd and entertaining responses. Their stories offer lively insights into military press publishing and each is packed with guidance for aspiring writers. Crow answered each of my questions as I proposed them, while Brown composed a narrative that riffs on my questions. Read them below, please, and join me in saluting their efforts:

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Interview with Tracy Crow, President of MilSpeak Foundation

When you became President of MilSpeak, what was your sense of its potential? What was your vision for it?

My vision for MilSpeak is constantly evolving. In 2017 when I became president, my vision was limited to relaunching the Foundation's dormant writing workshop component. I'd already been leading workshops for women veterans and women military

family members when MilSpeak's founder, Sally Parmer, a retired, disabled Marine Corps veteran, encouraged me to merge my workshop program with the Foundation's. A year later, we secured the Foundation's first grant, which was from Wounded Warrior Project® for the funding of two weekend writing retreats for women veterans and family members that could accommodate 200 participants and 11 faculty, each of whom was a vet or spouse with creative writing teaching experience and published books.

But Sally's vision when she founded MilSpeak in 2009 had included *two* components—writing workshops and book publishing. Her retired status had afforded her the time to manage both from 2009 to 2013, and MilSpeak's titles from this era are still available on our archived website and on Smashwords. In 2020, I received an unexpected, generous donation from a friend who had seen me lead workshops and wanted to fund others; when I suggested we use her donation to relaunch the Foundation's publishing component, she was overjoyed to do so, and has been actively involved ever since as our CFO.

In 2022, MilSpeak released 6 books in paperback and ebook formats, and will release 5 in 2023, and at least 4 in 2024. Meanwhile, we continue to offer writing workshops, mostly online since the start of the pandemic.

Today my vision for the Foundation is so much larger than I'd dared to dream in 2017. Using Graywolf Press as a model, I hope to evolve MilSpeak Books and our newest imprint, Family of Light Books, as presses recognized for their artful efforts to explore and elevate our understanding of human consciousness.

What are the rewards of being a small-press publisher?

The rewards are numerous. The greatest reward, however, is being able to say yes to a writer with a meaningful, high-quality manuscript who has felt marginalized and shut out by

other traditional publishers, and then the collaboration with that writer from copyediting to cover design, and beyond. Our team of freelance editors and designers work hard to ensure our authors enjoy every aspect of their publishing experience.

What catches your eye in regard to proposals/drafts submitted to you for possible publication?

While MilSpeak publishes books authored by veterans and family members, not all our books are *about* the military or even mention the military. Our mission is to support the creative endeavors from within our community, period. However, the quality of the manuscript—and I'm referring to everything from sentence level writing to use of sensory language, pacing, character development, and a narrative arc—determines whether we'll make an offer.

We've published an excellent coming-of-age debut memoir by Norris Comer, a military family member, who spent his first summer after high school graduation salmon fishing in Alaska, and earned a lifetime of lessons. His memoir, *Salmon in the Seine: Alaskan Memories of Life, Death, & Everything In-Between,* has received so many awards this year I've lost count.

Another family member, Karen Donley-Hayes, reveals the heartbreaking story in her debut memoir, *Falling Off Horses,*of a friendship that began in high school over a mutual love for horses that survives numerous falls, a rollercoaster of love losses and triumphs, and finally, a heartbreaking diagnosis of a fatal illness.

Navy spouse, Samantha Otto Brown, author of the debut memoir, *Sub Wife: A Memoir From The Homefront,* lifts the curtain on nuclear submarine life, revealing how she and fellow wives keep themselves afloat during the occasional excruciating silence during their husbands' sub deployments.

Amber Jensen, wife of a National Guardsman, reveals the

loneliness of pregnancy when her husband is deployed to Iraq, and the marital strains for a couple when a loved one returns from deployment, forever changed, in her debut memoir, *The Smoke of You: A Memoir of Love During & After Deployment.*

Our new imprint, Family of Light Books, has released a brilliant young adult novel, *American Delphi,* by military family member M.C. Armstrong, in which his main character, fifteen-year-old Zora Box, sets out to discover the true history of her family, including her father's secretive military mission, and finds herself at the center of an activist movement with international hashtag status following the tragic death of her best friend, a trans-teen. The Greensboro, North Carolina, Library selected *American Delphi* for its summer reading program, and Kirkus Review described the book as "An intriguing kaleidoscope…compelling….An engaging story of current events and social justice for teen readers."

And of course we've published books written by veterans about the military experience, such as Lauren Kay Johnson's memoir, *The Fine Art of Camouflage,* about her service in Afghanistan as a public affairs officer, Kevin C. Jones's short-story collection, *Collateral Damage*; RLynn Johnson's debut novel, *Cry of the Heart*; and Jennifer Orth-Veillon's collection, *Beyond Their Limits of Longing: Contemporary Writers & Veterans on the Lingering Stories of WWI.*

What have you learned about trying to market war-and-military themed books? What do books about war-and-military themes have to offer a general reading public?

As for the actual marketing, MilSpeak supports its authors and their releases as best as our financial and personnel resources allow, but we've also discovered that the most successful approach *for us* tends to follow an organic unfolding. I can't say enough about the unwavering support from the military writing community, and this includes

military publications as well. Our authors have also appeared on local television programming, podcasts, book clubs, book fairs, etc.

From a business aspect, MilSpeak boosts the success potential of its releases by offering the same wholesale discount to retailers as the large traditional publishers offer, and the same return policy for unsold books. Not many small presses can do this if they're profit driven. As a nonprofit, everything from our sales after paying royalties to our authors gets earmarked for the publication process of another book by a veteran and family member.

I've been closely examining the cross-generational impact of military service for more than a decade now, especially the impact of combat service on families. My sincere hope is that human consciousness will more quickly evolve toward conflict resolution that never includes war, and so our books tend to reflect the lesser known, yet gut-wrenching, aspects of how and why our world mindset seems trapped inside a warmongering matrix.

What MilSpeak titles are forthcoming? What is exciting about them?

In the fall, we're releasing two novels:

Releasing October 15 is *The Waiting World*, by Andria Williams, author of *The Longest Night* that earned a starred Kirkus Review, and that Entertainment Weekly described as "A stunning debut." In *The Waiting World*, Andria takes us back to the era just after WWI, and explores the seedy underworld of an American business tycoon, and that of his two Irish servant girls and their chauffeur-friend who are intent on forging a life on their terms, no matter the risks.

Releasing November 15 is *Changelings: Insurgence,* a captivating science-fiction thriller by Navy veteran and Cal Poly Pomona professor, Liam Corley, who shares that he drew

from his experiences as a humanities professor and his overseas deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq to portray a futuristic world with a potentially harmful outcome for humanity *if* it eliminates what makes it truly human.

Spring 2024, we're releasing three titles—*The Celdan Heresies* (a fantasy) by Megan Carnes; *Shoalie's Crow* (a young adult novel by Karen Donley-Hayes); and *Hills Hide Mountains* (a novel) by Travis Klempan.

Fall 2024, we're releasing a collection of essays and poems about a family's cross-generational military service, *The Indignity of Knowing,* by University of Tennessee-Knoxville professor, Amber Nicole Albritton.

Randy Brown on the history and vision of Middle West Press:

I started Middle West Press as a sole proprietorship in 2003. I had been editor of a number of national Better Homes and Gardens-brand "how-to" newsstand magazines, and I continued to provide freelance writing, editing, and editorial project-management services to that sector, while also pursuing a graduate degree in architectural studies. My architecture thesis involved something you might call cultural-terrain analysis. Emplacing an object of public art as grit in the community oyster, to see what develops.

In 2008, my family and I started preparing for a deployment to Afghanistan. I was an Iowa National Guard citizen-soldier with one previous overseas deployment. Preparing for war, my daytime Army job involved internal communications and organizational lessons-learned. It wasn't public affairs—although I often worked alongside the Public Affairs officer and NCO—but the brigade commander kept asking us all for ideas on best-practices and -policies regarding soldiers' off-duty blogs and social media. The Internet was the Wild West back then. Sometimes, I didn't know what to tell him.

There weren't any training manuals, so I started my own off-duty blog under the pseudonym "Charlie Sherpa." The exercise was equal parts "learn by doing" and "ask forgiveness, not permission." People still call me "Sherpa," particularly in veteran circles. It helps people find my published work. It also helps differentiate between my efforts as a veteran-activist, and as a for-hire writing and editing professional.

I ended up not deploying to Afghanistan. Got the word about 10 days before Mobilization-day. I retired instead. However, I eventually went to Afghanistan on my own, embedding as civilian media with my former unit. That story became an essay, and has even been re-told in comic book form (*True War Stories*, Z2 Comics).

In 2015, I registered Middle West Press as a limited liability corporation in the State of Iowa, and expanded business operations as an independent book publisher of journalism, non-fiction, and poetry. Poet Lisa Stice joined us as an associate editor in 2023. In the past, we've also had the pleasure of working with guest editors such as the *Line of Advance* journal's Christopher Lyke, and Steve Leonard—the creator of the military-themed DoctrineMan!! cartoon.

We call ourselves a "micro-press"—we publish only one to four titles annually, and our projects can be driven as much by intellectual curiosity and artistic exploration as by

potential profit. Our bottom line: We like to complicate and enrich readers' insights into the people, places, and history of the American Midwest—and the U.S. military.

What's the connection between "military" and "midwest"? Both are often overlooked by ivory tower academics, big city publishers, and others who seem to have their own pre-conceptions about what being a Midwesterner or veteran must mean. The truth is, not all veterans are "heroes." Neither are all veterans "broken." Reality is more center-mass than those tropes; reality is equal parts sublime, mundane, and human. To paraphrase Walt Whitman: We contain multitudes.

Veterancy shouldn't be flyover country—a place viewed from 40,000 feet every November 11. War poets—a term that can include veterans and mil-fam and anyone else willing to do the work—can short-circuit expected narratives with amazing, everyday insights into hurt and loss and growth and reconciliation. I've often said that every U.S. citizen has a connection with the military, even if only as a voter and taxpayer. The fight for hearts and minds and empathy for what it means to go to war is out here. In the hinterlands. In the boonies.

Middle West Press published our first book of poetry for the same reason Sherpa started a blog: Learn by doing. Once we learn how to something—and to do it well—we try to teach others. The Army would call it "lessons-learned integration." In 2022, I tried to capture the philosophy in a short prose-poetry-memoir, *Twelve O'Clock Haiku.*

(Another lessons-learned tie-in: After the unit returned from Afghanistan, Middle West Press also worked with my former brigade public affairs colleagues, compiling and publishing a 668-page organizational history titled *Reporting for Duty: U.S. Citizen-Soldier Journalism from the Afghan Surge, 2010-2011*.)

Since 2015, we've serendipitously developed an expertise in curating and promoting "21st century war poetry." Many of these soldier-poets—but not all—are rooted in the American Middle West. Each collection we publish is intended to disrupt stereotypes of what it means to be an American veteran, or to be a member of a military family. After all, we're not all Navy SEALs and American Snipers. Some of us are F-16 pilots. Or Navy Corpsmen. Or Coast Guard mustangs. Or Army logistics soldiers.

We use poetry to build bridges of mutual empathy and understanding, between "military" and "civilian" audiences. Every poem is a conversation.

Our collections usually comprise more than 50 poems. In considering manuscripts, we look for unique voices, life-experiences, and perspectives. We also like to see lots of chewy intersections and contradictions within a poet's veteran-identity. People are not just uniforms, after all—they are parents, spouses, hikers, professors, nurses, etc.

From a business standpoint, poetry books provide low-stakes opportunities for experimentation. We are a traditional-model publisher; in other words, we pay our authors—they never pay us. We don't fund our operations via submissions-fees or "contests." We don't ask our authors to pimp their friends and families for pre-sales. And, when we publish, we use Print-on-Demand (POD) technology—wherever it is sold in the world, a copy of a book is printed only when it is purchased. That way, no one ends up with 500 extra copies sitting in a garage or basement.

Our starting goal with poetry books is to sell more than 100 copies. Because we run on bootstrap-budgets, that covers most everything but editorial labor. Our poetry books are priced to be accessible: Usually about $12 recommended cover price.

With our first books, we ended up doing more than break-even,

and we've been able to replicate those successes a number of times over. By the end of 2023, we'll have published 13 individual poetry collections, as well as anthologies of military-themed prose, poetry, and non-fiction.

Our poetry books are eye-catching, award-winning, and best-selling. One forthcoming collection is by a U.S. Navy Reserve intelligence officer, who also teaches American literature. One is by a U.S. Army veteran of Iraq, who now also writes gritty (and funny) crime fiction [Liam Corley, who is mentioned above by Tracy Crow]. A third is an Army veteran of Afghanistan—she's a divorced single-parent who recently gender-transitioned, after years of sobriety and therapy.

Our books can be found on the shelves of such places as the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, the Dean F. Echenberg War Poetry Collection at the University of Texas-Austin, and even the Library of Congress.

We're particularly excited about an anthology forthcoming this November, *The Things We Carry Still: Poems & Micro-Stories about Military Gear*. Showcasing the work of approximately 60 war writers, the book will also feature a set of 10 discussion topics and writing prompts inspired by the book's content. The foreword is written by Vicki Hudson, a former U.S. Army officer who advocated dismantling "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policies.

We've got some crazy things planned for 2024 and beyond. For example, Middle West Press recently opened a call for a "Giant Robot Poems" anthology that will engage themes related to culture, war, and technology. Everything from Predator Drones to R2D2. We're also conceptualizing a potential first call for an anthology of short war fiction; it would likely be organized around a particular geographic or genre theme.

I continue to volunteer as poetry editor for the national non-profit Military Experience & the Arts' literary journal *As You*

Were—a post I've held since about 2015. Editor-in-Chief David Ervin and other editors work hard to make that publication a welcoming, inclusive space. It's a great market for war-writers who are just starting to explore their stories on the page. They love working with established writers, too.

Middle West Press also underwrites a community of practice called The Aiming Circle (www.aimingcircle.com), a resource for writers who regularly engage military themes and topics. Our coverage helps writers identify potential book publishers, literary journals, academic publications, and other markets for their work. The Wrath-Bearing Tree is one of our most-recommended literary markets.

So that's a quick history of Middle West Press: Grit in the oyster. Learn by doing. Then teach others. Along the way, build bridges and disrupt stereotypes.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

Middle West Press: http://www.middlewestpress.com/

MilSpeak Foundation: https://milspeakfoundation.org/

Full disclosure: I have an essay in the MilSpeak anthology Beyond The Limits of Their Longing and another under consideration for an upcoming Middle West anthology.

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": American Veterans and the Ukrainian Crisis

Bordentown is a pleasant town located on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River about twenty miles north of Philadelphia. For a small town, Bordentown has seen a fair amount of history and notable residents. Clara Barton lived there for a while, as did Napoleon Bonaparte's brother Joseph. Most famously, Thomas Paine, the British author and friend to the American and French Revolutions, bought a home in Bordentown in 1782 and lived there on-and-off until his death in 1809. Paine is sometimes called "the father of the American Revolution" for his writing and active support of the American cause. His 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* stated the American case against England's King George III clearly and persuasively and so helped galvanize the American will to fight for independence. Later in 1776, another Paine essay, titled

“American Crisis” contained the famous words:

These are the times that try men’s souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.

I don’t live far from Bordentown, and occasionally visit it in the course of daily life. So it was on a Sunday afternoon this past February that I arrived in town to find the downtown square packed with people assembled to honor the memory of Peter Reed, a Bordentown native and former Marine who had recently been killed in Ukraine aiding the resistance against the Russian invasion. I had read of Reed’s death earlier in the week, but had not noted the Bordentown connection. Given my own sympathy for Ukraine and interest in the lives of veterans, it seemed a fortuitous coincidence, or even a matter of fate, that I happened upon the ceremony held in Reed’s honor.

From the spoken remarks, it was clear that Reed was well-liked and admired, and also a guy cut from a different cloth. Speakers remembered Reed fondly as a good guy, but also something of a joker. One story was that he had streaked through the new local high school in the days before it opened, christening it in his way to the delight of friends who cheered him on. Another speaker told of how Reed had filled her car interior with wadded-up newspapers in a friendly show of prankster one-upmanship. Every speaker noted Reed’s desire for adventure, to help, and to serve—impulses revealed in service in the Marines as a medic and culminating in stints as an NGO providing medical aid in Mosul and then in Ukraine. This impression is corroborated by a reminiscence published in the Guardian by an author who had worked with Reed in Mosul helping fight ISIS: “Pete was one of the most selfless people I’ve ever met. You should know a bit about the good he did in this world.”

While I listened to the speakers at Peter Reed's memorial, I did not hear mention of Thomas Paine. Maybe I missed it. Maybe the speakers thought it a stretch to invoke his name in connection with Reed's sacrifice on behalf of Ukraine, or they didn't know how. For myself, I greatly admire Paine in his time as a man who combined striking writing ability, political acumen and righteousness, and courageous service in the field. As I listened to the speakers in Bordentown, I came to admire Reed in his time as a man who, like Paine, was possessed by an unwavering sympathy for people fighting against tyrannical government.

Reed, as far as I know, was not a man of the pen, as was Paine, but he was just one of a number of American military veterans who have volunteered to fight on the side of Ukraine. Early on, the most prominent of these has been James Vazquez, a former Marine whose Twitter dispatches from the frontlines described in vivid detail the action and emotional caliber of the war. No doubt Vazquez's model inspired other vets to volunteer, either through admiration or envy.

But more recently, Vazquez's claims to prior combat experience have been discredited, and doubt has been cast on the verity of his reportage from Ukraine. Unfortunately, other articles have also portrayed some American vets in Ukraine as thrill-seekers, or as not having much to offer, as seeking profit, or as having little stomach for the long fight. Several veterans and the organizations with which they are affiliated have become ensnared in legal and financial turbulence that besmirch the good names of the participants and which suggest their utility, even at best, has been marginal.

Such articles are necessary, for the complete picture is important to understand. But in our overheated political times, they also seem motivated by an instinct to discredit the Ukrainian cause and undermine support for it in America. From my vantage point as chronicler of Iraq and Afghanistan literature, art, and movies, I've been most intrigued by the

accounts of Ukraine written by veterans of the GWOT art-and-literary scene. My sense that these men (all men that I know of, so far) have much to offer in terms of insight and expertise and possess the capacity to write shrewdly and in-detail about their experiences. In short, I trust them—not that their ideas are conclusive, but that their words are sturdy start-points from which my own thoughts develop.

Three writers in particular have published long trenchant articles that weigh their observations about American vets in Ukraine in light of their own war-and-military experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan: Elliot Ackerman, Luke Mogelson, and Matt Gallagher. Another, Adrian Bonenberger, the founder of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*, has spoken at length about support for Ukraine on a recent podcast.

Ackerman, a former Marine and now a novelist and journalist, has written frequently about Ukraine for high-profile media outlets such as *The Atlantic* and *Time*. Ackerman's articles often address policy and strategy, but my favorites have been those that describe scenes and people. Ackerman's portrait of soldiers already in the fight or moving to the fight, refracted through his own thoughts about the allure of war, are brooding and evocative, never more so than in an article published in the literary journal *Sewanee Review* titled "Four Letters from Ukraine." The passage below renders Ackerman's talent for scene-setting:

The driver nodded glumly. We piled our bags in his trunk, and he sped us through town to the hotel I'd booked on Expedia a week before. It never ceases to amaze me that you can e-book your rooms in a war zone. Wars can often feel to me like distant, far-off things, even though I have experience writing about them and fighting in them. With a war I've never seen, I usually feel this distance. The stream of headlines, the assault of images—it commodifies war, condenses it into a packageable story. When I feel that distance—whether I'm planning to head to that war or not—I'll often pull out my

phone and see what it would take to get to the front line. In nearly every instance, I discover I could arrive at the war with a place to stay within twenty-four hours. And suddenly, the war feels closer.

Later, Ackerman ruminates directly about the international volunteers he meets in Ukraine:

The effort to rally foreign fighters to Ukraine seems to suffer from an adverse selection problem. Although many are sympathetic to Ukraine's cause, a person must place their life on hold to fight. Typically, this means a person can't have much of a life to begin with. If you have a job, or a family, or myriad other adult commitments, it is likely you can't drop everything and go to Ukraine for an indeterminate amount of time. If you don't have any of these commitments, it might be for a reason, and perhaps these folks … aren't the best raw material from which to forge an international legion.

Luke Mogelson is not a vet, but a journalist and fiction-author who often writes about war-related and veteran subjects. His short-story collection *These Heroic, Happy Dead* is one of my favorite collections of GWOT-themed fiction. Even better, his *New Yorker* account of Kurdish fighters in Mosul served as the basis for my favorite post-9/11 war film so far, *Mosul*. Last year, Mogelson traveled to Ukraine to take stock of the international fighters fighting on Ukraine's behalf. A passage from his *New Yorker* article "Trapped in the Trenches in Ukraine" describes the best and the worst of the new arrivals:

Of the hundreds of foreigners who had been at the facility when it was hit, many had returned to Poland. According to my Canadian friend, this was for the best. Although some of the men had been "legit, values-driven, warrior-mentality" veterans, others were "shit": "gun nuts," "right-wing bikers," "ex-cops who are three hundred pounds." Two people had accidentally discharged their weapons inside his tent in less

than a week. A "chaotic" lack of discipline had been exacerbated by "a fair amount of cocaine."

The [recent] attack functioned as a filter….

As the article proceeds, Mogelson describes members of the Ukrainian military International Legion in action on the front-line, to include the precarious experience of trench warfare. At the article's close, he balances the sense of purpose that animates vets to volunteer in Ukraine against the lack of purpose many veterans felt in Iraq and Afghanistan. One vet in particular impresses him:

More than any other foreign volunteer I met, Doc seemed to be genuinely motivated by a conviction that the conflict was "a clear case of right and wrong." I sometimes wondered to what extent his desire to participate in such an unambiguously just war was connected to his previous military career….

Expanding on that last sentence, Mogelson juxtaposes service in Ukraine with the tenuous displays of gratitude veterans received from Americans for fighting in the Global War on Terror:

I also suspected another appeal in Ukraine for International Legion members. During my lunch with Doc on Andriyivsky Descent, in October, I'd been unexpectedly moved when the old man in the fedora thanked him for his service. I shared Doc's discomfort with similar gestures Stateside, but something here was different. Although the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were transformative for those who fought in them, they had no real impact on most Americans and Europeans. Everyone in Ukraine, by contrast, has been affected by the Russian invasion; everyone has sacrificed and suffered. For some foreign veterans, such a country, so thoroughly reshaped and haunted by war, must feel less alien than home.

Iraq veteran Matt Gallagher and author of the novels *Youngblood* and *Empire City* has published two long articles in

Esquire about his trips to Ukraine. The first describes a quixotic venture in the company of fellow vet-writers Adrian Bonenberger and Benjamin Busch to train rear-guard Ukrainians in basic infantry skills and tactics. Gallagher possesses the sardonic, anti-authoritarian streak of a humorist, but in this piece the instinct for comic appraisal bumps up against his desire to help and belief in a cause that was no joke whatsoever for the Ukrainians he was training:

Then that lawyer does it again, and again, and again, and then, all at once, he's capable. Because he must be. Every woman and man there said they'll defend their homes if the war comes to western Ukraine. I pray it doesn't, but they'll be ready if those pleas go unheard. During our two weeks together, they gave our group their trust, their commitment. It's a heavy thing, to pick up a gun in war. The choice, if it does come, belongs to them alone.

Gallagher's sentiments made me think of Thomas Paine's words from "American Crisis":

He who is the author of a war lets loose the whole contagion of hell and opens a vein that bleeds a nation to death.

Gallagher's second piece more directly explores the motives and behavior of American and other international veterans fighting in Ukraine. The article is buried behind a paywall, so you'll have to accept my summary of it, but the title hints at the ambiguities Gallagher discovered: "The Secret Weapons of Ukraine: A Journey Through the Strange, Semiprofessional World of Volunteers and Foreign Fighters Who, One Year Into Russia's Invasion, Are Risking Everything to Defeat the Invaders." Not everything Gallagher describes is reassuring; several volunteers are obviously opportunistic and less than well-behaved. Gallagher is a fervent believer in the Ukraine cause, so he doesn't throw the let's-just-say "colorful" volunteers under the bus. But he's a shrewd observer of the veteran-scene in America, and he doesn't miss that that some

of the same dynamics that have driven some American GWOT vets to folly have reemerged in the overseas fighting community:

Everyone's story is different. Everyone's story is a little the same. Certain traits and patterns recur as we meet more volunteers. Most are men, but not all. Many of the younger ones served [in the US military] at the tail end of the war on terror and didn't get the combat experience they'd anticipated or perhaps wanted. Some of the older ones sold their businesses and homes to sustain their work. More than a few are living off military retirement and disability checks. I stop tallying the number of divorces and separations.

Taking stock of this ambivalent portrait, Gallagher lands of the side of the glass being half-full:

One can view this as a bit sad, even pathetic. Or one can regard their coming to Ukraine as an act of courage. Here they are, in another war zone, trying to pay it forward to others, because they believe they still have something to give.

The aforementioned Adrian Bonenberger is a US Army veteran of two tours in Afghanistan and the author of a memoir and short-story collection, as well as the founder of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*. Bonenberger's wife is Ukrainian, and he has been in-and-out of Ukraine many times over the past decade. As I write, he is back in Ukraine and serving in the Ukrainian military as an advisor. Though he has not yet written at length about his endeavors, we await the time when he does, for it surely will be interesting. In the meantime, a podcast with Paul Rieckhoff offers insight into his motivations and actions. Speaking of his work helping Ukraine prepare for a spring offensive, he states, "Helping them get ready for the offensive was probably going to be the single most useful thing I could do as a democratic citizen, a citizen of the US, a citizen of the democratic world, of the civilized world."

Later in the podcast Bonenberger explains, "The United Sates

invested seven years of time in me. I went to Ranger School, to Long Range Reconnaissance School. I was a platoon leader and executive officer in the 173rd Airborne Brigade. I was an [operations] officer and company commander in 10th Mountain Division. I knew what I had to offer to the Ukrainians….”

How to read Thomas Paine’s belief and support for America in light of American veterans fighting today in Ukraine? Is the connection specious? Is it meaningful? Perhaps it’s best not to make too much of it. None of the veteran-authors I’ve described above made 1/100th the impact of Paine in his time, even measured collectively, and the same might be said for the international fighters they describe. Paine’s life was not without complication and controversy, both during the American Revolution and afterwards. Today, he is as likely to be as invoked by the right as by the left as an ideological forebear to contemporary political currents. Roughly stated, conservatives view Paine as a fierce critic of overbearing state authority, contra the more popular understanding of him as an apostle of democracy.

Be all that as it may, given the force with which Paine met the demands of the 1776 moment, less savory particulars and after-events seem secondary. My own thought is that anyone who volunteers to get anywhere close to a war-zone has less regard for convention, propriety, and personal safety than most. For Ukraine to defeat Russia now requires men and women of action first, with talent important, and idealism and commitment factored into the equation in uneven doses.

Also important is the war-of-words that place events in context while guiding readers’ thoughts to the fullest appreciation of circumstances. At Peter Reed’s memorial ceremony in Bordentown, after friends and family members spoke, a representative from a local Ukrainian Church took the podium. Though not an official emissary, the man spoke with authority and gravitas. “I know the war in Ukraine is a

distant one for many Americans, but for us it is life or death. Peter Reed's death fighting for Ukrainian freedom may be difficult for you to understand, but to every Ukrainian he is a hero. Thank you for sending him to us. We know you will never forget him, and neither will we."

Later, re-reading Paine, the Ukrainian's words seemed reflected in this "American Crisis" passage:

It is not a field of a few acres of ground, but a cause, that we are defending, and whether we defeat the enemy in one battle, or by degrees, the consequences will be the same.

Works quoted in this article:

Elliot Ackerman, "Four Letters from Ukraine." *Sewanee Review*, Fall 2022.

Adrian Bonenberger, *Independent Americans with Paul Rieckhoff* podcast. Episode 220, May 2023.

Matt Gallagher, “Notes from Lviv.” *Esquire*, March 2022.

Matt Gallagher, “The Secret Weapons of Ukraine.” *Esquire*, February 2023.

Luke Mogelson, “Trapped in the Trenches in Ukraine.” *The New Yorker*, December 2022.

Cengiz Yar, “My Friend Pete Reed was Killed as He Saved Lives in Ukraine. You Should Know the Good He Did.” *The Guardian*, February 2023.

Thomas Paine’s writings are easy to find on-line. I also found the following two biographies helpful in understanding his life, work, and times:

Edward G. Gray, *Tom Paine’s Iron Bridge: Building a United States*. Norton, 2016.

Harlow G. Unger, *Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence*. DeCapo, 2019.

Peter Molin’s Strike Through the Mask!: “So Say We All and the Veterans Writing

Workshop”

Justin Hudnall, the founder and director of the San Diego-based performative writing-and-reading collective So Say We All, asked me to lead a Zoom writing workshop for veterans and veteran-affiliated writers. (The event was co-sponsored by The Wrath-Bearing Tree.) I first met Hudnall many years ago at a writing conference and have long admired what he has achieved with So Say We All. Judging from their social media posts, their readings are very well-attended and lively and fun. They are not always centered on veterans writing, but many have been, and Hudnall has sponsored several writing series specifically for veterans and has published anthologies of vet-writing.

Hudnall asked nice, and I wasn’t about to say “no.” The thing is, though, I’m not much of a creative writer or a memoirist.

I do teach writing, but it's college composition and research papers, not imaginative literature. Nor have I have attended an MFA program. I didn't feel completely unqualified, because I have participated and led vet-writing workshops before. But compared to vet-writers such as Ron Capps, Matt Gallagher, and Tracy Crow, authors with many published books who have led dozens and hundreds of writing classes, I knew I didn't bring much experience or authority to the endeavor. But Hudnall believed in me, and I was intrigued.

One reason I was intrigued is that vet-writing workshops have been huge forces in contemporary war-writing. Organizations such as Warrior Writers, Veterans Writing Project, Words After War, The War Horse, and Voices from War have been instrumental in helping veterans discover their writing voices, find outlets for publication, and build audiences. Situated structurally midway between isolated amateurs in the hinterlands and professional publication in New York City or elsewhere, writing workshops, along with online vet-writing journals, form the material core of the vet-writing scene.

The evening of my workshop, I logged on to find ten participants waiting. The mix was evenly split between men and women. Two Vietnam vets were in attendance; the others were post-9/11. A few had not served in uniform, but had family members who were vets or had worked for the military. I knew a couple, and learned that several had published before, while others were just beginning their writing journeys. The sub-title of our workshop was "Finding Your Voice," which suggests that it was aimed at beginning writers, but I had prepared writing prompts meant to engage both new and experienced writers, veterans and civilians alike. We had two hours, and so I had crafted four prompts, thinking we'd probably have time for three, with one in reserve.

The prompts were designed to preclude dark or graphic responses, which was somewhat disingenuous given that's exactly what many vets want to explore in their writing.

Still, good work could be done, I thought, helping participants connect physical detail with emotional resonance in regard to less sensational subjects. I allotted fifteen minutes for writing on each subject, with ten-to-fifteen minutes following to discuss and share.

The first prompt I borrowed from a Warrior Writers workshop I had attended: “Write about an article of uniform or piece of equipment that was important to you and still lingers in your memory.” I’ve seen this prompt used in other places, too, and there’s even been contests built around the theme. It’s also a staple subject of vet social-media threads, so I thought it would be a good one to start with.

I wrote to this prompt alongside the attendees. In truth, I had been thinking about the prompt all day and then wrote my passage an hour or so before the actual workshop. Be that as it may, I wrote about Leatherman utility knives:

When I first joined the Army I noticed that many soldiers more experienced than me carried on their belt not just a jackknife, but a particular kind of multi-purpose tool called a Leatherman. The Leatherman resembled a Swiss Army Knife, but without the elegance of design. Where a Swiss Army knife seems like, well, it was made by Swiss artisans, a Leatherman was dull black and seemed forged out of cheap or leftover tin. It wasn’t even all that functional. When I got my hands on one for the first time, I noticed right away that the blade was neither long nor sharp, the bottle and can openers marginally useful, and the scissors and saw functions pathetic. A saw? The only function that seemed like it could be useful were the pliers, but how often was that going to be necessary? Plus, when I priced a Leatherman in the local military gear store, it seemed very expensive for what you were getting.

But that’s the thing—the idea was not to buy a Leatherman with your own money, but to obtain one through your unit supply shop. Leathermans were cool; the soldiers who had them whipped

them out with panache and were always all the time finding some little task to do that could only be performed with one of the multitools. And not only did all the cool guys have a Leatherman, they were able to obtain them for free, because they knew someone in supply with whom they had made a deal to get one off-the-books. To actually have to buy a Leatherman was evidence that you weren't yet worthy enough to wield one. If you were a newbie in the unit, not having a Leatherman was a sign of exactly how new you were.

And so it was for the first twenty years of my military career. No Leatherman for me, just ordinary old pocket-knives of one brand or another. But then, in training at Fort Riley prior to deployment to Afghanistan, we drew a lot of personal gear. In fact, we drew gear three times at three different places, and there were individual issues as well. And every time we opened our bag to receive new equipment, the supply guy would drop in a Leatherman. Not once, not twice, not three times. By the time I packed my duffle bags to fly to Afghanistan I had four Leathermans.

I didn't think I was now cool, but something had changed, and things were different.

I shared this vignette and we discussed it for a few minutes. A participant then volunteered to read his vignette, which against my expectations, turned out to be very graphic. I offered comments meant to be supportive while also returning things to a less intense place. Other participants either had not written anything or were not ready to share, so we talked generally about the prompt and writing process.

The second prompt invited participants to write on a trip they had made in the military, or just before or just after. This prompt was inspired by a University of California summer writing-intensive for veterans I had once co-taught. At the writing-intensive, a student-veteran of Chinese-Uighur descent had written about a trip he had made cross-country from Fort

Benning, GA, to California after completing his service. His short essay, which described the places and people he had met on this long trip, with the residue of Army-service and his family in China on his mind, had many of us in tears when he read it at our final group event.

I hoped to capture some of this magic, and indeed this prompt was more of a hit than the first one. Most of the attendees either read their vignette or chimed in with comments about memorable military journeys. One vignette described a bus ride while on leave through the wilds of New Jersey and New York. Another described deploying into the Middle East at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom on a military landing craft. I didn't write on this prompt, but read a classic Brian Turner poem, "Night in Blue," about flying home from war:

At seven thousand feet and looking back, running lights

blacked out under the wings and America waiting.

a year of my life disappears at midnight,

the sky a deep viridian, the houselights below

small as match heads burned down to embers….

We only had time for one more prompt, so I posted one that occurred to me from reading the veteran fiction and short-stories: I asked participants to describe a memorable character they had met while in the military. Like the second prompt, this one generated a vibrant response. Everyone either read or spoke about a larger-than-life person they had known in the military. In some cases the vignettes were light-hearted and affectionate. More seriously, one was about someone who had been important in the author's life at one point but who had since drifted away or perhaps was no longer alive.

As a model for consideration, I deliberated between two

vignettes from contemporary novels. One was from Nico Walker's novel *Cherry* in which Walker describes the death of a platoon-mate named Jimenez:

The battle roster number was EAJ-0888, and we were trying to think of who that was. We knew it was a guy from First Platoon because Staff Sergeant White had called it in. We knew it wasn't Specialist Jackson, First Platoon's medic, since line medics weren't attached to Bravo from HHC and if the dead guy were Jackson the battle roster number would have started with HHC and not E. The first initial A wasn't much help was we weren't in the habit of calling one another by our first name. It took us the better part of ten minutes to come up with a guy from Third Platoon whose last name started with the letter J….

The last time I saw him was about eight hours before Haji killed him. He'd been boxing Staff Sergeant Castro in the weight room, sparring, and Castro had popped him on the nose pretty good so his nose was bleeding—not broken or anything, just bleeding….

Jimenez was a cherry….

The other passage was from Stephen Markley's novel *Ohio*. Markley's not a veteran and *Ohio*'s not exactly about the military and war, but two soldiers who fought overseas are central characters. In one place, Markley describes a group of soldiers reminiscing about a deceased comrade named Greg Coyle who referred to everything as a "MacDougal," as in "Bring that MacDougal over here" or "And then this MacDougal said….":

When they stood for inspections, Dan, like everyone, would get ripped, maybe because he'd stored his compression bandages in the wrong place or always tried to get away with not wearing the side plates of his body armor (those heavy, awkward five-by-five bastards). Greg Coyle, no matter how goofy he was, never got ripped, was always on point. Coyle, who referred to

everything as a "MacDougal." A bore snake, pliers, a target at the range, military-age males, MREs, ops, battalion—they were all just MacDougals to him. To the dismay of the whole company, within weeks of their deployment everyone was saying it.

"We're getting those up-armored MacDougals next month."

"Those powdered MacDougals—goddamn! Better than Mom's homemade MacDougal."

"That other MacDougal was getting rocked by IEMacDougals."

They landed in Iraq in 2006, when the country was no joke, but that joke worked right through rocket attacks and EFPs.

The second thing Dan did after he got out and visited Rudy in the hospital was attend Bren Della Terza's wedding in Austin, Texas. A lot of his friends from Iraq were there, guys he hadn't seen in a while because they'd gotten out after two tours. Badamier, Lieutenant Holt, Cleary, Wong, Doc Laymon, Drake in his wheelchair, "Other James" Streiss, now with two robot hands. They of course got drunk and began referring to everything as a "MacDougal," annoying the hell out of those piqued Texas bridesmaids. Decent, churchgoing women who had never seen soldiers cut loose. How hilariously stupid they could be. In his buzz, Dan found himself wishing to return to 2006, to be back on patrol with his friends.

Ultimately, I chose the *Ohio* passage; the death of Jimenez passage from *Cherry* is fantastic but also both graphic and full of Army infantry jargon I was not sure everyone would get.

At this point, nearing the end, everyone except one participant had shared at least one vignette. This last participant now volunteered to read his passage in response to the first prompt, about a piece of military equipment. As he read, I could see why he had hesitated at first. The piece was

brooding and complex; the piece of equipment was intimately connected with a serious family event, but widely separated by the passage of time. For such a short piece, it really packed a punch; it was both very moving and also very accomplished. I was glad the author shared it with us, and I hope he finds means to share it more widely in the future.

And with that our time was up. “You’re up, you’re moving, you’re down,” as we used to say in the Army to describe the quickness with which infantry soldiers must pop up-and-down when charging against enemy fire. I didn’t offer many pearls of writing wisdom, nor tips for professional success. The main thing was to make the event absorbing in the moment. Writing is an individualistic endeavor at heart, but I wanted to convey how meaningful writing can also be inspired by the company of sympathetic fellow authors.

As I reflected on the event in the days following, I realized I had not availed myself of two very worthy vet-writing handbooks: Ron Capps’ *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story* (2011) and Tracy Crow’s *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story* (2015). Both are full of sensible advice, inspiring examples, and creative writing prompts. *Writing War* includes many excerpts from classic and contemporary published war-writing, while *On Point* offers more personal modeling of how the events of one’s life might be transformed into memorable prose relatable to all. But each is highly recommended.

So, to end, thank you Justin Hudnall. Other workshops in the So Say We All/Wrath-Bearing Tree series have been led by Andria Williams, Abbey Murray, and Halle Shilling. I don’t know Shilling, but I can vouch that Williams and Murray are both authors and teachers with much to offer students and emerging writers.

Another author in the war-writing scene, Jesse Goolsby, once wrote, “There are blank pages in front of us all. If one wants

a different war story then go write it, and I wish you well." I like the spirit of that, and I hope that the So Say We All/Wrath-Bearing Tree collaboration continues. Here's to all the leaders of vet-writing workshops and to all who participate in them.

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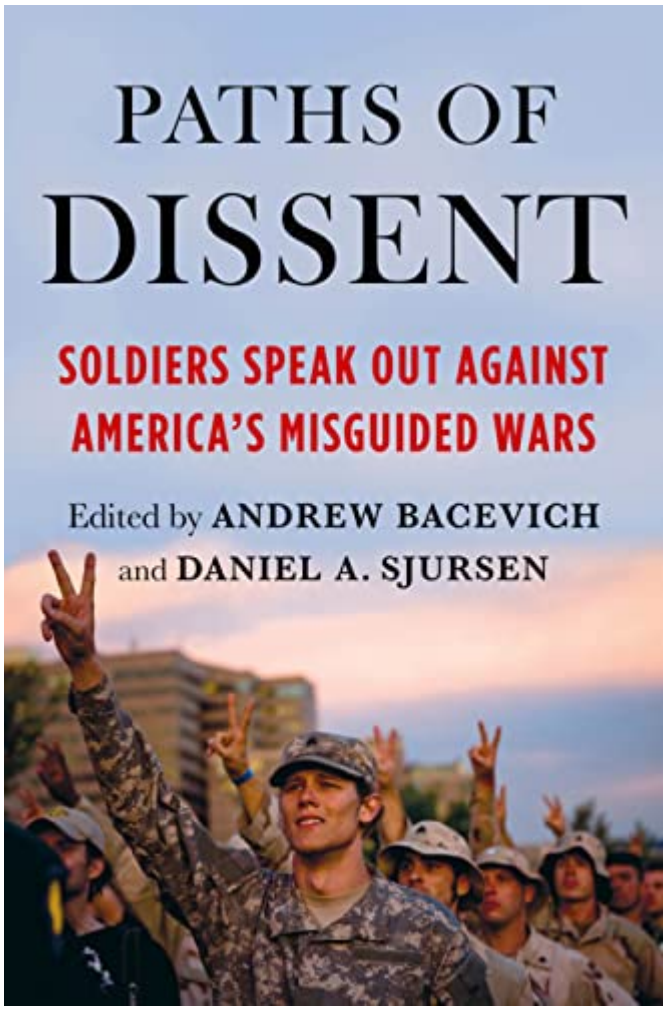
Peter Molin’s Strike Through the Mask!: A Review of Andrew Bacevich’s “Paths of Dissent”



What did you do if you were deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan and believed the wars you volunteered to fight were unethical or badly managed? Keep quiet and perform your duties as best you could? Take your concerns to the chain-of-command? Express your reservations privately to friends and family? Protest publicly by writing a congressman or news outlet? Or, wait until you were out of service to tell the world about your misgivings?

In *Paths of Dissent: Soldiers Speak Out Against America's Misguided Wars* (2022), editors Andrew Bacevich and Daniel A. Sjursen invite fourteen veterans of the Global War on Terror to describe acts of public protest they made while still serving or in the years afterward. The contributors describe the events that led them to protest and explore the consequences of their actions. They also reflect on the shape dissent has taken in the post-9/11 contemporary political and

cultural climate.

Contributors include field-grade officers, junior officers, and enlisted service members; former non-commissioned officers are notably absent. Army and Marine voices dominate, with only Jonathan Hutto representing the Navy and no former Air Force or Coast Guard personnel featured. Hutto is the lone African-American voice, and Joy Damiani's the sole woman, while Buddhika Jayamaha's contribution illustrates the multi-cultural make-up of America's post-9/11 military. Arguably the most-well known contributors are National Football League star and Army Ranger Pat Tillman's brother Kevin and Army veteran-author Roy Scranton. In many cases, the contributors' acts-of-protest were letters written to influential decision-makers in Washington or opinion-pieces published in the *New York Times* or other high-brow journalistic outlets. Others were published in military venues such as the *Armed Forces Journal*, or in book form. Contributors often describe brief moments of mainstream news notoriety, but curiously, the Internet as an outlet for protest or as a possible galvanizer of public outrage is rarely mentioned. Only a few authors report actively participating in public protests or anti-war organizations.

The lack of a vibrant antiwar movement is foregrounded in Andrew Bacevich's introduction, as Bacevich, a retired colonel, came-of-age in the Vietnam era. That war's glaring sins and mistakes, as well as the ensuing public demonstrations, are on his mind: "In fact, from its very earliest stages until its mortifying conclusion, America's war in Vietnam was a crime." The implication, then, is that Iraq and Afghanistan were also crimes, with the additional message being that we have ignorantly repeated Vietnam's mistakes. "…of this we can be certain," Bacevich writes, "rarely has such an excruciating experience yielded such a paltry harvest of learning."

The dismal historical record drives Bacevich to ask

contemporary contributors to examine the disconnect between their isolated protests and popular tolerance of the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, marked as they were by torture, wanton killing, disrespect for our allies, helplessness in the face of Improvised Explosive Devices, unresolved debates about policy and strategy, and, most of all, lack of success. The personal narratives that follow Bacevich's introduction are varied and compelling.

For the field grade officers represented, such as Jason Dempsey, Paul Yingling, and Gian Gentile, speaking out against failed policies and tactics came not in the guise of impassioned outcries, but as reasoned analyses in books and thought-pieces aimed at military decision-makers. To a man, they report their ideas and objections fell on deaf ears. Gentile, an Army colonel who served in Baghdad at the height of the surge and subsequently took issue with COIN strategy and its primary proponent General David Petraeus, states it most bluntly: "From what I can tell, [my] seven years of professional military dissent had no impact on the actual US strategy and the conduct of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan." Instead, the failure to conform to repeat the party line brought upon their authors ostracization leading to early-retirement. No one's going to feel too sorry for colonels forced to live on a colonel's retirement pay-and-benefits, but taken together, the essays by this group of authors are savvy about military institutional politics and culture, particularly within the officer corps and especially in regard to its capacity for intellectual honesty and rigor.

The essays by junior officers typically begin by describing the youthful idealism that led the authors to the military, followed by accounts of how their idealism was crushed first in training (or in their educations at West Point or Annapolis), and culminating in scornful howls fomented by battlefield events in Iraq and Afghanistan. Army infantry

officer Dan Bershinski describes how losing his legs to a mine in Afghanistan made him a pariah within the infantry corps. Rather than treated as a hero who might speak the truth of combat to officers in training, he was isolated from the junior officers whom he wanted to help become better leaders for fear his words and injuries might bum them out. For Marine Gil Barndollar, two desultory tours in Afghanistan drove home the point that the war was unwinnable, in equal parts due to failed American overarching strategy, the incompetence of the Afghan military, and his own units' risk-averse and uninspired tactics. For Marine Matthew P. Hoh, experiences in Iraq similar to Barndollar's in Afghanistan soured him. For these former officers, the gaping chasm between stated goals and ideals and actual experience of the war was intolerable. The sentiment expressed by Hoh that after leaving the military he vowed "to live a life according to how my mind, soul, and spirit dictate—to be intellectually and morally honest for the remainder of my days"—unites their accounts.

The contributions by junior enlisted service members are the most varied and in many ways the most interesting reflections in *Paths of Dissent*. Often, they recount dutiful performance of duty while in uniform, even by left-leaning and artistically-minded soldiers such as Joy Damiani and Roy Scranton. Airborne paratrooper Buddika Jayamaha reports with almost chagrin and regret an act-of-protest—an article he and squad members composed for the *New York Times*—he undertook while serving in the ranks while in Iraq. Frankly, the sense that the military was a reasonably tolerable institution for young men and women just starting out in life seems to predominate. Only Jonathan W. Hutto's essay describes a sustained and contentious wrangle with his chain-of-command and the big Navy while in uniform born of miserable terms-of-service. For most of the enlisted authors in *Paths of Dissent*, the real drama takes place after leaving the military. Several accounts report flirtation with anti-war movements. A more common experience is a period of drift and dysfunction as they

sorted out their past lives as soldiers with efforts to build meaningful lives afterward. Jayamaha writes, “I had too many choices, and every choice seemed hollow. I had survived the war relatively unscathed, thankful to my colleagues, leaders, and God for saving my dumb ass… But what would be the most meaningful way to spend the rest of my life? How could I be of service again?” Similarly, Roy Scranton writes that “…dissent may need to take form not in words but in deeds: not as yet another public performance of critique but as the solid accomplishment of repair.”

The principled literary objections to small-unit practices or big-military policies recorded in *Paths of Dissent* differ from more overt forms of protest, such as refusal to obey orders or demonstration outside the halls of power. There are, however, other ways veterans manifested dissent than by writing letters, disobeying orders, and marching in the streets, which Bacevich and Sjursen seem not inclined to foreground. We might think of the low-boil burn virtually every deployed soldier felt about the wars. It was evident to almost everyone that that victory was far-off as the wars were being imagined and fought. As someone who has read dozens of Global War on Terror soldier memoirs and fictional portrayals, I’m surprised that the truculent dissatisfaction of lower-enlisted soldiers and junior officers surfaces in only a few *Paths of Dissent* accounts. Damiani’s essay points to it, as does former-Marine’s Vincent Emanuel’s; general readers might know this spirit of unruly disobedience best from the sarcastic Terminal Lance cartoon strip.

We might also consider how the national conversations around Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and veteran suicides represented if not direct dissent, then touchstones by which the ill-begotten wars were often measured. In other words, the cries for help broadcast by troubled veterans might be understood as a dissent that had not found the right words for what those cries signified. Only Jonathan W. Hutto’s

contribution directly references racism as a rationale for dissent; Hutto's unfortunate experience illustrates how large could be the gap between the military's stated ideals and the reality of life in the ranks for people-of-color. Even in Joy Damiani's essay, which wonderfully documents what might be described as an early case of "quiet quitting" to silently register protest, gender inequity and sexual assault and abuse are not explored for the rottenness they all too often exposed at the core of military culture and the war effort. Finally, the idea that alienation generated by disgust with military hypocrisy and incompetence might lead to anti-establishment fervor for President Trump and radical conservative outrage is not considered in *Paths of Dissent*. What might Ashli Babbitt, the Air Force veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan who died storming the Capitol on January 6, 2021 have to say on the matter? Or active-duty Marine Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Scheller, Jr., whose tirade against President Biden for his perceived mishandling of the evacuation of American allies at Hamid Karzai International Airport in August 2021 effectively ended his military career?

So, *Paths of Dissent* leans heavily toward mannered outcries-from-the-left against the American war machine, inspired by conscience, principle, and duty. I like that fine, but the mannered approach also hints at reasons why protest never caught hold with the populace as it did in the Vietnam era. Bacevich and many contributors view the tepid indifference of the American public as structurally facilitated by the all-volunteer military that allowed the populace to safely avoid thinking about the war. Considered from the populace's perspective, the Global War on Terrorism did not exact much of a cost, and was hazily connected with the fact that there were no more major terrorist attacks on American soil. "Thank You for Your Service" and "Support the Troops" rhetoric was enough to demonstrate care and assuage guilty consciences about not personally doing more to fight "terrorism." Left mostly unspoken was a less-flattering corollary in regard to veteran

protest: “Well, what did you expect? You volunteered for it.” Even more: “You volunteered for it and were well-compensated for your service.” Vets themselves were subject to the force of these sentiments. It’s also hard not to think that a significant portion of the American public rationalized that there were plenty of Al Qaeda in Iraq and Taliban in Afghanistan who hated America and wanted to kill American soldiers. To continue to fight them—to not admit defeat—registered as legitimate, whatever the problems that accrued in the process.

Thus civilians, deferring to the military itself to shape and win the wars, did not demand accountability from political leaders, who in turn did not demand accountability from senior military leaders. In the absence of oversight, the military in the field floundered. Units did what they could, which often wasn’t much. Soldiers, murky about the big picture, understood missions in terms of tactical proficiency, loyalty to their squads, and body counts of dead Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters. Without clear orders and a winning strategy, soldiers made up their own minds and often took matters into their own hands. Some fought more brutally than policy and circumstance called for, while others turned in lackadaisical efforts that focused on staying safe and doing as little as possible.

While demanding that civilians and civilian leaders listen more carefully to the voices of soldiers, *Paths of Dissent* zeroes in on the military’s own culpability for creating the specific conditions that caused soldiers to dissent, as well as its inability to correct those conditions. An overarching message repeated often is that the military was and is incapable of critiquing or reforming itself. The accounts by field grade officers illustrate that perpetuating the status quo is the imperative that most governs military culture, not winning wars or taking care of soldiers. Even relatively sustained efforts at internal change, such as the pivot to a counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq, or application of manpower

“surges” in Iraq and Afghanistan, have been poorly conceptualized and wracked by group-think and “flavor-of-the-day” thought-processes. A political sphere and populace that either refused to exercise oversight or just didn’t care made the situation even worse. That the whole war enterprise might have been a disgraceful crime, as Bacevich suggests, tugged at the mind of all participants, thus adding layers of denial and self-deception. Given such inadequacy, is it any wonder that junior officers and junior enlisted felt unsupported and unheard?

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Paths of Dissent is dedicated to Ian Fishback, the Army special forces officer who took his grievances about the lack of guidance regarding the use of torture while interrogating prisoners in Iraq to the Washington political establishment and media mainstream in 2005. Bacevich reports that he asked Fishback to contribute, but Fishback was too overtaken by the madness that consumed him at the end of his life to author a publishable essay. Bacevich himself is no stranger to dissent; a retired Army colonel himself, he has written books whose titles illustrate his own objections to America’s modern wars: *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (2005*), Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War* (2010), and *The Age of Illusions: How America Squandered Its Cold War Victory* (2020). Co-editor Daniel A. Sjursen is not as well-known, but he’s a retired Army officer who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and is now associated with the website Antiwar.com.

Paths of Dissent: Soldiers Speak Out Against America’s Misguided Wars. Edited by Andrew Bacevich and Daniel A. Sjursen. Metropolitan-Holt, New York. 2022.

Peter Molin’s Strike Through the Mask!—Elliot Ackerman’s “The Fifth Act: America’s End in Afghanistan” and Jamil Jan Kochai’s “Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories”

Afghan resettlement camp, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, October 2021

It’s a commonplace that America largely ignored the long war in Afghanistan while it was being fought. Now, after a brief flurry of heightened interest in the 2021 evacuation of Afghan allies from Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) in Kabul, Afghanistan has again receded from national interest.

But another truism has held that a proper accounting of America's post-9/11 wars, either in fiction or non-fiction, couldn't usefully happen until the wars concluded. "Tell me how this ends," is a quote ascribed to General David Petraeus in regard to Iraq. The imperative now is timely in regard to Afghanistan.

And so, the first drafts of history, in the form of online articles and podcasts by veterans who fought in Afghanistan and in particular those who were involved in the HKIA evacuation, have begun to appear. In summer 2022 came former-Marine Elliot Ackerman's *The Fifth Act: America's End in Afghanistan*, among the first of book-length appraisals.

Ackerman has always been quick into print. His previous books—some fiction, some non-fiction—have appeared with yearly regularity and have consistently zeroed in on hot-button issues: refugees, disabled vets, Syria, China, and now the Afghanistan end-game. More a novelist, essayist, and memoirist than a scholar, historian, or journalist, Ackerman's primary subjects in *The Fifth Act* are his own life and thoughts, which he portrays in vignettes heavily reliant on narrative and physical description, which he then connects to large-scale events in which he played parts. Though *The Fifth Act* is not a work of focused, deep analysis, Ackerman definitely has ideas born from his experience fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan and, more recently, circulation at high-levels among military and national powerbrokers. Judging from *The Fifth Act*, Ackerman has an eye-opening number of well-placed contacts in the nation's military and security apparatus, as well as in government. An invitation to lunch with Afghanistan's ambassador to America in the summer of 2021 is described; so too is an invitation to speak privately with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Similarly, many of the officers with whom Ackerman formerly served with in the Marines and as a CIA paramilitary officer are still in service, and a surprising number were stationed in Kabul in 2021 and involved

in the evacuation effort.

These connections come into play in one of *The Fifth Act's* two main narrative thrusts: description of the part that Ackerman played, from afar in Italy, and operating mainly via text messages, helping busloads of Afghans evacuate in 2021. Ackerman at the time was on vacation in Italy with his wife and kids, and vignettes of tourist-life are interspersed with recaps of text exchanges with his network of fellow veterans in Kabul and around the world fighting to evacuate Afghan allies. These scenes, to my mind, are vivid and dramatic. Even more compelling are passages depicting scenes of combat in Afghanistan leading small American advisor teams and Afghan militias in battle. Ackerman has seen an extensive amount of combat, and a previous book, *Places and Names: On War, Revolution, and Returning* (2019), recounts actions in Fallujah that led to him being awarded a Silver Star. The Afghan accounts in *The Fifth Act*, however, are far from triumphant. Instead, they are haunted by Ackerman's sense that he has failed in certain respects and disappointed people who were counting on him. Two long passages describe combat missions recovering bodies of American fighting men; another describes a wrenching conversation with a mentor whom he must tell that he is leaving a CIA career in which he was being groomed for success. The connection between the two narrative arcs, mostly juxtaposed, but sometimes asserted explicitly, is clear: Failure experienced on the personal level in Afghanistan reflects the American failure at large, with both arcs culminating in the ad hoc evacuation effort in 2021. Underlying Ackerman and his network's desperate desire to rescue endangered Afghans is the battlefield ethos of "leaving no man behind."

Speaking personally, and also on behalf of at least some veterans, these passages resonated strongly. My own tour in Afghanistan was marked by events remembered remorsefully, even painfully, and my own efforts to help Afghans evacuate in

August 2021 (and since) were all-consuming, though without the successes Ackerman and his network achieve. (Earlier I have helped three of my interpreters emigrate to America, and remain in periodic contact with two of them, who are doing well. I am also still trying to assist allies still in Afghanistan who are stuck in the infernal Special Immigrant Visa purgatory.) GWOT memoirs by officers are fewer than those by enlisted soldiers, and the enlisted memoirs tend to portray officers harshly—incompetent and self-serving, often out-of-touch and even delusional, not to be trusted. Be that as it may, *The Fifth Act* excels at tracing the deep tugs of responsibility and duty that motivated at least some officers to do their best in tough circumstances. Responsibility and duty are embedded in military codes-of-honor, but *The Fifth Act* documents how they are experienced personally as desire to please, desire to not disappoint, desire to measure up, and desire to form allegiances with fellow officers of perceived merit. Early on, Ackerman describes how Marine officers are judged as either "a piece of shit or a good dude." Something of the same emphasis on personal reputation and honor animates Army officer social dynamics, and I'm sure the other services as well.

Intermixed with the passages about evacuation efforts and combat missions in *The Fifth Act* are ruminations on the collapse of Afghanistan in the wake of the American withdrawal and Taliban takeover. Some of Ackerman's ideas are widely shared, but given interesting new formulations. The tendency of Americans to fight a twenty-year war "one year at a time" is brought home to Ackerman by his observation that buildings on American bases were built out of plywood rather than concrete. Afghan military ineptitude is touched on, but the real issue, he asserts, was the doomed structuring of Afghan forces that had ethnic minorities fighting outside of their regional homelands. To send, say, Uzbeks, to fight in Pashtun regions such as Paktika and Kandahar de facto deprived the Afghan National Army of local legitimacy and cultural

competence. Glossed over are American military tactics and operations, either those that didn't work or which might have worked, to include consideration of indiscriminate night raids to kill or capture high-value targets that many critics suggest destroyed Afghan trust and confidence in the American war effort.

Instead, Ackerman holds Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden accountable on-high for decisions that led to military and government failure in Afghanistan. According to Ackerman, Obama's declaration that his 2009 surge would be short-lived was an open invitation to the Taliban to wait out the influx of forces. He judges President Trump's Doha Accords a craven notice to the Taliban that the country would soon be theirs, while messaging the Ashraf Ghani government that they were effectively out of the picture. Regarding Biden, Ackerman maintains that the final collapse that led to the impromptu evacuation was an extreme failure of leadership. He asks why, given the US military presence in so many countries around the world, it was so impossible to conceive of leaving a force of some (unspecified) size and capability in Afghanistan to protect American interests and facilitate working relationships. Finally, Ackerman suggests that the American public's failure to care much at all about anything in Afghanistan represents an egregious manifestation of a civil-military divide that left many military members and veterans (such as Marine lieutenant colonel Stuart Schiller, Jr. and former airman Ashli Babbitt) seething with resentment and contempt.

In a review of *The Fifth Act* by Laurel Miller published in *Foreign Affairs*, the author, an Obama-era diplomat who served in Afghanistan and Pakistan, refutes Ackerman's big-picture analysis while expressing scant regard for the human narratives that constitute most of Ackerman's story. Miller accuses Ackerman of basing his claims on opinion rather than scholarly analysis of facts and events : "When the book

comments on policy and politics, it offers no basis for its reasoning besides Ackerman's personal experience." This is a reasonable charge, I guess, given the highly-literate *Foreign Affairs* readership. I don't think Ackerman would disagree and general readers might not expect otherwise. But Miller makes a further claim that bears heavily on what will follow in this review. That *The Fifth Act* is so "me-centric" is actually congruent with the biggest problem with the American war effort in Miller's diagnosis: from beginning-to-end it paid short-shrift to the cultural and structural aspects that defined the Afghanistan operating environment while remaining fixated on American goals, policies, and actions, as well as the personal experiences and opinions of participants. "Looking at the conduct of the war through a narrow aperture," Miller writes, [Ackerman] focuses, as Washington did, largely on U.S. forces and U.S. policy; the politics, motivations, and experiences of Afghans are pushed offstage." Books such as *The Fifth Act* illustrate, then, how Americans measured the war primarily in relation to American perspectives, while marginalizing Afghan (and Pakistani) actors.

Bad reviews suck, and valorizing the experience and opinions of like-minded individuals over those of racially different "others" and structural aspects can be a problem. In regard to Afghanistan, this line of critique also appears in a *Los Angeles Review of Books* review of Afghan-American author Jamil Jan Kochai's 2022 collection of short-stories titled "War Is a Structure: On Jamil Jan Kochai's "*The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories*." Author Najwa Mayer praises Kochai's stories about Afghans both in America and in Afghanistan for "[i]ndicting a transnational structure of war that conscripts everyone" as opposed to war literature that "glosses over the geopolitical structures that produce unequal suffering." Continuing, Mayer writes, "War's structure includes its diffuse militarisms, profit economies, reforged borders, and cultural marketplaces, as well as its displacements and wounds, which leave indelible marks and absences long after

the bombs have dropped." Ultimately, Mayer praises the stories in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak* for finding fresh literary-thematic means of not "narrating the harsh trials of war and displacement through the interior life of a character." So, according to Mayer, down with stories that emphasize the "interior life of a character" and up with literary portraits of the "transnational structure of war." That sounds dry, but literary efforts to alter the template of things-that-happened-to-me-and-what-I-thought-about-them are welcome. Mayer's review elsewhere highlights how Kochai's stories are imaginatively and poignantly crafted, a sentiment I share.

But Mayer's review really begins to crackle when she turns her attention to Ackerman's own review of *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak* published in the *New York Times*. Ackerman is not totally critical, but over-all the review is luke-warm. Ackerman is not especially impressed by Kochai's literary verve and innovation, and outright rankles at Kochai's failure to get military details right. Most of all, he is irritated by what he perceives as Kochai's portraits of white American soldiers as evil and Kochai's overall "fixation on whiteness." Ackerman writes, "When Kochai wants to signal characters are generically bad, he describes them as white; all the characters from the U.S. military — a remarkably diverse institution in reality — are described as 'a small clan of white boys.'" In response, Mayer states, "Yet, very few white characters appear in the collection; indeed, a narrative decentering of whiteness in a collection about the US empire's racialized wars is, perhaps, the point. Kochai does, of course, intimate the well-documented history of white supremacy that is foundational to the enterprise of US imperialism— a history never lost on the colonized themselves."

Mayer's concern expressed here is measured compared to numerous other denunciations of Ackerman (and the *New York Times*) following publication of his review. Played out in

Tweets and blog posts, one of the charges was that in a short review Ackerman focused obsessively on trivial aspects of *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*—getting military detail right—at the expense of more considered evaluation of its virtues. The larger charge was that the review was racist and so per force was the *New York Times* for commissioning a former Marine officer and CIA operative to write a review of a book that illustrated the ravages of war on Afghans in their home country and displaced throughout the world. Ackerman's review is curious in respects (*The Haunting of Hajji Hotak* has otherwise been universally acclaimed), but Ackerman upon reading the social media firestorm that followed his review must have been thinking about his own endeavors on behalf of Afghanistan. To have lived and fought side-by-side for some 500 days-and-nights with Afghans and to have successfully engineered the evacuation of hundreds of endangered Afghans, to say of nothing of having written a novel—*Green on Blue* (2015)—that is focalized through the eyes of a Pashtun, only to be reductively categorized as a member of a "small clan of white boys" by Kochai and "a former Marine and CIA officer" by Kochai's supporters must have grated. The closing words of *The Fifth Act* quote a video-message from an Afghan who with his family squeaked through the HKIA gates and is now on to a new life:

For such a help, for such a mercy, for such a service, I have no idea how to thank. But I'm thankful of everyone, of every single person of US America, because we never dreamed of such a thing. Their love. Their mercy. Thank you. Thank you for everything.

Jamil Jan Kochai's family emigrated to America from Afghanistan in the early 1980s; they might have had similar high hopes and equally copious amounts of gratitude. The stories in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*, heavily autobiographical (though enlivened with flights of magical-realism fantasy), trace the subsequent decades of transiency,

menial jobs and poverty, sickness and injury, constant cultural clash (both within the family and up-against the larger strictures of American life), and ultimate disillusionment and remorse bordering on regret that the family had attempted such an audacious transplantation. Roughly half the stories are set in contemporary Afghanistan as characters travel back to their home province of Logar or the capital of Kabul. War has ruined the lives of the Afghan characters in the novel, and to the Afghan-American characters it's a matter of chagrin that it is the Americans, not the Taliban, who are responsible for blowing apart Afghanistan culture and society and making so many people miserable. And yet, as fractured as modern Afghanistan is portrayed in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*, the Afghan-American characters, given a choice, commit to life, on whatever terms, in contemporary Afghanistan as preferable to continued second-class citizenship and cultural alienation in America.

All in all, a grim vision, but making the tension and anxiety compelling as stories are the characters that (perhaps) most resemble Kochai himself—immigrant sons imbued with American habits and attitudes who carry the weight of their family and cultural expectations. These characters for the most part come to detest how thoroughly Westernized they have become, though they also struggle with their parents' old-fashioned ways and outlooks. It is these characters' often sulky and sometimes irreverent voices that spice up the stories in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*. To my ears, they are in the great tradition of young male adult American fictional characters—think Huck Finn, think Holden Caulfield—struggling with the circumstances of their lives and who wield scorn as a weapon to protect the shreds of their idealism while desperately searching for place and purpose in adult life. The opening paragraph of the first story, "Playing *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*" illustrates:

First, you have to gather the cash to preorder the game at the

local GameStop where your cousin works, and even through he hooks it up with the employee discount, the game is still a bit out of your price range because you've been using your Taco Bell paychecks to help your pops, who's been out of work since you were ten and who makes you feel unbearably guilty about spending money on useless hobbies while kids in Kabul are destroying their bodies to build compounds for white businessmen and warlords—but, shit, it's Kojima, it's Metal Gear, so, after scrimping and saving (like literal dimes you're picking up off the street), you've got the cash, which you give to your cousin, who purchases the game on your behalf, and then, on the day it's released, you just have to find a way to get to the store.

That's a bravura opening, to be sure, inflected throughout with vivid detail and signifying resonances. Not to make too much of it, but the wildly undisciplined melange of sentiments expressed by the young male narrator also resembles that of disgruntled Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans flailing against the limits of their own lives, as expressed in many GWOT stories and memoirs.

It's doubtful anyone will be inviting Jamil Jan Kochai and Elliot Ackerman to the same dinner party anytime soon, nor ask them to share a conference stage. The war-of-words surrounding their recent works reveals that the civil-military divide still gapes, and efforts to speak across it can easily exacerbate mistrust and miscommunication. However, it's not impossible to like both authors' books. Readers interested in Afghanistan-American relations and the Afghan diaspora in particular can read them in tandem for insight into how the population flows linking the two countries are often experienced individually as confusing and disappointing.

Former site of the Joint Mguire-Dix-Lakehust Afghan Resettlement Camp after its dismantling. July 2022

Elliot Ackerman, *The Fifth Act: America's End in Afghanistan*. Penguin, 2022.

Jamil Jan Kochai, *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories*. Viking, 2022.

Elliot Ackerman, *NYTimes* review of *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*:

https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/19/books/the-haunting-of-hajji-hotak-jamil-jan-kochai.html?smtyp=cur&smid=tw-nytbooks

Laurel Miller, Foreign Affairs review of The Fifth Act:

https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/unwinnable-war-america-blind-spots-afghanistan

Najwa Mayer, *LARB* review of *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*:

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New Interview of Author Hassan Blasim, by Peter Molin

Hassan Blasim's 2014 short-story collection *The Corpse Exhibition* captured American readers with its harrowing portrait of an Iraq wrecked by authoritarian rule, oppressive Islamic custom, American invasion, and sectarian in-fighting. The stories in *The Corpse Exhibition* were Poe-like in their ability to combine story-telling prowess—often humorous—with unexpected and sensationally graphic violence. Especially for readers familiar with the growing body of works written by American veterans of Iraq, *The Corpse Exhibition* aptly portrayed the nightmare of recent Iraq history from the other side, while confirming the sense that however bad Iraq might have been for American fighting men and women, it was infinitely worse for Iraqis caught in the melee. Now comes Blasim's *God 99*, a genre-defying text from which signature-style Blasim short-stories emerge organically from a textual seedbed composed of memoir, auto-fiction, and transcribed emails. The narrator is "Hassan Owl," an Iraqi exile now living in Finland, who begins a blog titled God 99 to document the experience of other Iraqi refugees living in Europe, but that conceit is only the start-point for a wide-ranging set of story-lines and thematic concerns. Roughly categorized, these include descriptions of Hassan Owl's early life in Iraq, where the dream of a peaceful life full of artistic creativity are blasted by political and religious persecution and violence,

the many-year exodus that follows as Hassan Owl makes his way out of Iraq to Finland, the texture of everyday life in Finland in which quote-unquote normal existence is elusive for Arab refugees still touched by enduring conflict in the Middle East, and, finally, Hassan Owl's attempt to reconnect with a beloved family member now said to be living somewhere in the Middle East.

Author Hassan Blasim. Photo by Katja Bohm.

That's a lot, and adding spice to it all are short interludes between chapters excerpted from a long email thread between Hassan Owl and a mentor, a fellow Iraqi émigré named in the novel Alia Mardan, who is based on the Iraqi expatriate writer Adnam al-Mubarek. Potentially intimidating, the hybrid mix is unified by Blasim's dazzling prose voice, which inflects descriptions of even mundane occurrences with funny and/or startling story-turns and moments of imaginative insight. *God 99* offers a profound sense of the connectedness of war in Iraq and contemporary European life, and, even more so, a superb self-portrait of an artist in exile—a 21st version of James Joyce, Henry Miller, and the other revered expatriate authors of 20th-century literature.

I had a chance to speak with Blasim about *God 99* and his current life in Finland. We spoke in English via Zoom, and I have condensed and clarified his answers.

Molin: Do you have a particular audience or ideal reader in mind when you write?

Blasim: I never imagine that someone's looking over my shoulder while I write. But because I write in Arabic, I do consciously try to play with classical Arabic style, mostly by incorporating street language, to make an Arab reader feel the uniqueness of what I'm trying to do. Mostly though the fight is with myself, and I don't consider what any reader might think—there's just not time or space for that. When I send the book to the publisher, it's pretty much finished—to include the design for the cover and the lay-out of the text. That's very important to me. The publisher may suggest changes, but I'm not usually very receptive. Some readers and reviewers haven't understood *God 99*; I think they expected or wanted more short-stories since my previous book—a collection of short-stories—had been successful. I had more short-stories, but to publish them as stand-alone tales in a collection to me was boring. I wanted to incorporate the stories into a larger and more complex structure, which a novel allowed me to do.

Molin: How would you describe your reception in America and in Europe?

Blasim: I don't think world literature is popular in general in America, which means people aren't used to looking for Arabic books and probably don't understand real Arabic culture apart from what they get in the movies or the news, both of which are full of cliches. I especially don't understand the publishing market and the intellectual climate. When I first published in America, I was happy like any author would be. But you need someone with energy to promote you to readers and newspapers and critics, and I didn't know how that works. Unfortunately, my first trip to America was not enjoyable. It was a huge problem getting permission to enter the country, both in terms of obtaining a visa and then going through customs, which made me feel like a criminal. And without going into detail, some of the readings and writing events were

unpleasant, too. I’m not in a hurry to repeat any of that. In Europe it’s better for me because I’ve learned a lot over the years and become more recognized by readers and book people. My books are translated into many languages, they’ve been adapted to theater often, and every month there are one or two book festivals somewhere where I’m asked to read.

Molin: How about in Iraq and the Arab world?

Blasim: When I first began writing stories in Arabic after arriving in Finland, I sent them to many publications in Iraq and other Arabic-speaking countries. But no one was willing to publish them because they said they broke too many taboos and the language was too coarse. So my first publications were online and then later in print in Europe. Only after I was translated into six languages in Europe did anyone in an Arab country publish me, even though I was already popular among young people who could read me online. But now with *God 99*, it’s the same thing again. It’s currently banned either officially or publishers won’t touch it. I still feel my real work should be back in Iraq and helping Iraq understand itself better, but I’m not permitted to do that. It would be dangerous for me and my family still in Iraq to even try. It’s still very easy to get shot by someone for expressing unpopular views.

Hassan Blasim and Peter Molin in one of the three Zoom interviews conducted for this story. Screen capture by Peter Molin.

Molin: What about fiction attracts you?

Blasim: It's important for English and American readers to know that I don't only write fiction, I write poetry, criticism, plays, and essays, too, that haven't yet been translated into English. I also write a lot in support of refugees, gay rights, and Iraq and the Middle East. But as for fiction, it's what I have loved most all my life, from the time I was a boy. I always liked the way stories could contain extremes and opposites, such as how a story could be both a love story and a horror story, a funny story and a sad story, both tender and violent. Fiction is serious for me, but it's also play and pleasure. In my writing, I enjoy trying to make all these parts come together. A lot of my sense of how to write fiction comes from my love of movies, from which early on I was impressed by how easily they switched between different types of scenes and moods. In my stories I want that

same effect, something unexpected happening, something changing all the time. That's how I try to write, too, I don't plan anything ahead of time, I just enjoy the rhythm of writing and the chance to play. I open my laptop and I type….

Molin: *God 99* pays tribute to many writers and movie-makers who have inspired you, both Arabic and Western. As a youth in Iraq, what attracted you to European and American art, film, and literature?

Blasim: When I was growing up, my friends and I loved European and American movies, art, music, and books, me probably most of all. It seemed so free—there were no taboos and everything was possible. A lot of it was easily available. Even after the first Gulf War, for example, in the early 90s, we were still reading Raymond Carver and Richard Ford stories. When economic sanctions were put in place by the US that limited imports and forced us to restrict the use of electricity, we would still gather in apartments and have parties while watching Oliver Stone movies. We loved Arab writers and artists, too—we celebrated all art and artists, especially contemporary ones—they were heroes to us.

Molin: One writer referenced frequently in *God 99* is the Italian author Italo Calvino. What do you like about Calvino?

Blasim: Calvino is very popular in Arab countries generally. For me, I love him because he is my opposite. I'm very loud in my writing, like an Oliver Stone or Quentin Tarantino. But Calvino is so cool, and you can tell he's a slow and deep thinker, in a good way. I'm jealous of people who can sit and consider things without getting excited, because that's not me, nor is it like Iraq, which is so passionate and excitable, like heavy-metal music. The part in *God 99* where I describe fleeing Iraq and traveling through Europe making my way to Finland with only book, Calvino's *Mr. Palomar*, is true.

Molin: That's important—the book you carry with you when you

are fleeing from one country to another! Another writer you mention is Henry Miller. How is Miller important to you?

Blasim: I discovered Henry Miller in the 1990s and read six of his books, all of which was a big shock for me growing up in a society where so much was restricted. He's a great fighter and he's honest.

Molin: When did your admiration for American and Western art become complicated by politics and war?

Blasim: From the beginning. As a teenager reading Western books and watching Western films, I learned many ideas about freedom—individual, cultural, religious, and political. My friends and I wanted to change culture and society as much as we wanted to be rid of Saddam, and we didn't like the restrictions of Islam either. Mostly we just wanted to do what we wanted, such as drink, which I started to do as a teenager. I quickly learned that books could be transgressive, too—many were censored and you could get in trouble if you read them. So in the beginning, my love of Western art placed me in opposition to the dominant attitudes in Iraq.

That continued in college where I studied film. From classroom discussions and making short films, I learned that it was dangerous to complain about the government, so I kept quiet about politics, but I still got into trouble. After I made a documentary about poverty in Iraq, for example, I was visited by Baathist officials who questioned my motives. My teachers always complimented my ideas and work, but it was clear that they were also warning me about being too radical and too outspoken. Within the college there were lots of rumors about spies, and one of my teachers warned me that if I didn't keep silent, the police would send for me after sunset, which was an idiom for being executed, being sent "into the dark"—we knew many people were being shot in those days. Meanwhile, members of my family were also in trouble with the government, which was constantly watching us. This is when I knew that I

would eventually get into trouble if I stayed in Iraq and it was important to find somewhere freer and safer.

After the American invasion in 2003, the problem for me changed. By 2004 I was in Finland, but I was hearing horrible reports from friends and family in Iraq and I could see things were going to get very bad. The sectarian civil war was breaking out, and the danger and violence were worse than ever. So now I began to speak out and write against the Americans and the religious violence the invasion unleashed.

So, my attitude toward America is complicated, like a crazy mystery. In terms of the culture and people, I don't know many Americans, but my Iraqi friends in America encourage me to visit again or think about moving there. They tell me the people are friendly and the living is easy, more so than in Europe. That wasn't exactly my experience on my first short visit, as I mentioned above, but the diversity of people, the literature, and the music all are appealing. The politics and the capitalism are not.

Molin: During the period you were trying to flee Iraq and then settling in Finland (2000-2004), how did you keep alive the dream of being a writer and artist?

Blasim: In high school I wanted write and make films, and I studied film in college. I was always writing, but then my life was unsettled for a long time, but when I got to Finland I began to write again, and I had some small jobs that allowed me to write and translate, but it was boring and not creative. But fiction and public writing happened after I finished work and was sitting at home. After I discovered the Internet everything changed for me. The Internet gave me an outlet and allowed me to build an audience, and then led to the print publication of my books.

Molin: You must get asked about identity a lot—have you come to think of yourself as Finnish?

Blasim: It's funny because I'm a Finnish citizen, but I'm not considered a true Finnish writer because I don't write in Finnish and so am not eligible for Finnish literary prizes. Still, I now have a lot of good memories from living in Finland for many years, and when I travel around Europe, it feels good to return to Finland, where I am comfortable. But I also still feel like an exile, which doesn't make me sad. Exile can be a gift for a writer, or for any human being. When you think about it, reading is a form of exile—when you read a book about New York or Tokyo, you go into a temporary form of exile that takes you out of the boring daily life of your own country and allows you to see things differently. I've learned not to be become too attached to one place, so I treat any location I'm in like a hotel—one room is in Baghdad, another is in Helsinki, etc. That's also how I've come to think about my identity.

Molin: In *God 99*, it's written that Finns are very conservative except when they're in the sauna or at the bar. As someone who is one-quarter Finnish, I like the part about the saunas and the bars.

Blasim: Yes yes, I like it here a lot. The country is peaceful and the people respect free speech. That's good, very good.

Molin: In *God 99*, the chapters recounted by the narrator are interspersed with short interludes transcribing email conversations with a woman named Alia Mardan. In an Author's Note you explain that the emails with Alia Mardan are based on actual emails you exchanged with Iraqi writer Adnan al-Mubarak, who lived for many years in Denmark before dying in 2017. Why is al-Mubarak important to you and how did you devise this form for the novel?

Blasim: As I began to write *God 99*, I had a lot of stories but no structure. I was also depressed about the death of al-Mubarak, who was my friend and mentor. When I was on the move from Iraq to Finland from 2000-2004, he would write me long

emails full of talk about great artists, classical Arabian folklore, and philosophy. I didn't have any books or much time to read, and I was very desperate, so he was my best friend and teacher, an angel really. Those emails meant so much to me even when I arrived in Finland and was working in restaurants and was even homeless for a while. We often talked about writing a book together, but never got the chance while he was still alive. When after his death I was lost emotionally and thinking about how to bring the pieces of *God 99* together, it occurred to me to use our email dialogue to frame the stories I had written. It might make things difficult for the reader at first, but it works for me personally and I think for the book, too. The emails in *God 99* are all real, though I cut them up and made a collage of the thousands of emails we've exchanged.

Molin: You change the gender of your interlocutor from a man to woman. Why?

Blasim: That's my ode to Scheherazade—the inspiration for a thousand stories!

Molin: Alia Mardan is interested in the 20th-century French-Romanian essayist Emil Cioran and writes frequently about her ongoing project to translate Cioran into Arabic, which seems to amuse the narrator. How is Cioran important for *God 99*?

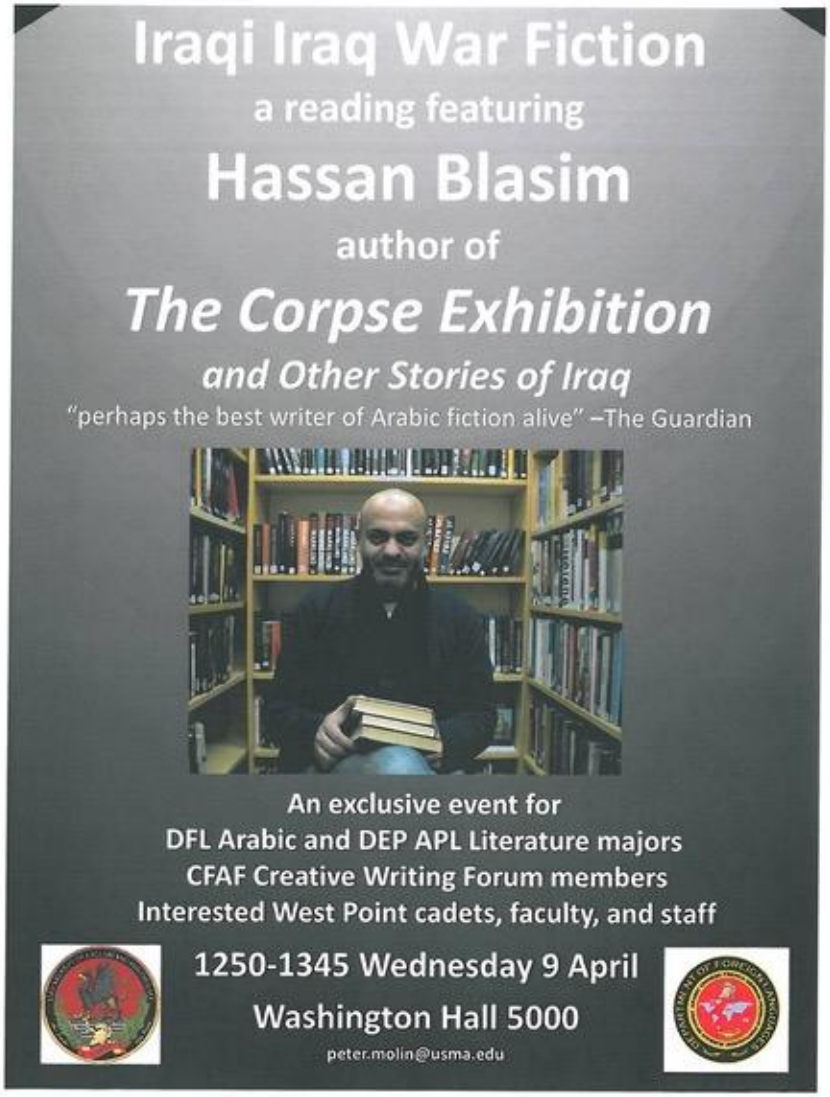
Blasim: Cioran is not popular in Europe now, in part because he had a brief association with the Nazis, [an association he renounced and regretted]. Maybe he is just too dark for Europe, but he is widely loved in Arab countries. They love him so much it's crazy. It's his pessimism, his bleakness, his nihilism, his black humor. But I haven't read all his books, mostly I like his quips, many of which I got from al-Mubarak.

Molin: All right. Let's end with some bigger questions.

Blasim: Smaller questions are good, too. Just normal is best.

Molin [laughs]: OK, then, how about last thoughts?

Blasim: I wonder what your memories are of my visit to the United States Military Academy at West Point, where you were my host. Did you often invite artists and writers?



Poster made by Peter Molin for Hassan Blasim's visit to West Point.

Molin: Yes we did, at least while I was there, and before and after, too, I think. We brought in mostly Americans, and not all military writers, a lot of civilian writers, poets and filmmakers, too, including Oliver Stone. I would say you were pretty far out there compared to others in terms of your background, but you were a trooper—you gave a great reading

and talk and were pleasant with everyone, even though it must have seemed a strange thing for you, after the way war has wrecked Iraq. But you gave us our money's worth, and we all—faculty and cadets, including several international cadets from Arab countries—enjoyed hanging out with you.

Blasim: Some of my friends are surprised to learn I visited there, but I was encouraged to do so by my hosts in New York City, who knew West Point had a tradition of inviting writers such as Orhan Pamuk to visit. I just thought it was an interesting opportunity and was just taking things as they came.

Hassan Blasim at West Point. Photo by Peter Molin.

Molin: Well, I'm sure I was pretty inconsiderate about what it all meant for you—it couldn't have been easy. Maybe I was hoping for you to learn that we aren't all monsters or stupid idiots, at least not all the time. I mostly wish I could have given you a funner memory, like we might have gotten drunk in the barracks or something like that. You haven't written the visit into a story yet, for which I think I'm glad.

Blasim: No, no, that wasn't a bad day. Still, I hope that we

can meet again sometime with that military stuff far behind us.
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Hassan Blasim, *God 99.* Translated from Arabic by Jonathan Wright. First published in Arabic by al-Mutawassit, Milan, 2018. Published in Great Britain by Comma Press, 2020.

Fiction from Peter Molin: "Cy and Ali"

The following short story is based on the myth "Ceyx and Alceone," as recounted in Ovid's Metamorphoses*.*

Cy busied himself with the by–now routine activities of a combat patrol: gathering his personal gear and stowing it in the truck, drawing the big .50 caliber machine gun and mounting it in the gun turret, setting the frequencies and security codes on the radio, helping out the other crew members and being helped by them in turn. As he waited for the mission commander to give the patrol brief, he thought about his wife for a few moments. Ali had not wanted him to go on this deployment; he had had options that would have kept him in the States, at least for a while longer, and she could not understand why he had been so eager to return to Afghanistan.

"I think you are crazy," she had told him. Left unstated was the suspicion that he liked the idea of going to war more than he liked the idea of being with her. She loved him dearly, and

though he professed his love for her, too, she couldn't help but feel that he didn't value their relationship as much as she did. Cy also wasn't sure what to think, either then or now while he waited for the patrol brief to begin. Returning to Afghanistan had been important to him, but beyond his claims about needing to be with his unit and doing his duty, he sensed that there was a cold hard nugget of selfishness about his willingness to jeopardize his marriage—not to mention his life—for the sake of the deployment.

Rather than give Ali an excuse or an explanation, he had offered a compensation. "When I get back, I promise I'll make it up to you," he had said, "I'll go back to school, or find some job where I won't have to deploy again anytime soon."

The offer seemed lame, even to Cy, like he had thought about it for two seconds, but Ali acceded to it anyway. She loved Cy in part because he was a soldier, but some things about being a military wife were really bad. Now she busied herself with her classes, her part-time job, and her friends and family. But she worried a lot, and had a premonition that things might not end well.

The day's mission was nothing special: accompany an Afghan army unit while they resupplied three of their outlying outposts. The mission commander explained that the Americans' role was to inspect the readiness of the Afghan outposts, and to provide artillery and medical support in case anything happened along the way. Cy's job was gunner on the mission commander's truck, which was to be third in the order of march behind two Afghan trucks. From the truck's exposed turret he was to man the .50 cal while keeping an eye out for suicide bombers, IEDs, and ambushes. But nothing was expected to happen; "There has been no enemy activity on the planned route in the last 48 hours," the mission commander informed them. They had traveled the day's route many times before with nothing more serious occurring than a vehicle breakdown. Sure they planned well and rehearsed diligently, but that was all

the more reason the actual mission was probably going to be not much.

Which is why what happened, at least at first, had an unreal feel. Three miles out, on Route Missouri, Cy saw the two lead Afghan trucks come to abrupt halts and their occupants pile out. The Afghan soldiers took up firing positions on the right side of the road and pointed their weapons back to the left side. Because he had headphones on and was chattering with the other truck occupants, Cy was unable to immediately distinguish the sound of gunshots, and it took him a moment to comprehend that the Afghans had stumbled into an ambush. Other Americans also soon gleaned what was going on and suddenly the radio net crackled with questions, reports, and commands.

“Action front…. Scan your sectors….. Anyone have positive ID?…. There they are…. 11:00 200 meters. Engage, engage!”

Cy identified three turbaned gunmen firing at the Afghan army trucks from behind a low wall. He charged his machine gun and

began to shoot. He had fired the .50 cal dozens of times in training and thus was surprised by how far off target were his first two bursts. But very quickly he found the range, and was rewarded by seeing the big .50 caliber rounds chew up the wall behind which the insurgents were hiding. Dust and debris filled the air; Cy couldn't tell if he had hit anyone, but surely the fire was effectively suppressing the enemy. By now, the other American trucks had identified the gunmen and were firing, too. Still, it was so hard to figure out exactly what was happening. That the three insurgents behind the wall were capable of resisting the torrent of fire unleashed on them by the American and Afghan soldiers seemed impossible, but no one could tell if there were other enemy shooting at them from somewhere else.

Soon, however, the sound of explosions began to fill the air. Again, it was not immediately clear that the Afghan army soldiers and the insurgents were now firing Rocket Propelled Grenades at each other. "What's going on up there?" Cy heard the mission commander ask him through the intercom. Loud booms resounded everywhere from the impact of the rocket-fired grenades. Cy next heard "RPG! RPG!" echo through his headphones as the Americans understood that they too were now under attack. A round exploded against the truck to his left and Cy felt the blast wave wash over him. How could the enemy engage them so accurately?

As the battle unfolded, Cy realized the situation was serious, no joke. The rest of the crew was protected inside the armored truck, but he was partially exposed in the machine gun turret. He continued to fire the .50 cal, doing his best to punish the insurgents who were trying to kill them. The noise was deafening, but in the midst of the roar of his own weapon and the other American guns, as well as the cacophony of human voices on the intercom, he discerned that enemy fire was pinging around him and sizzling overhead. Though he was not scared, he thought about his wife.

Ali had felt uneasy throughout the day. She had not been able to communicate with Cy, which in itself was not so unusual. She understood that sometimes missions made it impossible for him to call or write. Still, she sent him emails and texts and the lack of a response for some reason felt ominous. That night, she had had a terrible dream. Cy appeared, looming over her, silent and reproachful, and Ali had awoken with a start. Nothing like this had ever happened before, not even close. She didn't know what to do, so she watched TV for a while and then began surfing the Internet. She thought about calling her husband's unit rear-detachment commander, but decided not to. There was no one she could talk to who wouldn't think she was overreacting, so she didn't do anything except continue to worry.

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The next morning two officers appeared at Ali's door. "The Secretary of Defense regrets to inform you that your husband has died as a result of enemy fire in eastern Afghanistan," one of them intoned. It was all too true, but for Ali the reality of the situation dissolved in a swirl of chaotic thoughts and physical sickness.

Ali waited on the tarmac at Dover Air Force Base with Cy's parents. An honor guard was also present, as well as a contingent from her husband's unit, and a general whom she had never seen before and whose name she didn't catch. Everyone was very nice to her, but Ali was confused. She didn't know if she was supposed to be strong and dignified or to collapse in a pool of tears. She also didn't know if she was angry with her husband, angry toward the Army, or just some strange combination of sad and proud. As her husband's casket emerged from the plane, Ali felt herself drawn toward it. First she was taking small tentative steps, as if she were nervous about breaking some kind of rule or protocol. Then she was running, moving quickly toward the casket while the others in attendance waited behind. She was barely aware of what she was

doing, but her feet seemed to no longer be touching the ground. It was as if she were floating or flying, and her arms were beating like wings of a giant bird. “O, Cy, is this the homecoming you promised me?” she thought, or maybe said aloud. Then she remembered throwing her arms around the casket, but at the same time she also felt herself rising into the air, in unison with her husband, who now was alive again and also seemed a magnificent, noble bird. Together, Cy and Ali soared upward, and the plane and the honor guard and the onlookers whirled beneath them as they circled in the sky.

Fiction from Peter Molin: “The Brigade Storyboard Artist”

Captain Alex Athens had been the undisputed master of PowerPoint storyboards within the brigade headquarters since the unit’s arrival in Afghanistan. No order was disseminated until he had compressed it into a carefully orchestrated one-slide tapestry of photos, maps, graphic symbols, and textual data that prescribed every detail of an upcoming mission from intelligence to logistics to actions-on-the-objective. No mission was complete until he had compiled a perfectly manicured one-page/one-screen garden of text and images representing information, data, assessment, and analysis that thereafter would comprise the enduring record of whatever had happened, no matter what anyone said later on, and each storyboard he created was eminently ready to be submitted up the chain-of-command, if the event or mission recorded was

important enough, to “the highest levels” and consequently shape understanding of what was happening on the battlefields and drive policy and strategy decisions.

Nominally objective, his storyboards were in reality a representation meticulously constructed by Captain Athens’ highly organized, supremely artistic processing of what really realer-than-real soldiers had encountered outside the wire, reported in terse radio reports, scribbled about on notepads, photographed on pocket cameras, and committed to memory as best they possibly could under confusing, stressful circumstances. Though far from the senior officer on the brigade staff, Captain Athens had made himself its most valuable member in the brigade commander’s eyes. No one could tell the story of what was supposed to happen as well as Captain Athens, and no one could better tell the story of what supposedly had happened.

Declassified US Army storyboard published in “The Most Lethal Weapons Americans Found in Iraq,” by John Ismay, October 18, 2013, New York Times.

Captain Athens’ success had imbued him with an autocratic, aloof air that made him respected, though more feared than

well-liked, among his peers on the brigade staff. In that claustrophobic and deeply unhappy cauldron of furious military endeavor, lots of people grumbled, could be prickly to deal with, and periodically descend into funks, but a spirit of shared servitude, black humor, and forced good cheer generally prevailed, so it was notable that Captain Athens had few friends among the many other staff officers, nor did he seem to bond with the other officers scattered throughout the base. But whether he was liked or not was really beside the point. Since no one worked for him directly, he couldn't really make anyone miserable personally, so as long as he kept creating storyboards that were better than anyone else's and were loved by the brigade commander, then that was enough, more than enough, really.

But when Captain Athens went on mid-tour leave, the problem arose of who would replace him as the brigade's designated storyboard creator. Captain Jones tried, but his storyboards were full of errors and oddly un-synchronized typefaces and needed dozens of revisions before they were ready to be disseminated. Captain Smith's were okay, but just okay, and he couldn't complete them in a timely manner, let alone work on two or three simultaneously as could Captain Athens. With Captain Athens gone, both morale and effectiveness within the brigade headquarters plummeted. Without his storyboards suturing gaps between concept and plan and plan and action, uniting the headquarters across all staff sections and up-and-down the chain-of-command, it felt like the brigade was fighting the enemy one-handed. Orders were understood incoherently and execution turned to mush. Storyboards sent higher generated questions and skepticism, or even derision. The brigade commander's mood turned more horrible than usual and he pilloried his deputy and senior staff members, accusing them of sabotaging the success of his command.

Desperate for help, the brigade ransacked their subordinate units for an officer or staff NCO who might replace Captain

Athens. Of course none of the subordinate units wanted to give up their own best storyboard artist, so now they engaged in subterfuges to avoid complying with brigade's tasking. That's how Technical Sergeant Arrack's name got sent up to brigade. In his battalion, he'd been a night shift Tactical Operations Center NCO whose potential as a storyboard artist was unrecognized. An Air Force augmentee to an infantry unit, he had never been outside the wire, much less in combat. Nothing much was expected of him by the infantry bubbas with whom he worked, thus the night shift TOC duty answering routine radio transmissions and compiling the morning weather report. The battalion submitted his name to brigade confident that it would be summarily rejected and they wouldn't have to replace Sergeant Arrack on the night shift. But Sergeant Arrack's trial storyboard for brigade had been magnificent. Created to support the brigade's new plan to engage the local populace on every level of the political-economic-cultural-military spectrum over the next six months, it was a masterful blend of bullet points, text boxes, maps, charts, images, graphics, borders, highlights, and different type faces and fonts, totally first-class in every way and obviously presentable without correction even at "the highest levels." The brigade operations officer's heart leaped when he saw it, because he recognized how good it was and was confident that it, and Sergeant Arrack, too, would make the brigade commander very happy.

And so he was, and so for the remaining three weeks of Captain Athens' leave Sergeant Arrack was the brigade go-to storyboard creator. In twenty-five days he generated thirty-seven unique storyboards in addition to the routine ones that accompanied daily briefings and needed only to be adjusted for recent developments. The entire life of the brigade during that period passed through Sergeant Arrack's fingertips and into his computer's keyboard and then to reappear in magically animated form on his workstation screen: raids, key leader meetings, unit rotation plans, IED and suicide bomber attacks,

VIP visits, regional assessments, intelligence analyses, and every other operation and event that took place in the brigade's area of operations was nothing until it was transformed by Sergeant Arrack's storyboard artistry.

Captain Athens heard-tell of some of this while on leave and didn't like it. Though overworked as the primary brigade storyboard artist, he liked the status and the attention it brought to him. Truth to tell, he was glad when his leave ended and he made his way back to the brigade headquarters. But his first meeting with Sergeant Arrack did not go well. Sergeant Arrack was seated at his workstation, busy on an important project. Engrossed in what he was doing, he had barely looked up. "Hm, good to meet you, sir, I've heard a lot about you," he murmured, and turned his eyes back to his computer screen and began tapping away again at the keyboard. Captain Athens hated him immediately, and he could tell his place within the brigade HQ had now changed. Among other things, people just seemed to like Sergeant Arrack more than they liked Captain Athens, and were eager to work with him, eat with him, and hang out with him, while they approached Captain Athens gingerly. And when the brigade operations officer assigned Captain Athens a new storyboard project, it was obvious that it wasn't a priority mission, what with the operations officer making a lame excuse about easing Captain Athens back in slowly.

Over the next five weeks, the tension between Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack bubbled. Captain Athens was now Sergeant Arrack's superior, and though Captain Athens didn't do anything totally unprofessional, he didn't make things easy for his subordinate, either. He assigned him menial tasks such as inspecting guard posts around the FOB walls in the middle of the night and inventorying the headquarters supply vans, all ploys designed to get Sergeant Arrack out of the brigade headquarters while reminding him of his place in things. Rarely did Captain Athens let Sergeant Arrack near a computer

and he never complimented him or made small talk of any kind with him. Everyone on the staff saw what was going on, and gossiped about it endlessly, but no one said anything officially, and the atmosphere within the brigade headquarters roiled as a result of the unconfronted animosity. For his part, Sergeant Arrack spoke about the matter only in guarded terms with some of the other staff NCOs. He didn't want to make trouble, but it wasn't long before he hated Captain Athens just as much Captain Athens hated him. The brigade commander pretended not to notice anything was wrong, but neither did he tell anyone that he had come to like Sergeant Arrack's storyboards more than Captain Athens'. The captain's were good, but Sergeant Arrack's were better.

The tension between Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack boiled over when Captain Athens told Sergeant Arrack he was detailing him to the dining facility to conduct headcounts. Sergeant Arrack determined not to take the sleights any longer and complained to the senior Air Force NCO on post who spoke to the brigade command sergeant major who then spoke to the brigade commander. The conversation between the commander and the command sergeant major took place at an auspicious moment, however. The night previously a raid to capture a high value target had gone very wrong. The intended target had not been at the objective and the military age male who had responded to the noise outside the family kalat walls with an AK-47 in his hand and subsequently shot by the Americans had been a nephew of the provincial governor. That's not to say he couldn't have been Taliban, too, but there was no proof that he was, and his death would certainly demand explanation. Next, a woman in the kalat, distraught and angry, had charged the American soldiers, and she too had been shot. As the unit had waited for extraction from the already botched mission, the helicopters coming to get them had identified a group of gunmen a klick away from the landing zone. Not taking any chances, the helicopter pilots had opened fire on the shadowy shapes in their night vision goggles, but the gunmen turned

out to be a platoon of Afghan army infantrymen on patrol with their American advisor team. Even worse than worse, the advisors had done most things right—they had had their mission plan approved, called in all their checkpoints, and marked themselves and the Afghans appropriately with glint tape and infrared chem lights that should have made them recognizable to the helicopter pilots—but once buried deep in the mountain valleys their comms had gone tits-up and they couldn't talk to anyone quickly enough to forestall the attack from above. So now the airstrike was a cock-up of the highest order and six Afghan soldiers, along with the two civilians, plus one American soldier, were dead, and higher headquarters was screaming for information and the Afghan provincial governor was outside the door demanding to know what the brigade commander was going to do about it.

If any event was going to be briefed at "the highest levels," it was this one for sure, and the brigade would need the best damn storyboard anyone had ever created to make sure the right narrative and message were conveyed or the mess would even grow bigger. It wasn't just that the facts had to be right, the tone had to be perfect, or even more than perfect, if that was possible. The storyboard had to signify that the mishap in the dark night was just an unfortunate blip in a continuum of fantastically positive things that were happening and that everything was under control, that the brigade had this, would get to the bottom of things, learn the appropriate lessons, take the right actions, punish appropriately who needed to be punished, and just generally get on with it without any help from higher and especially without the basic competence of the unit, which meant the reputation of the brigade commander, being put up for discussion.

The brigade command sergeant major, oblivious to the events of the night before, walked into the brigade commander's office at 0730 to discuss the Sergeant Arrack situation. Normally the brigade commander would have cut him off, but the mention of

Sergeant Arrack's name gave him an idea. He would have both Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack build storyboards describing the events of the previous night. It would be the ultimate test, he thought, to build the best storyboard possible under the most trying conditions imaginable, and whichever storyboard was best would go a long way to forestalling tidal waves of scrutiny from above. The brigade commander issued directions to the operations officer and the operations officer passed the word to Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack. Each commandeered a workstation with an array of secure and non-secure laptops spread out in front of them and multiple oversized screens on which to project their designs. They gathered records of radio message traffic and patrol debriefs, both hard-copy and digital, pertinent to the botched mission and opened up all the necessary applications on their computers. Each was told they had full access to anyone they needed to gather information and reconcile conflicting reports, but they had only two hours to complete their work and send their storyboards to the brigade commander, who of course would pick the one to be sent to higher. Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack fueled themselves with energy drinks, snacks, and dip, and got to work. After two hours of furious endeavor, each pushed save one last time and sent their storyboards forward.

Captain Athens' storyboard was good, real good. The brigade commander gazed at it on his computer screen and admired its very organized and aesthetically pleasing appearance. In the upper left corner was the required administrative information—unit name, date-time group, security classification, etc. Down the left border was a timeline, in great detail, of all the events that had taken place on the mission. In the upper-half-center was a map that showed the locations of the night's major events. Each was marked with a succinct, well-turned description of what had occurred in each location. Below the map were four pictures, each dedicated to showing a different aspect of the night's events. On the right

were a series of summarizing statements that prudently listed complicating factors, actions already completed in response to the disaster, and actions planned to be taken in the name of damage control. Everything was done extremely competently, perfectly positioned, not a thing out of place. Borders, background, font and font-size were all to standard. It exuded the professionalism of a unit that had its shit together in every way and as such would undoubtedly forestall questions and offers of unwanted help. The brigade commander was pleasantly surprised; Captain Athens had come through in spades.

Then the brigade commander opened the email attachment sent by Sergeant Arrack. The PowerPoint slide clicked into focus and the brigade commander gasped, for what appeared was not what he expected and could hardly even be said to be a storyboard. Unbeknownst to the brigade commander, Sergeant Arrack had been up all night trying to resolve a problem with his daughter's childcare plan back home in New Mexico. The situation still wasn't right when he had gone to chow in the morning. At the dining facility, he sat with a group of soldiers from his old infantry battalion who filled him with stories of how shitty things had gone down on last night's raid. When Sergeant Arrack arrived at brigade, a scorching email from his ex-wife greeted him accusing him of not fulfilling the requirements of their divorce decree. Then the operations officer gave him the mission to make a storyboard that would cover the brigade's ass about the fucked-up raid, and do it in so-called "friendly" competition with an officer whose guts he hated, and vice-versa. "Fuckin' fuck this fuckin' horseshit," he had muttered as he settled into his workstation.

Sergeant Arrack's creation was immediately arresting, no doubt, but it had little obviously to do with the mission the night before. Instead, Sergeant Arrack had created a gruesome montage of horrific war-related images, snippets of military operations orders and Persian script, along with smears of

colors, mostly red and black. The most striking image was that of an Afghan man with a knife sunk to the hilt in the side of his head. Somehow the man's countenance teetered between that of an extremely gaunt but handsome young Afghan and a skullish death-head whose vacant eye-holes bore into the viewer like the gaze of doom. It was as if Sergeant Arrack, an extremely talented artist, had perceived the assignment as a chance to portray the hellishness of war as effectively as possible, without a touch of romantic idealization of its dark side, and had done so in way that manifested both supreme imaginative power and technical skill. The whole thing, beautiful and terrifying at the same time, constituted a huge FU to the Army mission in Afghanistan generally and to a brigade he no longer cared about personally.

The brigade commander expressed mild concern about Sergeant Arrack's state-of-mind—"Holy shit, Sergeant Arrack has lost it!"—but he was too busy to either take offense or worry much about Sergeant Arrack now. He of course selected Captain Athens' storyboard as the competition winner and with no changes immediately forwarded it to his boss accompanied by a note explaining that he was in full control of the response to the calamities of the previous night. He then told Captain Athens to look out for Sergeant Arrack but under no circumstances did he want to see him in the brigade headquarters again. Captain Athens didn't have any problems with the order and even gloated a little that his competitor had cracked up under the pressure of the tough assignment. Sergeant Arrack's perverted storyboard might be museum quality but that's not what mattered now. Working with the command sergeant major and the Air Force liaison NCO, Captain Athens placed Sergeant Arrack on 24/7 suicide watch for a week and then reassigned him to the FOB fuel point in the motor pool. Now, instead of building slides in the air-conditioned brigade operations center for review at "the highest levels," Sergeant Arrack pulls twelve-hour shifts in a plywood shack annotating fuel delivery and distribution on a crumpled, coffee-stained

spreadsheet secured to a dusty clipboard. To kill time during the hours when absolutely nothing is happening, he sweeps spider webs from the corners of the office.

"The Brigade Storyboard Artist" originally appeared in Time Now*, October 7, 2016.*

Interview: The Problem of the Hero: Peter Molin Talks with Roy Scranton

Introduction: Roy Scranton's soon-to-be published *Total Mobilization: American Literature and World War II* expands upon Scranton's controversial 2015 *Los Angeles Review of Books* article "The Myth of the Trauma Hero, from Wilfred Owen to 'Redeployment' and 'American Sniper.'" The *LARB* piece asserted that American war literature over-privileges the emotional suffering of white male American combatants at the expense of their war victims, while ignoring larger social and political aspects of militarism and war. In *Total Mobilization* Scranton locates the birth of the trauma hero in canonical World War II fiction and poetry. He connects literature with culture by making two arguments: 1) Treating soldiers as easily-damaged and pitiable victims of war obscures moral reckoning with war guilt and effective reintegration by veterans into civilian society, and 2) identifying and isolating veterans as a sanctified social caste offers veterans a dubious cultural reverence that overestimates the authority of their experience, while satisfying a dubious logic that preserves soldiers their

identities as good men and the wars they fought as good wars. In making this argument, Scranton shuffles the deck of World War II-writing, inviting readers to seriously reconsider the cultural work performed by canonical works, and asking them to pay more attention to a number of novels, poems, essays, articles, and movies that tell a different, more nuanced story about World War II and the decades after.

The interview was conducted via a series of phone calls and email exchanges.

– Peter Molin

PM: When did the concept of the trauma hero as a literary trope and cultural reality begin to form in your mind? Was it related more to your actual service in Iraq or to your reading and beginning efforts to write afterwards?

RS: I can pinpoint the origin of my conceptualization of the trauma hero and, in fact, the origin of what became *Total Mobilization*, in a graduate seminar I took on war literature at the New School, in 2007 or 2008. I was anxious about taking the class, because it was one of the first graduate seminars I was to take, and because I was highly sensitive about the way in which my personal experience in Iraq might distort the classroom dynamic. I wrote the professor an email in advance, asking about the course, expressing my concerns, and assuring him that I was really interested in the material, not in using the classroom as a space to talk about myself. He responded enthusiastically, encouraging me to join the class, and telling me that my personal experience need not be a focus in the seminar, though he was convinced the mere fact of it would help my fellow students better connect with the material.

The syllabus was fairly typical "war lit," jumping from the *Iliad* to [Robert Graves'] *Good Bye to All That* and Wilfred Owen, then a bunch of stuff on Vietnam, then I think ending with [Anthony] Swofford's *Jarhead*. What quickly became

apparent, however, was that for the professor, all the material we were reading could only be understood through a combination of Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* and Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. For this guy, all war literature was a story of trauma. But not just for him: he was merely a particularly dogmatic preacher of what was, I soon realized, a pervasive cultural belief.

Now I'd loved *Hero with a Thousand Faces* when I read it in high school, and spent two or three years annoying my friends by breaking down every movie we saw into its constituent archetypal moments, the giving of the boon, the crossing of the threshold, confronting the father, blah blah blah. But that had been a long time ago, and I'd long since realized the limits of Campbell's reductionist approach, despite the real insights it often offered. And while much war literature did seem to fit loosely within the adventure-story framework Campbell elaborated, reading something like [Ernst Junger's] *Storm of Steel*, to take only one example, through the lens of trauma seemed deeply mistaken, not only missing what was most interesting about the work, but wrenching its central premises into an alien ideology. The same thing seemed true with the *Iliad*, which is deeply misunderstood when viewed through the lens of trauma (as in [Jonathan] Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*, which misreads Homer and misunderstands Greek culture, though does nevertheless have real insights), as are numerous other works.

So I did what I do, which was to ask annoying questions, find counter-examples, and probe the professor's all-encompassing theory for weak points. The entire seminar was soon taken over by our intellectual grappling: things rapidly spun out of control and devolved into a power struggle. I was fighting for my intellectual integrity, my authority as a veteran, and my grade, while he was fighting for—well, it turned out that his brother had gone to Vietnam and come home fucked up, and this professor seemed to have devoted his life since to fixing his

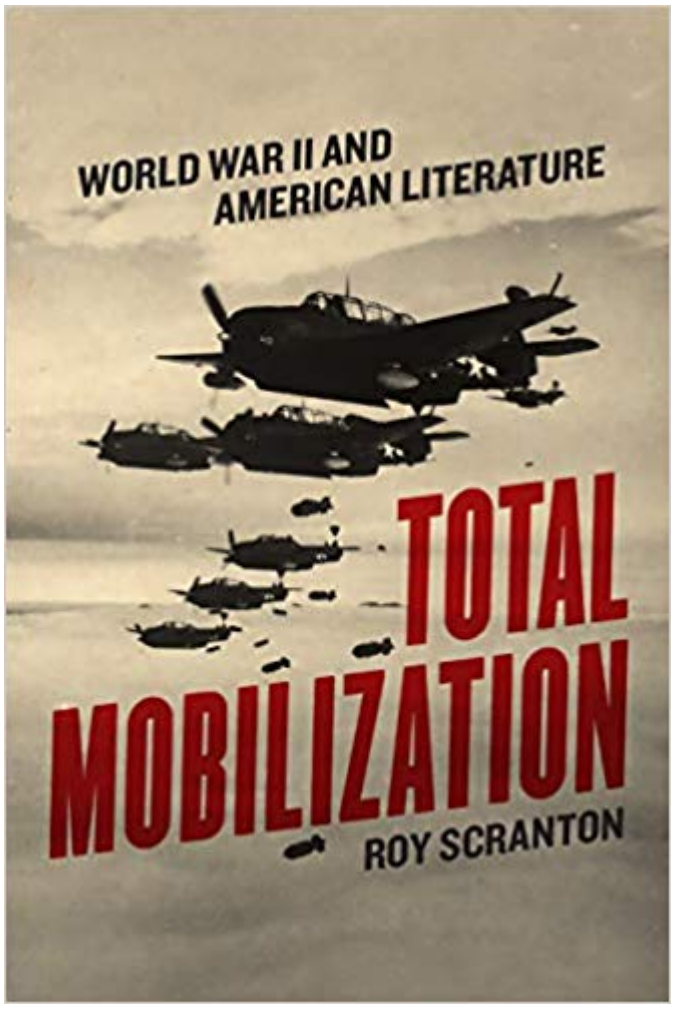
brother by proxy. I did not know when I started the class that I was to be another such proxy, but when our conflict climaxed in him sending me an eight-page email telling me how sorry he was that I was so traumatized and how much he wished he could help me, I went to the department chair.

The professor was not invited back to teach. I saved my grade, wrote an essay about trauma and confession that was published in George Kovach's journal *Consequence* ("The Sinner's Strip-Tease: Rereading *The Things They Carried*," *Consequence*, 2:1, Spring 2010), and started delving deep into the idea of trauma: where it came from, how it worked, and why everybody seemed to conflate it with socially organized violence.

PM: At what point did you begin to sense that the trauma hero trope worked not as a redemptive effort by authors to "humanize" soldiers by illustrating the brutality of war, but a pernicious cultural mechanism that valorized an unhealthy way of thinking about soldiers, war, and militarism? Was there a specific book, thinker, or event that crystalized the impression?

RS: From the beginning, really, I was asking myself how this worked and who it served. Cui bono, right? I was also—let's just say that I was deeply formed in the hermeneutics of suspicion, and at the same time as I was taking that seminar on war literature I remember reading Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. Now Foucault… I'm not going to spend any time defending Foucault, as a thinker or a historian or whatever. I've always thought he's the Jamiroquai to Nietzsche's Stevie Wonder. But a key point of the *History of Sexuality*, which is a basically Nietzschean point, is that saying we're *not* going to talk about something is a way to talk about it. Repression is a mode of expression. Foucault made this point about the Victorians and sex, but it's worth keeping in mind anytime you start looking at cultural practices, since taboos and mysteries and so on are usually key to a culture.

This may seem sideways, but it’s important to remember that trauma is always “that which cannot be spoken.” Recall Tim O’Brien’s mystical lyricism about how there’s no such thing as a true war story (which I discuss in my chapter on trauma). Narrating the unspeakable is a power move: it designates you as a master of mystery. Now I already knew about and was suspicious of the moral authority invested in veterans simply by fact of their having joined the military. It was a pretty short step then to see how trauma functioned as a way of evoking and preserving a sense of mystery around that authority. Luckily, I happened to come across Israeli historian Yuval Harari’s magnificent book, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*, which provides a deep synoptic cultural history of how the experience of war changed in the west from being understood as a testament to one’s capabilities, like a bullet point on a CV, to being understood as a revelation of esoteric wisdom. That book was very useful for helping me understand how contemporary perspectives on the experience of war evolved and what kinds of cultural work they do.



PM: Early in *Total Mobilization*, you list a fairly conventional canon of well-known World War II fiction and poetry. But these are not the works you want to discuss in *Total Mobilization*. Instead, you bring to the fore authors such as poet Kenneth Koch and popular entertainment fare such as a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Why? What do we get by paying attention to this "alternative canon"?

RS: Norman Mailer wrote in "The White Negro" in 1957 that "The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it." Yet by the early 2000s, if not before, a clear mythic framework had emerged for understanding World War II, which can be seen in the pre-eminent WWII films of the late 1990s, *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*, both from 1998, that re-interprets WWII through both the American war in Vietnam and the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War. This framework interprets World War II as

primarily an individual traumatic experience of violence that leads the individual to a more enlightened state, in *Saving Private Ryan* to a deeper patriotism, in *The Thin Red Line* to a deeper Transcendentalist engagement with the non-human world. But these films come out of a major cultural revision of the meaning of World War II that happened primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, first in literature, then in film, which laid the groundwork for these more explicitly trauma-based narratives. The mere fact of this should strike observers as puzzling, since World War II was an unquestionable American victory, a war in which America suffered fewer casualties than any other major combatant nation, and the origin of a half-century of American global hegemony. *Total Mobilization* explores two questions concurrently: First, how did World War II (and by extension, all war) come to be identified with trauma? Second, what is this re-interpretation obscuring?

What I found in my research by going back to the literature of World War II with fresh eyes, discounting the academic and literary consensus which tendentiously declares that World War II "didn't produce any great literature," is that writers attempting to make sense of WWII—from Ralph Ellison to Herman Wouk, from Wallace Stevens to Kenneth Koch, from James Jones to Joan Didion—were obsessed by a set of problems I group under the idea of "the problem of the hero," essentially questions about how the individual relates to society in a time of total mobilization.

What was at stake was a conflict between different kinds of stories society told itself about its values, which is to say, how Americans told themselves the story of who they were: on the one hand, narratives in which every individual was an equal and independent member of a commercial democracy where everything was for sale, and on the other hand narratives in which every individual was subordinated to the collective and the most important thing anyone could do would be to sacrifice their life for the nation. The total mobilization of American

society to fight World War II demanded, in Kenneth Burke's words, a "change from a commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives to a collective-sacrificial-military nexus of motives."

In effect, World War II opened wide a conflict that had been building within the western world since the Napoleonic Wars: the conflict between nationalism and capitalism, specifically the conflict between the metaphoric logic of nationalism and metaphoric logic of capitalism around the issue of bodily sacrifice. This is the conflict at the heart of *Total Mobilization*, the conflict at the center of World War II writing from the 1940s to the 1960s, the conflict for which the "trauma hero" provides an imaginary solution. Looking at works that have fallen outside the canon—such as Kenneth Koch's war poetry, wartime Bugs Bunny cartoons, Wallace Stevens's wartime poetry (which is generally derided or ignored as war poetry), or James Dickey, who has been more or less deliberately abandoned—while also revisiting canonical works such as Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," *Catch-22*, and *The Thin Red Line* with new eyes, helps us see the complex historical reality that the post-Cold-War academic and literary framework erases and obscures.

Author Roy Scranton

PM: In particular, I was struck by your rereading of Randall Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." How has that well-known very short poem been misunderstood or not

appreciated in its full magnitude?

RS: Jarrell, as many readers will know, was drafted during the war, and served stateside as an instructor in "celestial navigation." He never saw combat, but he did see plenty of men who were headed that way. One interesting thing about Jarrell is that he writes all these poems in which youthful, virile young men are sacrificed to state power, but his letters show a pervasive and thoroughgoing contempt for his fellow soldiers. What he thought of the actual men he served with (he calls them racists and says they are intellectually "indistinguishable from Cream of Wheat"), however, is less important than the use he made of them in his poetry, which was to revitalize the British trench lyric through a Protestant American mindset. In his poetry, pre-eminently focused on bombers, Jarrell is performing a complex ritual substitution: the victims of American political violence—German and Japanese soldiers and civilians—is being replaced by the agents of that very violence—the bomber crew. The picture is flipped, so that instead of seeing Germans and Japanese women and children physically wounded and killed by American bombing, we focus instead on the suffering that bombing causes the person doing it. With the fully developed trauma hero myth the suffering is purely spiritual, but we can see Jarrell working it out de novo, as it were, making the transition from the physical—as in "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"—to the spiritual—as in the poem "Eighth Air Force."

The observation that Jarrell turns killers into victims isn't new. As Helen Vendler noted in her 1969 review of Jarrell's *Complete Poems*, "The secret of [Jarrell's] war poems is that in the soldiers he has found children; what is the ball turret gunner but a baby who has lost his mother?" What I do in *Total Mobilization* is look at the context and mechanism for how this happens within the genre I identify as the "bomber lyric," within the literature of World War II, and within broader

currents of American literature from 1945 to the early 2000s.

As I write in *Total Mobilization*: "If we want to understand the human experience of war, we must come to terms with numerous difficult and unpleasant facts. One of them is that no agent of violence can be deemed innocent or faultless, even if that agent is drafted against their will to fight in a war ultimately considered just. We must understand the soldier first, foremost, and always as an agent of state power, since that is their objective social role. Hence stories of soldiers must be read in light of their complicity with and participation in sovereign power. Soldiers are the state's killers. That's their job. Jarrell's efforts to excuse the men engaged in bombing the German people on the basis that they like puppies and opera, or because they are mortal, turn soldiers into victims of their own violence. Such efforts are not only deluded and obscurantist but ethically naïve."

PM: In the chapter section titled "The Hero as Riddle: The Negro Hero and the Nation Within the Nation" you tie together Richard Wright, James Baldwin, John Oliver Killen's 1962 novel about a black quartermaster company in World War II *And Then We Heard the Thunder* to interrogate the racial dimensions of the trauma hero. What is significant about the African-American literary perspective on World War II?

RS: What looking at the African-American literature around World War II really helps illuminate is how much the question of war literature, and the related question of the hero, are related to what Benedict Anderson famously called "the imagined community of the nation." War literature qua "war literature" is fundamentally tangled up in questions about the national identity of the writers and subjects of that literature. This is why when people say "Vietnam War literature," they typically mean [Tim] O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* or [Larry] Heinemann's *Paco's Story* or [Karl] Marlantes' *Matterhorn*, rather than B□o Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* or Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*.

The single most important issue at stake in the African-American literature of World War II is the question of national belonging. As James Baldwin puts it in a reminiscence written many years later, “This was in 1943. We were fighting the Second World War. *We*: who was this *we*? For this war was being fought, as far as I could tell, to bring freedom to everyone with the exception of Hagar’s children and the ‘yellow-bellied Japs’…. I have never been able to convey the confusion and horror and heartbreak and contempt which every black person I then knew felt. Oh, we dissembled and smiled as we groaned and cursed and did our duty. (And we *did* our duty.) The romance of treason never occurred to us for the brutally simple reason that you can’t betray a country you don’t have…. And we did not wish to be traitors. We wished to be citizens.”

As I discuss in the work of Baldwin, Richard Wright, John Oliver Killens, Gwendolyn Brooks, and most notably Ralph Ellison, the dilemma faced by many African-Americans under total mobilization during World War II was that they were being *ordered* to sacrifice themselves for the war, they *wanted* to sacrifice themselves for the war, but they were structurally incapable of actually sacrificing themselves—because while they could serve and while they could die in that service, like Messman “Dorie” Miller died, like Lieutenant John R. Fox died, like Sergeant Reuben Rivers died, their deaths were not recognized as legitimate sacrifices for the nation, since they were not seen as genuine constituents of that nation. In Jim Crow America, the negro was not regarded as a free citizen, hence while the negro was expected to give their life for their country—or indeed anytime it was demanded—that act was not regarded as sacred.

For writers such as Ellison and Killens, this problem emerged not only as a sense of having been prohibited from joining the (white) nation, but also as a provocation to understand their own identity as already existing within a “nationality,” what James Baldwin called “a nation within a nation,” which is to

say Black nationalism.

When we take into account how nationalism is constructed through ideas of shared blood, either through inheritance or through sacrifice, we begin to see the powerful ideological work narratives of collective violence do in shoring up cultural hierarchies—or in opening them to criticism and question. It's no mystery that the trauma hero in American war literature has been predominantly white, or that when we talk about "American war literature," people mostly mean literature by white men. Militarism, American identity, and white supremacy are deeply intertwined, and in fact have been woven together since World War II over and over again, in novels and poems and films that focus on traumatized white citizen-soldiers suffering for the violence they themselves unleashed on countless unnamed Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Iraqi, and Afghan bodies.

PM: An author who is not a veteran and who is not often thought of as a writer with an abiding interest in World War II is Joan Didion. But *Total Mobilization* asserts her importance in understanding how the American West and the World War II Pacific Theater were connected in ways that differed from the American East Coast's connection with the war in Europe. How can we think of Didion as a World War II writer?

RS: One of the central conceits of so-called "war literature" is that it is primarily by and about men in combat: Wilfred Owen, Ernest Hemingway, Tim O'Brien. But the violence of combat, as dramatic as it may be, is only one aspect of the larger phenomena of socially organized mass violence. Even thinking back to the *Iliad*, say, only parts of that work are about actual combat, and not necessarily the most interesting parts. Who can forget the scene on the battlements between Hector and Andromache, where Hector's son Astyanax recoils from his father's helmeted face in fear?

The Trojan War was perhaps the greatest literary and dramatic subject of Athenian culture, but the work addressing it was in no way restricted to narrow representations of the combat experiences of individual warriors. From Homer's *Odyssey* to Aeschylus's *Oresteia* to Sophocles's *Philoctetes* to Euripedes's *The Trojan Women*, we see Athenian dramatists and poets exploring a wide range of that war's events and effects. Similarly, as I argue in *Total Mobilization*, World War II was a hugely important cultural event in American history, easily the most important event of the 20th century, and when we take a wide view of post-1945 American culture, we can see that cultural and aesthetic representations of World War II have struggled to come to terms with its staggering historical, ethical, political, and psychological complexity in a variety of ways, in poetry, novels, musicals, history, television mini-series, comic books, video games, and films. From Pearl S. Buck's novel *China Sky*, depicting American doctors caught in the Japanese invasion of China, to the first-person shooters set in World War II that appeared in the 1990s and 2000s, starting with the now-classic *Wolfenstein 3D* and continuing with the blockbuster franchises *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*; from Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* to George Lucas's *Star Wars*; from Chester Himes's novel of racial tensions in wartime Los Angeles, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*, to Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, the protagonist of which is a professor of "Hitler Studies," the variety of American cultural production from the last seventy years that works explicitly, allegorically, and sometimes unconsciously with and through World War II is at once a testament to the war's importance and an overwhelming strain on our efforts to understand it.

Yet if we were to go looking for the war's impact strictly in the canonical "war literature," which is focused on the traumatic combat experience of individual soldiers, we would not see it. The focus on trauma obscures and elides the historical complexity of the event. This is how someone like Joan Didion, for whom the effect of World War II on American

society is probably the central subject of her career, can be excluded from the canon of “war literature.”

There is much to say about Didion’s work, not least to speak of its sheer technical brilliance, or of the interesting place she occupies in literary history, as the American heir of Conrad and Orwell and the progenitor of the pop-art merging of advertising and the Stein-Hemingway tradition we eventually see fully developed in Don DeLillo, for example. But first and foremost she is a chronicler of American empire, the complex way that the frontier mentality of “the West” transformed into the Cold War mentality of “the West,” through the crucible of victory in World War II. As a native Californian, old enough to remember Pearl Harbor but too young to do anything about, dragged around the country by her father (a reservist called to active duty), who saw her home state undergo a dramatic transformation from what was essentially agricultural feudalism to being perhaps the primary sector of the military-industrial complex and the utopian dream-space of suburban America, Didion was remarkably well placed to witness the disruptive and disturbing emergence of the post-45 American military Leviathan, which she tracked through her fiction, journalism, and memoir, from her first novel, *Run, River*, which is about the effects of World War II on agricultural life in the Sacramento Valley, to her memoir *Where I Was From*, which explicitly connects the frontier mentality of the Western pioneers with the emergence of American hegemony, while also elucidating the inescapable, long-term effects of military industrialization on Californian culture. Indeed, as she argues about modern Hawaiian culture in a key article I discuss in *Total Mobilization*, postwar Californian culture is inextricable from hypostasizing American militarism. And while it may be easier to see this in the west, in Hawaii and California, which only exist as they do today because of World War II, the insight applies to the whole nation. Since 1942, the United States has been a society mobilized for war, organized for war, even if only a small cadre do the actual

fighting. Didion helps us see that.

PM: To what extent do veteran authors and artists knowingly and culpably participate in the trauma hero narrative? I would think, or maybe hope, that most would be horrified to think that their works instantiate or re-instantiate misguided, reactionary, and generally oppressive cultural and historical practices and patterns of thinking. But you suggest that they do.

RS: The most generous response would be to say that we're all figuring it out as we go. We have the stories we love, the stories we were raised on, like *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now* and *Star Wars*, for example, we have the stories we take up when we're trying to figure out how to make sense of an experience, we see how people respond to the stories we try to tell—and we make decisions as we go. Especially those of us trying to have careers, trying to reach a wider public; you can't just say whatever shit you feel like. There's some back and forth, whoever you wind up talking to, and sometimes there's more freedom and sometimes there's less, and most folks will take the path of least resistance rather than try to fight their way through to a deeper understanding. Some people maybe know better and choose not to give a fuck. But most people think they're good people, most writers believe they're trying to really get into the complexity, and that they're doing the best they can. The deeper issue is that people lie first of all to *themselves,* but that's just human nature.

One example we could discuss from *Total Mobilization* is Brian Turner. I know Brian, I like Brian, I respect Brian. I have long admired his poetry. I think he's a good man and a good poet. But the situation he found himself in with the cover of *Here, Bullet*… The cover of that book is a striking visual example of the work that the trauma hero does to refocus attention from the typically brown-skinned victims of war to the spiritual travails of the white American soldier: it shows

Turner himself, alone in an empty landscape, facing the viewer with a thousand-yard stare. As Turner describes the process that led to this cover (in an interview in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*), he and his editor decided to literally erase Iraqi bodies from the photo they used because he thought the blunt truth of his experience would repulse readers. The thing is, he's not wrong. From a certain perspective, he made the absolute right choice. On the other hand, telling people what they want to hear, trimming off the unpleasant bits, leaving off the hooded Iraqi prisoners—all that contributes to a collective vision of the Iraq War that focuses on the psychological suffering of American soldiers at the expense of even *seeing* the bodies of the people we killed, never mind discussing the larger political context, which is an outright scandal. So do I sympathize with Brian, as a young poet making decisions about his first book, to minimize the unpleasant reality of the Iraq War and try to keep people focused on his poetry? Of course. But I think we also have to consider the big picture.

Several scholars have begun attending to the ways that the "veteran-writer" operates in the MFA economy of postwar American literature, most pre-eminently Mark McGurl, Eric Bennett, and Joseph Darda. What they've found is that the role of the veteran-writer has been privileged in the MFA-dominated literary economy as a form of white ethnic identity writing. Just like writers of color are expected and encouraged to put themselves forward first of all as representatives of their racial or ethnic trauma, so are veteran-writers expected and encouraged to put themselves forward as representatives of their war-time trauma (A broader critique of how identity-based grievance works to create subjects conformable to the commodity logic of neoliberal capitalism can be found in the work of writers such as Joan Scott, Allen Feldman, Wendy Brown, and Asad Haider, among others). These expectations function all along the line, at every level of gatekeeping, from MFA admissions to agents to publishing to award

committees. Working against these expectations is profoundly risky, especially for emerging writers.

It can be done—Percival Everett's wicked satire *Erasure* comes to mind, or Eric Bennett's novel *A Big Enough Lie*, perhaps my own novel *War Porn*—but it's not usually going to win you accolades.

PM: My reading of *War Porn* is that its Iraq vet protagonist refutes sympathetic identification as a trauma hero, nor can we grant him the experiential authority of the "noble veteran." What is the relationship in your mind (and chronologically) of *War Porn* and the academic work that became *Total Mobilization*?

RS: I started *War Porn* pretty soon after coming back from Iraq, while still in the army and stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, then finished the first draft the summer after I ETS'd, in Berlin in 2006. There was a lot of revision ahead, but the main generative work was done. And as you suggest, I was even at that point working out a pretty strong critique of the trauma hero, even if I hadn't distinctly articulated the figure itself. I feel like *Total Mobilization* is working out analytically some of the things that *War Porn* was working out narratively.

PM: Your framing of the issue seems divisive and perhaps even something of a betrayal of the veteran-writer community, which we might say you helped establish with the seminal 2013 *Fire and Forget*: *Short Stories from the Long War* anthology (co-edited by Scranton and Matt Gallagher, and containing work by contemporary veteran-writing luminaries such as Brian Turner, Phil Klay, Colby Buzzell, David Abrams, Brian Van Reet, and Jacob Siegel, and military spouse Siobhan Fallon). Can you talk about the desire or efforts by contemporary vet-writers to form a veteran-writer community? Can you talk about how you see your work in relation?

RS: In the conclusion of *Total Mobilization*, where I talk about the end of the Cold War and shifting arguments about the meaning of World War II, I bring up as an example the National Air and Space Museum's attempted exhibit on the 50th anniversary of the end of WW2. The exhibit failed, largely because of pressure from veterans' groups. One of the sticking points was the number of expected American casualties in the planned invasion of Japan, which was a key piece of evidence in arguments about whether the use of the atomic bomb was justified. The historical record—the consensus of professional historians—is clear: there was a clear path to surrender with Japan that would obviate any Normandy-style landing on Honshu and Kyushu, which invasion the US military at the time expected would lead to 30,000 to 50,000 casualties. The Air Force Association and others kept insisting that the language in the exhibit employ later estimates of 500,000 or more casualties, which come from Truman and Henry Stimson's postwar memoirs and are unsupported by the historical record. As military historian John Ray Skates notes in his book *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb*, "the source of the large numbers used after the war by Truman, Stimson, and Churchill to justify the use of the atomic bomb has yet to be discovered." At one point in the argument, Tom Crouch, who was the chairman of the museum's aeronautics department, put the problem neatly: "Do you want to do an exhibition intended to make veterans feel good, or do you want to do an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don't think we can do both."

Historian Edward Linenthal describes this as conflict between a "commemorative" view and a "historical" view. We face the same conflict every time we come back to the act of representing war, discussing war, talking about war literature, because—as I argue in *Total Mobilization*—war is one of the key practices through which human beings construct their collective identity. Every discussion about war, about a

museum exhibit, about the cover of a book of poetry, about a poem, is a discussion about who "we" are, which is to say what it means to be American. And the conflict Linenthal describes, the conflict exemplified in the issue at the National Air and Space Museum, is over whether we should focus on commemoration—remembering together, emphasizing our bonds and our unity, reassuring ourselves of our basic goodness—or on the objective historical record, which often shows the American military and American government doing horrible things for morally unjustifiable reasons.

I've seen this play out in smaller ways in the vet writers community. When we were putting *Fire and Forget* together, around 2011 or 2012, it seemed like one major thing vet writers could do for each was to help keep each other honest: to help keep each other from telling readers what they wanted and expected to hear. I think a lot about Jake Siegel's story from Fire and Forget, "Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere," in this respect: the experience of war the characters in that story are commemorating is so raw, so powerful, that the idea of betraying the experience is tantamount to betraying your battle buddy. But as the vet writers community became more definitively established, as the actual experiences of war have faded into the past, as people have built careers as professional veterans, I've seen the community grow increasingly hostile to dissent. It seems like there's been a real closing of ranks, a sense of a community supporting and protecting each other, and any real critical function has been lost (present company excepted, along with a few others). Commemoration has won out over any concern for the historical record. This is no doubt connected to the way that the "vet writer" serves to recuperate white ethnic militarism as a commodifiable victim identity (as discussed above), a fundamentally unstable identity formation given the historical and contemporary privilege afforded white men in American society, and given the tendency of militarism (however tempered by liberal multiculturalism) to resolve into a

fascistic worship of power as such.

PM: The conclusion of *Total Mobilization* asserts that contemporary war-writing about Iraq and Afghanistan represents a continuation, even a doubling-down, on the trauma hero trope. How has this come about and what are the consequences?

RS: I wouldn't say it represents a "doubling-down"—while I think trauma has remained central to contemporary war writing about Iraq and Afghanistan, I also think that many writers have looked for ways to innovate, if only to distinguish themselves from previous generations and each other. The film *American Sniper* and Kevin Powers' novel *Yellow Birds* are the most obvious and conventional versions of the contemporary trauma hero story, but even Powers struggles to renovate the trope, as I argue in *Total Mobilization*, by pushing through O'Brien's total negation of truth to wind up with something that is the obverse of Hemingway and Owen's insistence on particular factual sensory data: representing the act of violence as the origin of linguistic indeterminacy and the font of literary production as such. And with [Phil Klay's] *Redeployment*, [Brian Van Reet's] *Spoils*, [Elliot Ackerman's] *Green on Blue*, and [Will Mackin's] *Bring Out the Dog*, just for a few of the most talked-about examples, you can see writers struggling to get past the trauma hero, with varying degrees of gumption and success. Overall I think it has to do with long-term cultural changes: trauma remains a powerful concept for understanding reality, but I suspect that it's on its way out, and that a new emphasis on materiality is emerging. Which is to say, that which is both unspeakable and indubitable in trauma is increasingly less persuasive than that which is both unspeakable and indubitable in the body. But this is only a supposition. We'll have to wait and see. But as soon as the traumatized veteran becomes useful again, we see him return. The trauma hero will probably be around for a long time.

PM: In practical terms, how can understanding the trauma hero

as a literary trope and cultural myth help us think better, more clearly, about actual veterans psychologically damaged and emotionally troubled by war? What might the nation, or its military-medical apparatus, do to help them?

RS: Well, I've written a work of literary and cultural history, not a practical guide to coping with trauma. I would say, though, that the entire way that we understand "actual veterans psychologically damaged and emotionally troubled by war" must be understood as process of collective meaning-making. The psychologically damaged veteran is certainly suffering, but that suffering takes shape in performing a specific social role, which is the "traumatized veteran." As long as we stay within the bounds of the discourse, there's no way to "help" such a person by pointing out that their genuine suffering is culturally produced. I suppose we might tell them "trauma isn't real," but then what? They have to make sense of their experience somehow, and the best that could come from delegitimating a culturally dominant way of making sense of experience would be the emergence of a new way of making sense of experience. Are there better and worse ways of making meaning? I think so. But that's another discussion. The only *practical* help my project might offer is, I would hope, some understanding of the ways that the "actual veteran" exists in relation to the "nation."

I'm a Spinozist at heart, which means I'm a materialist, but it also means that I believe freedom comes first of all from understanding. Until you understand what compels you to understand your experience through certain roles, frameworks, and practices, you'll be stuck performing those roles, seeing through those frameworks, and acting out those practices. Understanding may never provide physical or social liberation, but it can at least open a space for some freedom of thought and movement, and the possibility of equanimity toward the world as it exists, which is to say a sense of peace.

PM: On what grounds can a veteran of Iraq or Afghanistan feel

good about his or her service? On what grounds can a veteran construct a guilt-free life post-military?

RS: I'm not here to make former soldiers feel good about their experience. The whole premise feels a bit absurd to me. Nor am I interested in articulating a way for anyone to live life "guilt free." I think guilt, like shame, can be useful and healthy. How else do you learn and grow as a person except by confronting your mistakes and owning them, internalizing them, recognizing what you did and finding a way forward? "Guilt-free" is an advertising slogan.

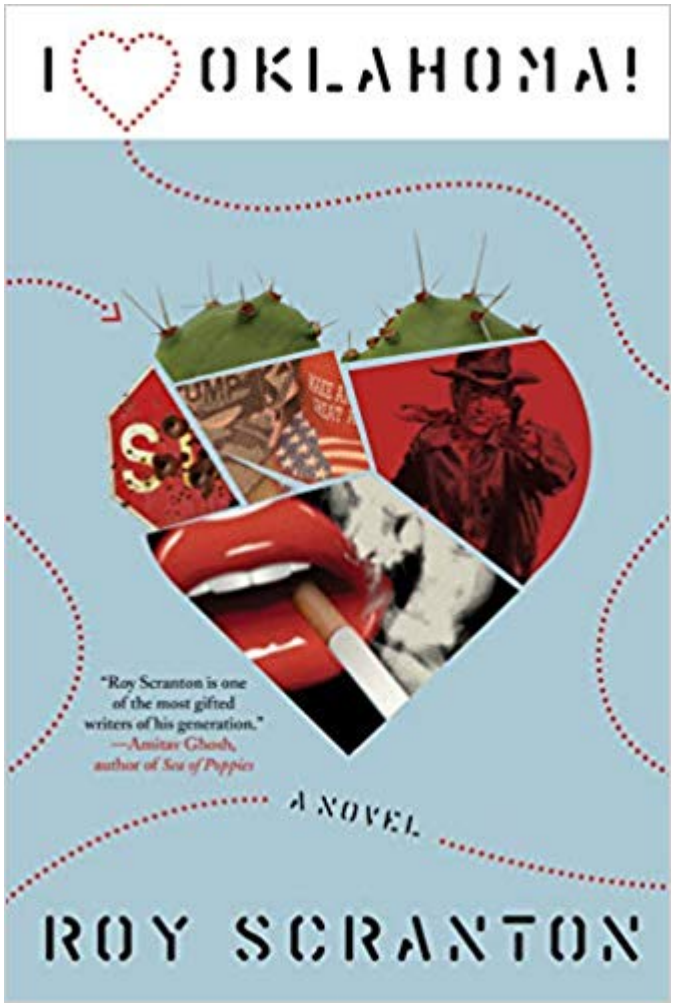
This goes back to what I was talking about earlier with the difference between "commemorative" and "historical" views about war and the role of the veteran in American culture. I feel no obligation as a scholar, critic, or writer to "commemorate" war or to "honor" the direct role some people play in America's wars. On the contrary, I feel an obligation to be faithful to the historical record, objective facts, and unpleasant realities. Because I am myself a veteran, some people see a contradiction there, as if selling my ass to the US Army for four years somehow obliges me to participate in the collective myth-making of American militarism. But such an expectation is absurd. I refuse to play the role of the professional vet.

It seems clear that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are unjustifiable in any moral sense. Everyone involved was not only complicit, but an active agent in genuine evil and massive human suffering. You have to come to terms with that.

PM: You also have a novel coming out this year, titled *I [Heart] Oklahoma*? What can we expect?

RS: It's a "road movie novel," a vision-quest, a deep dive into the blood myths of modern America. Let's just say there wind up being a lot of bodies on the highway. LitHub is publishing an excerpt, which I'd suggest as the easiest way to

see whether you feel like taking this particular death trip.



Interview With Will Mackin, Author of Bring Out the Dog

Guest Interviewer Peter Molin of *Time Now* interviews U.S. Navy veteran Will Mackin. Mackin's work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *GQ*, *Tin House*, and *The New York Times Magazine.* His story "*Kattekoppen*" was selected by Jennifer Egan for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories 2014,* and his essay about being an extra on Breaking Bad, published in *GQ*, was nominated for an American Society of Magazine Editors "Ellie" award. Mackin's debut collection of short stories, *Bring Out the Dog*, is on sale now.

Describe the path that led to you joining Naval Special Warfare? What were your thoughts and impressions of the SEALs when you first joined them? At what point did you feel you truly belonged?

MACKIN: I volunteered, interviewed, screened, then went through direct support selection, which is nowhere near as grueling as what the operators/SEALs go through. Most SEALs were personable one-on-one, but I found them to be very insular as a group. I never felt like I truly belonged.

From "Kattekoppen": "The variety of ideas among soldiers developed into a variety of ideas among units, which necessitated an operational priority scheme. As SEAL Team Six, we were at the top of that scheme. Our ideas about the

war were the war." How are SEALs different from soldiers in line-units? What motivates them and what's important to them? What were you surprised to learn about the SEALs, as individuals and as a collective fighting force?

MACKIN: The main thing that differentiated our unit from "straightleg" units was our budget. We had a lot of money to throw around. There was also a genuine desire on the part of the operators to fight, kill, and vanquish, and absolutely zero tolerance for administrative bullshit. This would sometimes bite us in the ass because no one ever wanted to plan. What we lost in lack of planning, however, was often made up for in execution. As individuals I was surprised to find those who I wouldn't have expected to be SEALs. In other words, guys who didn't fit the mold of the tattooed, bearded, Harley-riding Alpha male. They were just normal dudes with this ridiculous and well-disguised drive.

In the Acknowledgements to Bring Out the Dog you write, "To rejects of all shapes and sizes," but also "And last but not least, a sacred debt to the men and women of Naval Special Warfare Development Group." What lies behind those two sentiments, which seem to express contrasts. What specifically do you owe DEVGRU?

MACKIN: I was assigned to Naval Special Warfare Development Group, or DEVGRU, from 2006-2011. Our mission was to research and develop tactics, techniques, and procedures for operators in the field. I'd deploy with those operators to test whatever gadgetry or tactics we'd come up with. Meanwhile I'd fill in on some operational requirement, like forward air control. I've always felt an affinity with the fuckups and rejects who populate the entire spectrum of military activity. Some just hide it better than others.

What are your thoughts about movies such as American Sniper, Lone Survivor, and 0-Dark-Thirty? How did you try to differentiate your take on the SEALs from other works that

celebrate or castigate them, or treat them as heroes, barbarians, or traumatized victims?

MACKIN: I purposefully didn't watch any of those movies, nor read any of the books, because I didn't want to think my way around them. Character-wise, I tried to stick with the guys who surprised me by being SEALS, those who were able to sidestep the everyday macho nonsense without losing an ounce of respect.

Who and what were you reading before you joined the military? Were you writing? Did you publish or attempt to publish anything? Were you reading and writing while in the military?

MACKIN: The first book I loved was "The Outsiders" by SE Hinton, which I read in the sixth grade. As part of our lesson my English teacher brought in a boom box and had us listen to The Who's "Baba O'Riley" start to finish. She then related that song to the plight of the Greasers. I've been hooked on reading and writing ever since.

While in Navy I read mostly nonfiction and I wrote in my journal. I published columns for McSweeney's Internet Tendency and The Believer ("Dispatches from Iraq" and "Nutrition is a Force Multiplier", respectively) under the pseudonym Roland Thompson.

When, where, and why did you begin working on the stories in Bring Out the Dog? As you began to write, what attracted you to fiction, rather than memoir? Who or what helped most to develop you as a writer and reach your full potential? When did you realize the stories were getting good?

MACKIN: I started writing the book in 2011 after I transferred from DEVGRU to the Navy ROTC unit at the University of New Mexico. I gravitated toward fiction because it allowed me to better explore the anxiety that I'd felt during certain real-life situations. Those who really helped me were George Saunders, my friend and mentor since we met at a writing

retreat in 1998; my editor Andy Ward, who gave me enough rope to hang myself; and Deborah Treisman, fiction editor at the New Yorker, who never failed to set the bar really high. I knew when a story was getting good when I'd derive energy from it and not the other way around.

What was the kernel of the first story that made it into the final selection, both in terms of its relation to things that happened in real life and when you began to write about it? Which story in Bring Out the Dog was hardest to write and why?

MACKIN: We lost a dog on the first night of my second deployment to Afghanistan. The circumstances behind that loss and its fallout informed *Great Circle Route Westward Through Perpetual Night*. The cat-head shaped licorice and the seven-foot tall Dutchman, both featured in *Kattekoppen*, were real. I wrote *The Lost Troop* over a long weekend in April of 2017. Otherwise every story took forever to finish, with lots of iterations and getting stuck. The hardest story to write didn't make it into the book.

One of the recurring characters in your story is Hal, the SEAL team chief who expresses very strong ideas about tactical competence, unit discipline, and team-culture fit. What is complicated about Hal, what is simple, what is ambiguous, and what is problematic?

MACKIN: Hal is a combo of five or six real guys, named after the computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. What makes him complicated/ambiguous is his love for his men versus his love of the war. What makes him problematic is his ego. The only simple thing about Hal is his mullet.

Many Bring Out the Dog stories describe a new team member or potential new member striving for membership and acceptance. What attracts you to this type of story?

MACKIN: It wasn't so much an attraction as a default. Aside

from providing built-in conflict, that striver was me.

From "Great Circle Route Westward Through Perpetual Night":

"The stars were so bright we could have gone unaided. Still, night vision afforded certain advantages. I saw ice crystals trailing off the drone's wingtips, meteor shower in the ionosphere, plasma connecting unnamed constellations. Down in the valley I observed wind, not just playing on the corn, but the actual movement of air in evergreen loops. The sky was jade, the faraway mountains aluminum, the river like something you'd discover out the window of a time machine."

What is the story of writing this paragraph (which I chose almost at random)? What's the real-life origin? What's the literary genesis?

MACKIN: The real-life origin was me stopping to look through my goggles while on patrol. The literary genesis, I'd say, occurred in the space between my eye and the night vision screen, or reality and its projected image, how those things were different but also the same.

What feedback about Bring Out the Doghave you received from members of the SEAL community? Are you worried that it might not be well received?

MACKIN: Most guys say they like it, but I think they're lying. I had to stop worrying about it or I would've gone insane.

Check out an excerpt from Mackin's Bring Out the Dog Here and Buy it Here