

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 storytelling 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 Taflı 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."