So Say We All and Wrath-Bearing Tree Collaborate!

In collaboration with *So Say We All*'s Veterans Writing Division, founder Justin Hudnall and *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*'s Andria Williams had the privilege of serving 21 veterans, active-duty servicemembers, and veteran family members over 2023 by providing four masterclasses followed by an intensive creative writing workshop.

We would like to thank our masterclass teachers, Abby Murray, Halle Shilling, Peter Molin, and Andria Williams for their inspired presentations on the aspects of craft; all of our wonderful participants; and California Humanities for supporting veterans in the arts.

So Say We All and *The Wrath-Bearing Tree* are proud to showcase a portion of our cohort below. We look forward to reading much more from them in the coming years.

***

***

Connie Kinsey: “The Letters”

In the old gray shoe box with the tattered red lid is four years’ worth of letters. Most of them are addressed to my mother, but some are addressed to me. Many are written on onionskin and sealed in the familiar FPO airmail envelopes brightly colored red, white and blue. They crinkle and crackle when you touch them. My dad wrote these letters during his four tours of Vietnam—the first in 1966 and the final one in 1972.

Those years he was away were hard on us all, but of course he took the brunt of it. He left everything behind. We missed him.

He missed everything.

Those letters have been around the world, carted from base to base, and stored in one closet or another since the 1960s. I have not read all of them yet. I have not read most of them.

My mother gave me the letters with a warning. To use her words, there are some *pornographic parts.* I imagine there might be. He was a young man away from the woman that almost sixty years later he would refer to as the love of his life.

That's not the reason I can't bring myself to read them. I think I'm prepared to see my dad as a fully human male with a healthy sex drive. That might have been difficult when I was a teenager, but in all of those letters he is younger than I am now. Much younger. The men he led much younger yet.

What I'm not prepared for are the spaces between the words - the things he doesn't write about – the booby traps, the snipers, the dead bodies, the leeches, the cold c-rations straight from the can. At least, I don't think he wrote about them. But I don't know. Not yet.

I know of these abominations because I hang out in Vietnam veterans' groups on Facebook. I never post. I just read. It's research. The guys know I'm lurking there – I asked permission. I want to know what my dad, what they, went through, but I also don't want to know. It's like watching a horror movie while peeking through fingers.

My father, Captain Conrad L. Kinsey, always said the Marine Corps took him as a poor boy and turned him into an officer and a gentleman. I'm quite sure there was nothing gentlemanly about Vietnam. But he survived when so many didn't.

I adored my father. Most folks did. He was the officer and gentleman he wanted to be since seeing his first Marine in dress blues as a poor 9-year-old boy in Michigan. He had fulfilled a dream and took his oath seriously.

My dad was a commanding officer who lost thirteen of his men

in a horrific battle on May 10, 1968, at Ngok Tavak near Chu Lai. It was Mother's Day. They weren't able to retrieve the bodies. That battle haunted him. Gave him nightmares. Landed him in a psychiatric ward decades later.

A group of the survivors formed and held reunions every five years in Branson, Missouri. My father finally attended when a group of forensic anthropologists went to Vietnam and retrieved the bodies of his men. Until they came home, he just couldn't go.

After his death, I was invited to attend what turned out to be the last reunion. It was held six months after his funeral.

I ended up drinking too much with a group of men who thought my father a fine gentleman and referred to him as their best commanding officer ever. I cried a lot, but I laughed a lot too. I have a photograph of four of us – me and three older men, though not older by all that much, our arms around one another's shoulders, broad smiles on our faces.

They were able to say to me what they'd never said to their commanding officer. I was able to ask them questions I'd never been able to ask my dad.

We bonded that night. I'm still in touch with some of them.

It was an important weekend in my life and my grief. Talking to those men helped me heal from my dad's death. It had seemed as if the whole world just went on when mine was collapsing. But those men that night – they remembered, and we remembered the man, the Marine, Captain Conrad L. Kinsey had been.

He's been gone seven years now. His death was sudden and unexpected though his wounds never healed. He had severe post-traumatic stress disorder. His experiences branded his heart, brain, and body. Vietnam, Ngok Tavak and the thirteen who didn't come home, especially, affected every experience he would have until the Sunday evening we found him dead.

I’m writing a book of my experiences and his during the Vietnam war. I was young and having an idyllic childhood in Hawaii and then moody teen years in North Carolina. He was doing four tours in hell. Incorporating his letters into this book is important. I must read them.

I must.

*

Author’s note:

The 50th anniversary of the official end of that terrible terrible war is coming up soon – May 7, 2025. It will be three days short of the 57th anniversary of the battle that broke my father.

It’s time for me to begin. I can handle my dad’s sexuality, but I am not sure I can handle the unwritten words that became his post-traumatic stress disorder.

I once had someone dear to me and eight years older say, “Vietnam was not a factor in my life.” He said it as if tired of hearing my stories, tired of hearing my dad’s stories, bored by us both. I was stunned. He was the right age to serve but had a lucky draft number. What privilege to have lived through such an era without it leaving a mark. How insolent and insular.

Vietnam was a heavy load for my family – my father so much more than the rest of us, but we were scarred too. I cry when I open that box of letters. I will cry when I read the letters. I hope to smile too. To hear his voice as I read. But the unknown of what’s in that box haunts me and I’m afraid to begin.

But…Semper fi, Daddy, Semper fi. You rest in peace now.

– Connie Kinsey

***

George Warchol, “Service in the Middle”

Some inspire movies and books,
and others wind up in the news.
But for defenders with wrenches or keyboards in racks,
publicity wrecks our Service in Quietude.

And somewhere between the snipers and spies
are the middling faithful and true.
But no one tells stories about the comms guys,
they’re complex and they’re boring too.

Such as “Italy Went Dark” and the “Smurf Attack”
And “The Air Traffic Control System in Afghanistan is Down Again” too.
But the clever fixes among cables, and packets, and stacks…
They’re cool! But they would not interest you.

They say “All gave some, and some gave all”
and that’s true In Arms, sisters, and brothers.
But the defining phrase for answering the call, is
“Less than some; More than others”

Shep’rding the Team and The Job carried out,
that’s full time, and full effort, and much of what Service to Nation is all about.
But the pow’rs demand our grind and our continual waiting hurry,
“Waste yourself in OUR Way of Attainment! Or Be FOREVER Unworthy!”

“Climb the ladder, collect and achieve,
Stripes and baubles and slash up the sleeve!”
“Fill the reports with heroic deeds!”
“Promote!” “Promote!” MAKE them believe!

And like promotes like and after evil doth enter,
the Teeth of the Grinder do harden and render
Honesty’s kernel as powder in blender,
seeking to crush and to force The Surrender.

But instead, I’m finding my place in creative belong,
buoyed among words and not stripes.
And I’m finding my voice in verse and in song,
and in my choices towards effort, and living, and life.

And coming to terms with all that’s gone past,
I at last come to seek My Own Peace.
My Terms. My Service. My Sorrows. My Joys.
My ways to meet my own Needs.

I’ve done things you can not,
and you’ve done things I could never.
But the greatest of treasures, of gifts to be caught,
Is finding ourselves…and keeping ourselves together.

*

George Warchol, “Give and Get”

Give it up.
Give it up and get going.
Let it go,
and get on your way.

Listen up
and teach yourself freedom.
Write down your story,
you’ve got so much to say.

Lift your head.
Don’t abandon yourself.
Find your starting ground,
and don’t you retreat.
Just hang on.
I promise I’ll be there,
I’ll catch you.
Just try to stay on your feet.

Put it down.
It’s too much to carry.
Talk it out.

Don’t bury it deep.
Begin to trust
and be
just
a little less wary.
Let us help you begin to see.

To see something different
from all that you’ve known.
To perceive there is more
than your bearing alone.

See that we,

that we want you with us.

You have done so much good.
You are worthy of trust.

Just get up.
Get up and get going.
Begin to move.
Please, just shuffle your feet.
There’s still light ahead.
And there’s still movement showing.
And there’s still a good chance
for some kind of peace.

Everyone suffers.
But not all the time.
Not forever. Not always…

But always for some of the time.

And If redemption be needed,
then know that suffering need not be without value.
Grind the growth from it.
Squeeze it for purpose.
If nothing else,
it shapes us for something more.
Perhaps to fit us for more acts of tomorrow.

From the middle I can only tell you of what *I* see.
But from in front of it,
I can look back,
and tell something,
of what it means
against the background
of former,
forged ideas,
and
old,
cold,

hard,
sharpened facts.

Get in front of it.
We must put this behind.
Get in front of it.
We must stop wasting time.
Get in front of it.
We are not going alone.
Get in front of it,
and tell it to push you home.

You can watch George's beautiful reading of his work here.

*

***

Mariah Smith – No One Left Behind

“Every man is guilty of all the good he did not do.” – Voltaire

I’d already been awake for a day and half when the bombs went off. Physically, I was in a hotel room in the Willard

Intercontinental in Washington DC, but mentally, I was outside the gates of the Kabul International Airport, in the crush of scared and desperate people, trying to guide a number of Afghan families through the mob that surrounded it. My friend Dee, an Afghan American, who I had served with in Khost Province in 2007, was doing the same for her cousins and aunts and uncles. She was the one who texted me first, the instant after the explosion at the airport gate, and moments later the pictures started flooding in. The images were live-streamed into my brain, becoming indelible memories, through the phone screen my eyes had been glued to since August 15th 2021, the day the Taliban entered the city. The pictures showed people running holding their children, covered in dirt and soot from the blast, torn and bloodied clothing littering the streets. A thousand dropped and crushed water bottles. Dee called me on WhatsApp a few minutes later as we tried to get accountability of the Afghans we had been communicating with. In the end all we could do was cry wordlessly together at the futility and the anger we felt.

Hanging up the phone, I closed my eyes in exhaustion for a few minutes and let the despair wash over me. There had been very little sleep the past 9 days. The King sized bed in the quiet hotel room threatened to swallow me. The same hotel room where I had put on a dress and good earrings the previous day, pinned my hair up, and walked into a meeting where I asked for, and received $250,000 from Boeing’s veterans group to help fund our evacuation efforts. Until a week ago, I had never done any fundraising before and now we were asking for six figures at a time. Instead of sleeping I got up, walked into the marble bathroom, brushed my teeth, splashed water on my tear streaked face, put on a ball cap to cover my unwashed hair and went downstairs to the conference room where the others were. There was more work to be done.

The first interpreter I ever worked with was named Joseph, or that was the name he used when he was with our unit. He joined

our platoon of MPs a few days into the Iraq War in March of 2003. He recalled being a teenager when Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990/1991 and the US kicked off Desert Storm. When the US returned again 12 years later, he immediately volunteered to help. One night, all of us lieutenants were called to the bombed out building on Tallil Air Base that we were using as a temporary command post to meet our interpreters. The first one wouldn't shake my hand, informing me of his religious restrictions against touching women. I was the only female officer in the company. Joseph stepped forward and shook my hand warmly, his kind smile and direct eye contact dispelling the embarrassment and irritation I had felt the moment before. War was new to all of us at that time. We were excited – we felt like we were going on a big adventure. None of us knew it would dominate and sometimes consume the next almost 20 years of our lives.

I don't know what we would have done without Joseph. It wasn't just that he could speak the language and we couldn't. He showed a group of inexperienced Soldiers what a war is like for the people whose home is where it is being fought. What was at stake. What to do when you encounter children on the battlefield, the elderly, the injured citizens. All the realities none of us had lived before but would live many times over in the years to come.

In the years that followed there were more deployments including three tours to Afghanistan. And right around the time I was done with the Army, America had decided it was long past done with Afghanistan, we started negotiating with the Taliban and set a timeline to leave. I will never forget the sadness on General Miller's face in one of the last televised interviews of units pulling out. He sat on a concrete perimeter barrier and talked to the reporter, no inflection in his voice, only fatigue, perhaps hiding the regret and disagreement he felt with the decision. One of the younger Soldiers who was interviewed said she hadn't even been born

yet when the Towers fell on 9/11.

Downstairs in the conference room of the Willard, 18 years after that first meeting with an interpreter, I was trying to make things right. A dozen other grim, exhausted people, most of them fellow veterans, sat in a horseshoe formation of tables behind laptops. Many were from other non-profits like ours, No One Left Behind. The tables were littered with Redbulls and spitters. Messages continued to pour in from people who were working inside the airport grounds, those on the streets where the bombs went off, and other veterans from all over the country trying to find and help their interpreters. A congressional committee staffer who was also an Army 82nd Airborne veteran like me, texted: "Hey – are you hearing that the Kabul airport is shutting down? The gates are all being closed and nobody else is being allowed in?"

We had been talking and sharing information all week. Those of us in that conference room had a direct connection to US troops on the ground inside the airport. I had just heard that the Marines were bulldozing shut the gate that had been bombed, welding them closed behind earthworks. After the bombs, no one else was getting in.

"Yep, it's true." I confirmed.

"WTF?! Blinken and Hicks told Senators this afternoon on their call that ops would continue at least until the 31st."

"We are struggling to even get American Citizens on the airfield right now." I told him about the earthen berms being erected to block access to the airport, all while American citizens waved their passports and Afghan interpreters desperately waved their visa paperwork outside the razor wire. "Everything I have seen is indicating we are done evacuating. They lied." I set my phone down, disgusted at the way we were leaving our allies. Not even the Senate Intelligence Committee was getting straight answers.

A few hours later I watched in furious disbelief as the President addressed the country from the Oval office, a row of American flags behind him. He praised the bravery of the orderly withdrawal and reiterated the rightness of ending the War in Afghanistan. The group of us volunteers stood in front of the TV with our arms crossed, numbly watching the canned and false message being peddled. It was a pathetic attempt to try and spin the gigantic cluster fuck we had watched unfold over the past ten days into something resembling a strategic plan. I couldn't believe anyone would buy his empty statements. Did they even care about the scale of suffering that was happening on the ground in Afghanistan? The senior leaders at the State Department sure didn't seem to. As the US prepared to abandon the embassy in Kabul some US employees in the visa office burnt all of the Afghan passports and documents they had custody of. These were the golden tickets for the Afghans who had earned a Special Immigrant Visa to the US through their work with the American military or government. Although the burning was 'standard procedure' for preparing to abandon an embassy, in this case to the enemy, this action further sealed the fate of those who were so close to making it out yet still trapped.

Someone switched off the TV, and we walked to Old Ebbits Grill, a Washington DC institution. We ordered some much-needed alcohol. One of the other volunteers arrived a few minutes after the first wave of us, spotted my Old Fashioned on the table, asked if he could taste it, and knocked it back in one swallow, cherry and all, before his ass even landed in his chair. The table shrieked with hysteria tainted laughter. We were all a little unhinged from the horror of the past several days.

For almost two years, I've tried to think of a coherent way to talk about those two weeks in August 2021 and the months that followed. It was both the worst thing I've ever witnessed and some of the most moving work I've ever been a part of.

In April and May of 2023 No One Left Behind was contacted by a team from Japanese public TV. They wanted to do a story on our organization along with the Afghan women who had been part of the female tactical platoon (FTPs, they were called in short). This consumed my life for a month but ended up being very cathartic. One of the themes of their show was moral injury among veterans. “The Japanese people do not have the experience with this. The generation that fought in WWII never spoke of it and there have not been conflicts since. We also do not want them to forget what is happening to the Afghan people.” At the time of this writing I am still waiting for the documentary to be released. I don’t know what angle they will take the story. Although I came to trust the production team, both women close in age to me, I have to recognize that they are from a different country and I don’t know how they will paint the United States and our involvement in Afghanistan. I still hold a security clearance for work, and I held this in my mind every time they interviewed me. Although I was mostly open with them, I was not able to fully share the depth of the doubt and anger I was feeling at my own country’s clumsy and sometimes arrogant involvement in a 20 year war that we lost. It was hard to even put it in writing for this essay. In a way it feels like treason.

“Tell us the story of the skinny, scared woman again.” The Japanese camera woman zoomed her lens towards me. They must have asked me half a dozen times, referring to a story I had told them about searching Afghan women on a compound that Special Forces raided along with our ANA partners. My job was to search the women on the compound and this particular young woman was likely in her 20s as I was. As I searched her for weapons, in her own home, that I had invaded I was struck by how malnourished and frail she felt under my hands. Although I was gentle, I stood behind her with my boot between her two sandled feet and felt the fragility and lightness of her body, ashamed of my own camouflaged and armored presence restricting her movement and how easily I could have hurt her if that had

been my intent.

I think they liked this story because it drew a stark contrast between the American soldiers and the Afghan people whose country they were occupying. But that was the opposite of the Afghans in the military and government we had worked with. We were working collectively for a better future. And then that was snatched away from all of us. I say snatched, but it was years of poor strategy, a rotational plan that didn't work, a lack of focus, and a misunderstanding of the durability of the Taliban. When we lost and were cut off from our friends in the most chaotic, traumatizing way possible, all we wanted was to be able to be with our friends again and help them live safely. It wasn't about the differences, it was about our common humanity.

"Tell us about your PAIN and the GUILT" the camerawoman and interviewer would say. Emphasis on these sad words. Each interview led to a request for another, often revisiting the same topic 6 or 8 times. They wanted to hear more about my deployments in Afghanistan, hoping for a good shoot 'em up story I regretted and I think they were a little disappointed in the relative calmness of my deployments. Although they wanted the Japanese people to know the Afghans stuck under Taliban rule were still suffering, with few options, we didn't talk much about the withdrawal itself.

I met Efat when we interviewed her for the Japanese public TV show. She had been a female police woman, a job she loved. Now she was trapped at home. During our interview she cried helplessly and the feeling of watching a strong woman in such despair was gut wrenching. How do you help someone keep hope alive in these circumstances? I felt very helpless and grateful for the friends that have been able to leave. What does Efat have to look forward to? She was the one who made me confront, most clearly the reality for women left there. When I interviewed her, her surroundings looked like a mud walled compound with little furniture inside and a small assortment

of basic kitchen implements. She told us they had sold a majority of their possessions in order to live. She was dressed in a loose black robe with a black scarf ready to wind over her hair if she stepped outside. The way she sobbed softly tore at my heart. There was nothing I could do or say to help or that made anything better in any way. How terrible to be trapped so completely in your own country, after having lived a different life of relative freedom as a young adult.

No One Left Behind continues to evacuate people out of Afghanistan, mainly through funding their travel to Pakistan while they wait to finish processing at the US embassy in Pakistan. We set a goal to help 1000 leave in 2023 and we met that goal on 30th of June. We set a new goal of 2000 and we made that goal also in late October. There are still so many people trying to help, but it will really take a change in US and international policy to allow everyone who needs to leave Afghanistan to make it to safety. The overwhelming need makes our efforts feel like a drop in the bucket.

It was almost nine months after the evacuation when Latifa and har family arrived at Dulles airport in May of 2022. They had been waiting in Iceland for the past 4 months while their US visa was finished. Latifa was the primary applicant, which was less common for the woman to be the primary applicant, less than 10% . After having NOLB consume my life for almost a year, and to be overwhelmed by the amount of people reaching out that we couldn’t yet help evacuate, I realized it became important for me to help one person, one family, and to see what the experience was actually like for a new family arriving. This felt like it was as much for my redemption and well-being as it was for theirs. They came to live with me, making progress in starting their new lives though they still feel the wounds of the country they left and the life they lost that is now no longer possible in their native land.

The night after I left the Williard back in August of 2021, the night after the last US plane left the airfield in

Afghanistan, I was at a black tie event in Virginia horse country where I live now. It felt surreal, rich horse people in the most beautiful part of Virginia and that night I felt very removed from it, like a disoriented witness. I was still fully immersed in the violence and tragedy of what I had seen. I felt like I had been deployed, even though I hadn't left DC. At one point I started to tear up, overwhelmed, and my date walked me out to the large balcony where we watched the guests dancing, brightly lit through the plate glass windows, while we were shadowed in the summer night, the music from inside competing with the sounds of frogs and crickets. Teenage girls in their homecoming and prom dresses, jumped about joyfully on the dance floor in small groups or with their parents. The stark contrast between their safety and inhibition and what girls their own age had just gone through and what their lives in Afghanistan would be like now.

This is the story I wish I wasn't telling. I wish our war had ended differently. After investing all that time and lost lives and lives forever changed, our country's leaders had us walk away in the most humiliating way possible and leave our friends behind in a near hopeless situation. However, our work with No One Left Behind continues. While we are still helping people depart Afghanistan on the Special Immigrant Visa program we are also very focused on helping them restart their lives here in America. And this is where my faith in my fellow citizens remains strong. The kindness and generosity by regular people we have seen extended to these newly arrived Afghan refugees is incredible to witness. Restarting a life and a career in a new country is exceptionally challenging and so many Americans have stepped up to help in a thousand different ways. For a period of time after the withdrawal I was hyper focused on the horror and unfairness of what had happened to so many Afghans and how it affected the veteran community. But now my focus has shifted more to the good we are able to be part of.

 ***

Reinetta Vaneendenberg – A.O.R.

Letter from Hotel California 1 epistolary
The Hall of Valor 3 prose
Vet Killed by Granby ST Hit/Run 4 newspaper reportage
Obituaries 5 newspaper reportage
Collateral Damages of A.O.R. Ambiguities 6 scratch-out poem
Crossing Granby Street 8 poem encased by fragments
++++++++++

28/8/2017 Hotel California haha (same as before)

Dear Liz,
A volunteer is typing this for me since my hands are bandaged.

His name is Jonathan and
he’s here allot getting new legs and his gut fixed. Sometimes we play backgammon like you and
I did that year in the sandbox. I move pieces with my good finger.
It was great talking to you last night. I’ve been thinking about you allot today. You—in a
good place now, with a room of your own at the veteran house. It’s ok to accept the room and the food and the clothes. You’re a vet and all that is for vets. Not everyone can be lucky like me and spend a year at Hotel John Hopkins in lovely Baltimore.

Last night when we talked you were mad again about the AOR crap but we couldn’t do
anything. It’s over and done with and over and done. Listen hear, you and I aren’t responsible for the 10,000 dead from 9/11 and its wars,
so you need to let that go.

Take those five fuckin “Xs” off your fuckin hat. Sailors don’t count our kills or anyone
else’s. Shake your red hair free. We did the best we could with the crappy equipment and
leadership. Like Nam, man: who’s the enemy? Our interpreter, Fahad? A kid? A fruit vendor? Congress sucks! How can they tell us who’s a threat? When we can or can’t shoot? They’re a million miles away. In fuckin DC.

I must a got all stirred up after our call because I had that same dream again last night, the one with you standing in your battle dress, head down and walking, not watching where you’re going and I’m yelling “Liz! Look out! LIZ!” But you keep walking. I keep yelling. I wake up sweating, crying. You always had rotten situational awareness. I guess that’s why we made it as battle buddies.

We had good war-fighting skills. The rules of engagement said

when we could shoot. The
area of responsibility—the lines for bullets, bodies and bags were clearly drawn on maps,
directives, messages for Afghanistan, Iraq. I don't know why we were sent where we oughtn't to of been. Boundaries are boundaries.

You're right it was a set up because there was no way we could have guessed that little
girl had a bomb in her dolly basket.

Have you heard about the lieutenant? Someone came by saying the Navy was not
promoting her because of the explosion. I don't think it was her fault that we went where we weren't 'supposed to and her being in the navy not the army. I agree with you that w

I don't think it was her fault that we went where we weren't 'supposed to be' and her being in the navy not the army. I agree with you that we were setup because Fahad didn't go with us and he always wanted to be with us everywhere.

The sandbox is a strange place for sailors. Don't you think so? How can our Navy not
promote a young officer who is eating the same crap we had to and live like we had to and the Elephants keep changing the AOR and ROE? At least she didn't get hurt. She got home in one piece to her wife and kids.

Jonathan's nice, a handsome dude. Maybe you could have coffee with him when you
visit. I know you come from blue blood but not all guys are like those
Our families are so fucked up. Mine tries but they don't understand, even my dad who
did Vietnam. They returned to disdain and us as heroes but are forgotten a month after returning anyway. None of it is anyone's responsibility. Hope you get this litter at your new

address before our next call.

The docs say I’m doing ok and can see you whenever you come up from Norfolk. I’m
sorry for the mix up last time. I had the dates wrong. And here you rode the bus all day. Sorry.

Time is jumbled between surgeries and meds. You know what I mean—you have allot of meds to. I was in OR for reconstructing surgery the day you came. I don’t see much that they can do—nine fingers got blown off and all the operations won’t bring them back—but those doctors go figure they always have an idea how to make a bad thing better. Next operation is to make the whole in my gut better.

The only good things in my life are you and Jonathan as friends. The rest is crap. Look
forward to your weekly call. Same time same station.

So, now I really have to go because Jonathan has to go to PT. Remember when that
meant physical training, a chance to burn off some steam? Now it’s pain and torture.
I asked him to sign this for me so you’d know it was really from me but he laughed.

Just believe it’s from me,
your battle buddy,
Mary

The Hall of Valor
lists all
6906
U.S. military who have died during the Global War on Terror in Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn.
This Hall of Valor is a searchable database
by name, operation, month and year. It can also sort
by death date, oldest to newest or newest to oldest.

Viewed 3DEC2017: thefallen.militarytimes.com

VET KILLED BY GRANBY ST. HIT/RUN
NORFOLK
Dispatch reported an anonymous call 2:12 p.m.,
28 August 2017, about a hit-and-run at Granby Street and Thole Street
intersection in the Suburban Acres area of Norfolk. The caller said a
person was hit by a compact brown car. An emergency crew was on
scene within 4 minutes of the call, followed by an ambulance 3 minutes later.

There were no identifying documents found on the victim. She was
pronounced DOA at DePaul Hospital.

Police found no witnesses.
The victim has been identified as Elizabeth C. Stanton, 37, a U.S.
Navy veteran. Burial services pending.
Anyone with information about this accident is asked to call Norfolk Police Investigations.

obituaries
Elizabeth C. Stanton
NORFOLK — 37, Funeral
service: 8 a.m. Monday, on
Sept. 11, 2017, Virginia State
Veterans Cemetery, Suffolk.

Collateral Damages of A.O.R. Ambiguities

Area of Responsibility inside outside
the enemy outside inside
ordersdogtagsdufflebagI.D.cellphonesmokes
Iraq on the Way Back
Domino Theory
burqa door-to-door
An improvised explosive device I.E.D.
is a hidden bomb Blows up patrol
convoy missing body parts Balad
Bagram Air Base Afghanistan
we don’t know where the leg is Politicians
make up rules of engagement R.O.E.
tasty fish eggs grow into the child as I.E.D. who will lead us
hightechhighbodycount out-foxed
push meds push to keep/up with them
Ramstein Air Force Base Germany
VA Hospital amputations prosthetics thumb
Hand Calf Legs Charles C. Carter Center for Mortuary
Affairs, Dover Air Force Base, Delaware
Warmonger body armor/MadeinChina/budget hearings
re-take, re-deploy, re-calibrate
Fall of Berlin,Hanoi,Fallujah.
HailMaryFullofGrace
It has been 16 years

Senator, Is the 22-Veterans-Per-Day Suicide Rate Data Reliable?
Do you have stats for correlation with
Homelessness? Alcoholism? Drug abuse?
VA Failure rates? CPTSD? TBI ?

See: the Latin cida, killer
S u i cide me
Fr a t ri cide us
G e n o cide them
CNN reports an increased rate of blue-on-blue violence as military kill their own

By the book By the book
6 Bythebook
6 Bythebookbythebook t hebookCP
9 By book T
0 ook S
2 ok D
nobook
Allah M.C.
Mission Co
Com
Comp

black body bagsbagbags

Black
Hawk

W
a
r

She charged the crosswalk as if rushing the landing zone,
right arm propelled red pony-tailed floppy head.
Hot wash rose from swampy beach traffic.
I saw her as a unit, an interruption across my line of sight.
The uniform of a street person, I presumed, with time to
look during the long light. I turned up the AC.
Flicked the auto-lock.
Black wool beret, with five white Xs pinned on it.
Hawaiian shirt, glaring blue, green, yellow
Camouflage pants, too big or her now too small.
Black mocs like clown shoes, pale heels peeking out,
as if her feet had lost the mass for boots.
She was closing on the sidewalk, focused on the mark—
When the light turned, I shifted the Vette into first
just as horns blasted.

Reinetta Van explores identity and historical perspective issues in hybrid forms. Her work has appeared in The War Horse *and anthologies* Sisters in Arms: Lessons We've Learned *and* Things We Carry Still: Poems and Micro-Stories About Military Gear. *Van (captainvanusnavy@gmail.com) scribbled A.O.R.'s first draft June 12, 2017, and hopes to express someday why this piece sticks in her craw. You can hear her read from her work here.*

***

Tom Keating – REMF

Richie handed me a bandolier.

“Another fucking waste of twelve hours,” he said. The green cloth pockets each held a magazine filled with eighteen rounds for the M16 battle rifle slung on my shoulder. It was almost 1800 hours, and we were going on perimeter guard duty till 0600 hrs. the next morning. Ninety-eight degrees, and our jungle fatigues were soaked with sweat.

We loaded up the truck in the company area for perimeter guard duty, which we were assigned to do every couple of weeks. Twelve hours sitting in a hot, wet, smelly sandbagged bunker on our sector of the Army base perimeter. Twelve hours of boredom.

“I’d rather be typing the fucking monthly fuel consumption report,” I replied. “This sucks, again.”

“Can it, you two, and get on the truck,” yelled Sergeant Hollis, the sergeant of the guard for this shift.

The twelve of us climbed on the open truck, wearing helmets and heavy, sweaty flak vests, our rifles slung on our shoulders. The truck drove out to the perimeter along the dirt road behind the tall, barbed-war fence of our base. Two small Vietnamese villages were just four hundred meters from the fence, and the locals who lived there would come into the main gate each day, get checked by MPs, and then go to work on our base as cooks, laundry workers, and housemaids.

The combat troops called us REMFs, rear echelon motherfuckers; support troops that made the war possible with our typing, driving, computer programming and other work skills needed in a modern Army. We do the paperwork that feeds the war with everything from body bags to bullets. Our base and living quarters the grunts (infantry) call luxury. We had beds, daily hot chow, plenty of water and in some cases, air-conditioned offices.

Most of the soldiers assigned to this logistics base were trained to be Army administrative types. Some, like me, who

were trained for infantry, were assigned as clerks or typists when we arrived. The Army marches on paper. I knew I lucked out with this assignment, instead of being in combat.

Every couple of weeks we were pulled from our offices, trucks and repair shops and thrown together for bunker guard duty, strangers to each other. The truck arrived at our bunker's situated on large earthen berms on the perimeter near one of the gates into our base. The truck stopped, and Sergeant Hollis got out, walked to the rear, and said,

"Kearney, Philips, Richie and Denton, you four here, in bunker number one."

We hopped off the truck. Someone handed us our weapons, flares, ammunition for the M60 machine gun, extra canteens, and a box of C-rations. Richie carried two rolls of toilet paper. The truck drove down to the next bunker. We waited while Philips picked up a stone and threw it into our bunker.

"Hope ole snaky aint in there today."

Cobras loved our bunkers; they provided shade for the cold-blooded reptiles, who also enjoy the rats that live there, too. We threw stones in the bunker to let Snaky know we're coming in. Sure enough, he slithered out, an eight-foot-long cobra. The snake turned and retreated into the brush near the barbed wire. Philips threw in another rock and waited. Nothing. We carefully entered the bunker, our home for the next twelve hours. There were no bushes or tall grass around our bunker. Defoliant sprayed every week made sure of that.

I set the machine gun on its bipod, positioned it out the center bunker port. We took off our helmets and flak vests, and settled in. The heat and stink inside the bunker was unbearable. Richie and Denton went outside behind the bunker to smoke some weed. Philips and I took the guard position, looking out at the villages.

Philips said he was a truck mechanic for the 350th TC (Transportation Company). A short, stocky fellow, he speaks with a hillbilly accent. “Kearney, where you from?”

Before I could reply Richie came back in. Richie was tall and lanky. He shoved his glasses up higher on his large nose and announced, “Put on your gear, the sergeant is coming to check, and he’s got the ELL-TEE with him.”

We put on our helmets, shirts and vests and waited. Sergeant Hollis called us together outside the bunker. Lieutenant Nack, the officer of the guard this shift, stood behind the sergeant. Nack’s tailored fatigue was dark with sweat. Hollis was an experienced soldier who had fought in Korea. He gave us our instructions.

“Okay, you guys know the drill. Two on two off, two hours. Kearney, I want you on the machine gun. Richie, check the commo line. You are Reno 4. Do it now.”

Richie picked up the field phone handset, pressed the key and said, “Bravo One, Reno 4 commo check.” Richie put the receiver down. “We’re good to go, Sergeant.”

Sergeant Hollis replied, “Okay. Do that at least once an hour. Me and the lieutenant will do another check later tonight and bring more water. Anything else, Lieutenant?”

Nack stepped forward. He wore the custom fit new model body armor jacket that zipped up the front. “Stay alert, men. Keep your eyes open tonight, Intel says we are sure to get hit by Charlie.” He stepped back. Nack worked in the finance office, probably hadn’t fired a weapon since Basic Training or whatever reserve officers went through. They turned and got back in the Jeep and left.

Philips asked as he took off his gear, “Kearney, you think the EL-TEE was just bullshitting about an attack?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, “It is the big Chinese New Year festival, I would expect them all to be celebrating, not fighting.” We settled in, looking for movement in front of us.

Denton and Richie relieved us two hours later. The sun was almost gone, so Phillips and I went outside, where it was cool, the air fresh. Trucks and Jeeps kept coming and going out of the gate near our bunker. Philips used the piss tube alongside the bunker, and I sipped warm water from my canteen. Just then the field phone chirped. Richie picked it up.

“Reno 4.” His eyes got large, and he looked over at me.

“Roger, yellow alert. Reno 4.”

Yellow alert meant some shit was going down. We hustled back into the bunker. I drew back the cocking lever of the M 60 and put my shoulder against the stock. I looked out the port. Richie and Denton picked up their rifles. Denton looked confused. He didn’t know what to do with the rifle. I looked over and said,

“Denton, put the magazine into the rifle, then pull the charging handle. Put your selector switch off safety to fire. Richie, give him a hand.” These guys were clerks and typists, not infantry. Finally, their rifles were locked and loaded. We waited. I saw the gate being closed; Vietnamese workers on the post being hustled out of the gate as it closed. A Military Police Jeep pulled up to the gate, with an M60 machine gun mounted and manned. Damn!

“We have to check the claymores to be sure the wires are okay. Who wants to go with me?” Philips nodded his head. “Okay. Denton and Richie, eyes front. If you see anything move, shoot it. We’ll be right back.”

The two of us exited the bunker and found the claymore wires leading from the bunker. We followed along in the fading light all the way to the mines which were thirty feet in front of

the bunker. Everything looked okay, the wires attached to the blasting caps, positioned “FRONT TOWARD ENEMY.” We ran back to the bunker. I heard a rumble, like thunder. The phone chirped again. Richie answered,

“Understand. Red alert. Reno 4.” Richie hung up and relayed the news. “The VC are attacking Bien Hoa Air Base, and we may be next! Holy Shit!” We were jacked up with adrenaline and fear. The booms were louder, closer. The stutters of a machine gun could be heard. The field phone chirped again. I picked it up.

“Reno 4,” I said into the handset.

“Reno 4, stand by. Victor Charlie spotted in the village 400 meters your front. TAC air on the way. Get low in your bunker.”

“Reno 4.”

“Get down,” I shouted, “TAC Air!” Everyone crouched down below the sandbag wall of the bunker. We heard the roar of an F4 Phantom jet, and two large explosions. The F4 Phantom roared away. I cautiously looked over the sandbag port. The villages were gone, just smoke and fire. Nothing was moving in front of us. I looked over to the gate, the MP Jeep was gone, replaced by an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC). Before I could process this, we heard more firing and some small explosions, grenades most likely. Then it got quiet. The firing stopped. Nothing moved. The phone chirped again. I picked it up.

“Reno 4.”

“Reno 4, stand down from Red alert. Alert status now yellow. alert status yellow.” The sergeant arrived shortly after we relaxed. ELL-TEE wasn’t with him. I told him our situation.

“Sergeant, we went on red alert,” I looked at my watch, “60 minutes ago, just got word to stand down to yellow. TAC Air

blew up the villages to our front. All weapons locked and loaded."

"Okay, Kearney. Stay alert. This may go on all night." Hollis drove over to the next bunker.

I turned to the guys. "Let's get back to the guard schedule: two on two off, two hours. Stay alert. If you think you are gonna fall asleep, move around, take deep breaths. Me and Philips will take the first watch."

Philips and I looked out the bunker towards the destroyed village. Damn! the jet just blew it away! There were people there earlier. I hope they got out before the bombs. Jeesus! No movement at all. We could hear the chatter of machine gun fire and explosions far down the perimeter on our left. The APC roared away towards the fighting. We were alone in the darkness.

"Kearney, I'm scared." Said Philips.

"Me, too," I replied. The lights at the gate cast some in front of our bunker. Richie and Denton were napping outside. The sounds of battle diminished. We started to relax. After forty minutes I was fighting the urge to close my eyes and sleep when Philips whispered to me.

"Kearney, I see somebody moving!"

"Where?" I jerked alert.

"Over to the left, see it?"

I slowly turned left, and yes; someone was slowly crawling towards bunker two on our left. A sapper! I turned to my right and saw someone else crawling towards us. Two sappers! They got through the wire somehow and were about forty feet away.

"Philips, " I whispered, "you fire right, I fire left. Go!"

I fired my M16 four times at the guy. Bunker 2 must have seen the sapper too and fired their M60 machine gun. The red tracer rounds bounced off the ground in front of the crawlers. The sapper on the right got up on his knees to fire a B40 rocket at our bunker, just as Philips hit him. He fell back, and the rocket went sailing over our position and exploded behind us. Denton and Richie were now wide awake.

“Jee-sus! You got them,” shouted Denton.

“Keep looking,” I said. “There may be more.” My heart was pumping fast. My vision had sharpened. I scanned in front and on both sides, even looked behind us. But there wasn’t anyone else.

My infantry training told me to go out and check the bodies. I ran, crouched, to the first body. He was deformed by the rounds he took from me and the M60 from bunker two. His right arm was missing. Picked up his rifle and slung it on my shoulder. I checked him for papers, found some.

The B40 rocket guy was twenty feet away. Philips’ shot had blown his head apart. I wanted to throw up, but I held it in. I picked up his launcher and the rockets he carried. No papers on him. I ran in a crouch back to the bunker. I threw up outside the bunker entrance, then went in and picked up the phone.

“Bravo One, Reno 4.”

“Reno 4.”

“Weapons fired. Two enemy Kilos. No Whiskeys, (Army code for dead and wounded), two weapons recovered.”

“Roger, Reno 4. Continue alert.” We could hear some explosions and rapid firing along the perimeter, but it was quiet near us. Philips looked at me, his eyes were wet.

“I shot deer and squirrels back home,” he said. “But these

were men! Jeesus! I don’t want to do that again, Kearney.”

“I know,” I said. “It is fucking awful, but they were going to kill you and me and Denton an’ Richie. We didn’t have a choice.”

“Shit,” said Denton, “I wanna get outta this fucking bunker and this fucking country.”

“Shut the fuck up, Denton, you just got here,” said Richie. “You aint going anywhere for a year. Kearney’s right, it was us or them.”

Philips went outside, still upset. Denton and Richie took over the guard. I stayed in the bunker. I was suddenly hungry, feeling lightheaded as the adrenaline left me. I could not relax, though.

Time passed, and we heard no more shooting. When the sun came up, smoke was rising from the village. The two enemy bodies were still there in front of our bunkers, flies feasting on them. We heard no battle noise, just a few random rifle shots somewhere down the line. Sergeant Hollis and Lieutenant Nack were coming down the access road in the jeep. Hollis stopped the Jeep, and I went out to meet him and Nack. I nodded at Nack. No saluting officers near the wire.

Sergeant Hollis said, “Situation, Kearney.”

“Sergeant, all quiet. No further attack on this section since 2300 hrs. Two dead sappers out front, I policed their weapons and some papers taken from their bodies.” I pointed at the two weapons and the papers tucked in the corner.

Nack looked startled. He scowled at me, “Specialist, who told you to take the weapons and papers?” Hollis rolled his eyes, very slightly.

“Sir,” I said, “that’s SOP, disarm the enemy dead and check for any intel. They told us that at Fort Jackson.”

“Oh, you were infantry,” he snarled.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, You should have left the weapons there and notified me.” He wanted credit for the weapons capture. It would look good on his record, and maybe a medal. He took a small note pad from his breast pocket and a pen.

“I need your name and your unit and commanding officer.”

“Sir, Specialist 4th Class Kearney, I am an administrative aide to General Stark at headquarters supply, fuel division.” Nack looked surprised. That brought him up. He didn’t want to fuck with one of the general’s boys. He put the notepad back in his pocket.

“Okay. Sergeant, take charge of the weapons and documents, and contact the engineers to remove the bodies.”

“Yes sir.” He went into the bunker and retrieved the weapons. “Kearney, I’ll make sure you get credit for the captured weapons.” Nack threw an angry look at the Sergeant as Hollis put them in the back of the Jeep and climbed behind the wheel.

“Thanks, Sergeant,” I replied.

“Good job, men. Your relief is on its way.” The Lieutenant said as he hopped back in the Jeep. Hollis drove away as the field phone chirped. I picked it up.

“Reno 4, Alert status Yellow.” I turned to the guys, who were tired, dirty, and still jacked up on adrenaline.

“Alert Yellow, we can relax.” Then we heard the truck coming to bring us our relief. It was 07:00hrs. I took off my flak vest and sucked my canteen dry. Phillips had recovered somewhat and smiled at me. I could hardly wait to get back to those fucking fuel consumption reports.

Tom Keating is a Vietnam Veteran who kept a journal during the war in Vietnam, which enabled him to publish his memoir, Yesterday's Soldier: A Passage from Prayer to the Vietnam War. *He has also published in* The Veteran, *the Military Writers Society of America's* Dispatches, The Vietnam Memorial 40th Anniversary *Tribute,* 0-Dark-Thirty *from the Veterans Writing Project, the* Microlit Almanac *from Birch Bark Editing, and* The Wrath-Bearing Tree. *He lives west of Boston with his wife Kathleen. You can hear him read from his work here.*

***

Nancy Stroer – What Do You Expect?

The Rooster's nose was his most salient feature, curved and sharp as he strutted and preened in front of formation. It was an act, but the Rooster snapped his barnyard into submission without apology.

He told me, "Ma'am, I need you to take all the females to the clinic."

There'd been a rash of pregnancies in the barracks. Okay, maybe two in as many months, but this was the Rooster nipping his birds into line.

“It’s like we’re running agot-damn brothel on the female floor,” he said after he’d dismissed the soldiers. Other company leaders remarked, variously:

“These females got to learn how to keep their legs closed.”

“Put males and females together and what do you expect?”

What did I expect? I expected to get along as a woman in a man’s world. I knew how things worked and I expected I’d do fine with that, having grown up with three brothers, playing sports, all of this occurring in the broader context of a world run by men. I didn’t think about any of this in so many words back then. I didn’t know that I was a Guys’ Girl, a term my young adult daughters use now with a curl in the corner of their mouths.

Back in the olden days of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (unless it’s super-juicy), the NCOs were ranting the same old litany to a sexual but sex-free god, repeated in NCO meetings and formations and ad hoc conversations near the filing cabinets. Sex was a given, a right, for some, and a loaded weapon for others. Male soldiers wanted to have sex, were going to have sex. The women had to expect to receive that attention whether they wanted it or not. And they should expect it, but not want it. If they wanted it, they must appear not to; otherwise they’d get a reputation in the Barracks Bicycle. Those were the expectations.

No one expected birth control talks for the male soldiers. Two of the guys were walking around, looking kind of sheepish at times, kind of proud at others. There was much slapping of shoulders and good-natured cussing.

I processed information differently in those days. I was so young, still surfacing from the dreamworld of adolescence to find myself drowning in the patriarchy, except I thought I was swimming just fine. The only other female officer to process it was pregnant herself but married and therefore did not

count on the Tally of Concern. Maybe her PT game was a little weak, but she managed to get her hair done. She was decorative but ran the supply warehouse with confidence and competence. She was a Black woman, with a team of mostly non-white soldiers. Her operation was a bit intimidating to me, and maybe secretly to the Rooster, too, because his beak was out of her business. And sure, the commander was a woman but she was an androgynous little elf and we left her alone because to engage with her in conversation was to invite a deluge of unwanted information about her irritable bowel syndrome.

There was righteous sex (guys going to the Red Light district), and sex that was out of control (women daring to have sex in their barracks rooms). The NCOs moralized about the need for guys to get laid and the impact of single women getting pregnant on The Mission. Everyone laughed at the idea of the unsexy having sex. I recognized the double and triple standards, but still bought all the tangled lines.

Maybe these young female soldiers *don't* know about birth control, I thought. They couldn't all be the dirtbags the sergeants said they were, just getting pregnant to get out of the barracks and straight to the head of the line for military housing and priority spots at the child development center. Maybe they were just waking up as humans, too.

Imagine my surprise, then, to find the women gathered in the clinic lobby not looking contrite or curious but sullen and angry. I didn't quite get their mood. "Don't you want to be in charge of when you get pregnant?" I asked them. Surely they'd joined up to be all they could be. Capricious childbearing would shoot their career trajectories out of the sky.

Standing next to me, Johnson swung her swollen belly to face me. She was small and quiet. Curls framed her brown face. "Cute" is a diminutive way to describe her, but she was diminutive. She was objectively cute. I didn't know her, since she worked in the supply warehouse where women made up about a

quarter of the workforce, in contrast to my operation across the parking lot with the mechanics, where the air was heavy with secondhand smoke, AC/DC, the ping of wrenches and tool boxes across concrete floors. All the women watched each other, though, and my general impression of the ones in the supply warehouse was that they were as quietly competent as the pregnant female officer who ran their show. They were organized, and a little disparaging of the men who worked there because they clowned around too much. A bit dismissive of me as too rough and ready. Too accommodating of the Rooster and his ilk. Maybe they found us too white, and therefore suspect. This insight is a late add. I'm sure I didn't think too much of the racial dynamics at play in those days but my memories are fully colorized now.

So cute little Johnson rounded on me and said through clenched teeth, "I'll have as many children as I got-damn well want," and I had no response. It was an astounding, revelatory moment. Of course she was right. Of course she was outraged at the Rooster's overreach. A woman of any marital status can have as many children as she got-damn wants. A Black woman might justifiably feel more ferocious about this than anyone. Johnson's withering stare – those soft cheeks pulled into a parentheses of disdain – was an emotional heart round.

In a flash I melted into a puddle of shame, remembering how my father made me return a pair of cargo pants when I was fifteen because they were "too revealing." The second pair was so baggy I had to take them in at the waist which, in my newly self-conscious opinion, made my butt look even bigger. This was the first time I'd been told explicitly to hide my assets. I did not wear my new cargo pants and, among other things, I stopped volunteering to go to the board in health class, no longer wishing to show my work. Or anything else.

Might as well disappear my whole body, starve it into its preadolescent shape. Or maybe to eat and drink to keep up with the boys. Or go on whack diets to have something to talk about

with the girls. Or to do all the sports and sweat and swear and carry the mortar plate on ruck marches and be considered just another one of the guys.

Didn't matter. I wasn't one of them. The male soldiers still vied to run behind me in formation. Let me hitch myself to that ride, they'd say.

They left me notes under my car wiper blades and lewd sculptures on my desk. They backed me into the corners of quiet offices. They turned up at my house at odd hours. It was easiest to laugh them off, to call them the assholes they were, to put them all in their proper places, and keep my business to myself.

I had expected Army men to misunderstand me. My religious father with his Master of Fine Arts, who had enlisted as a medic in the days of the draft so he could control his fate, told me as much when I was insisting that I'd be able to control my fate, too. "It's different now," I said, "and I'll be an officer." But there are lots of ways to kill a person without firing a shot and on my very first day in my very first unit, my very first platoon sergeant took one look at my left hand and said, "We got to get you married, ma'am. An unmarried officer is going to cause trouble." I hadn't expected a welcome like that at all.

And here was Johnson with her soft round cheeks and her rounder belly, unashamed of the truth of the matter: that even she, this actual cherub of a woman, had had sex and now she was having a got damn baby and she didn't give a flying fuck what I or Rooster or anyone thought about her marital status or any of her choices. Johnson's comment was a two-by-four up the side of my head, and it woke me all the way up, right there, even though I still didn't know what to do with the information.

I've heard many white veterans say that they got to know, and

become friends with, people of color for the first time when they were in the military. But did we really get to know each other? Did we just laugh with them at company picnics or did we allow ourselves to be slugged, as I was by Johnson's verbal pugil stick, into the bleacher seats? It was a risk for her to say what she said to me, and a gift. I can only think that she was so angry she couldn't keep her thoughts to herself. Which at the time made me stop caring what the men thought, and to crave insight into what the Black women, the enlisted women, the queer women – all the ones operating outside of the narrow parameters of an acceptable life for a female soldier – were thinking behind their shuttered mouths. When someone rounds you on the convulsive truth, it's hard to hear but it is a gift, and Johnson taught me to grab with both hands.

Nancy Stroer grew up in a very big family in a very small house in Athens, Georgia. She holds degrees from Cornell and Boston University, and served in the beer-soaked trenches of post-Cold War Germany. Her work has appeared in Stars and Stripes, Soldiers *magazine,* Hallaren Lit Mag, The Wrath-Bearing Tree, *and* Things We Carry Still, *an anthology of military writing from Middle West Press. Her debut novel,* Playing Army, *is forthcoming from Koehler Books in 2024. She reads from her work here.*

***

It was such an honor and a pleasure to work with these talented writers. Thank you for supporting So Say We All and The Wrath-Bearing Tree.

Founded in 2009, So Say We All is a 501c3 literary and performing arts non-profit organization whose mission is to create opportunities for individuals to tell their stories, and tell them better, through three core priorities: publishing, performance, and education.

In addition to the programs made available to the public, SSWA offers education outreach programs specifically targeting communities who have been talked about disproportionately more than heard from in mainstream media. Creative writing and storytelling courses are offered in partnership with social service organizations such as The Braille Institute, Veteran Writers Group – San Diego, PEN USA, Southern California American Indian Resource Center (SCAIR), the homeless

residents of Father Joe's Village and Toussaint Academy, San Diego Public and County Library branches, and more.

The biggest hurdle for someone with a story that needs to be told is knowing where to begin. So Say We All's purpose is to answer that need, to be a resource that listens to all facets of its community regardless of the volume at which they speak.

—

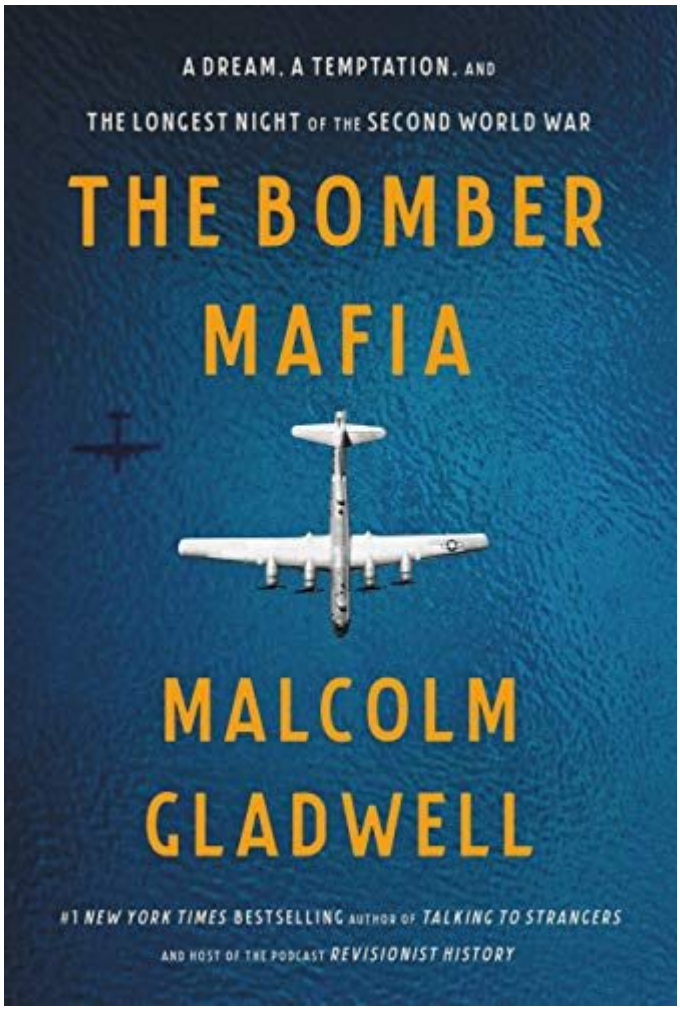
Justin Hudnall *received his BFA in playwriting from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. He currently serves as the co-founder and Executive Director of So Say We All, a San Diego-based literary arts and education non-profit. In a prior career, he served with the United Nations in South Sudan as an emergency response officer. He is a recipient of the San Diego Foundation's Creative Catalyst Fellowship and Rising Arts Leader award, SD Citybeat's "Best Person" award of 2016, and is an alumni of the Vermont Studio Center. He produces and hosts the PRX public radio series, Incoming.*

New Review from Brian Castner: Malcolm Gladwell's "The Bomber Mafia"

Why did Malcolm Gladwell write a World War II book? The bombing campaign over Europe and Japan is hardly his typical beat: Cliff-noting TED talks for the MBA crowd. Where's the investment edge here?

It's an obvious question that Gladwell addresses in the opening Author's Note. *The Bomber Mafia* is not so different than his other books, he says, because it is about "obsessives," "my kind of people." The topic is no less than "one of the grandest obsessions of the twentieth century." Join him, for "I don't think we get progress or innovation or joy or beauty without obsessives."

Which I think we can all agree, if nothing else, is a completely bizarre way to open and frame a book about killing millions of people with air strikes.



The Bomber Mafia was my first chance to experience the Gell-Mann Amnesia Effect with Gladwell. You know the phenomenon, if not the name. [Michael Crichton described it this way]:

"You open the newspaper to an article on some subject you know well. In Murray's case, physics. In mine, show business. You read the article and see the journalist has absolutely no understanding of either the facts or the issues. Often, the article is so wrong it actually presents the story backward—reversing cause and effect. I call these the "wet streets cause rain" stories. Paper's full of them. In any case, you read with exasperation or amusement the multiple errors in a story, and then turn the page to national or international affairs, and read as if the rest of the newspaper was somehow more accurate about Palestine than the baloney you just read. You turn the page, and forget what you know."

Turn the page on Gladwell—the self-proclaimed reviser of history, who helps us see and understand the overlooked and misunderstood—and what do you find? It wasn't until he wandered into my area of expertise that I appreciated the extent of the shallowness, so to speak.

My first encounter with him was *Outliers,* which in classic Gladwell fashion promises to explain sociological events with a surprising counter-intuitive twist. Why are rich New York corporate take-over lawyers Jewish? Why are 40% of professional hockey players born in January? (They're not.) The book stuck with me because I had a young son obsessed with hockey; should he just "give up" because he wasn't born in the right month?

Gladwell calls *Outliers* a how-to guide, but always dissatisfyingly so. I can't change my son's birthday. And even if you accept his case for why Jewish people from the Garment District born in the 1930s were destined to become highly successful attorneys, he never explains how the individuals themselves did it. Why one poor boy in the tenement and not his friend? Why one hockey player born in January and not another? One gets the sense that the answer may undermine Gladwell's thesis and so is left out, or, more conspiratorially, is revealing of other Big Ideas that Gladwell has less interest in exposing, such as the false meritocracy.

I am not a sociologist or a sports psychologist, so I can't tell you the failures in Gladwell's arguments in *Outliers.* But as a former Air Force officer, I know a fair bit about the service's history and culture, and so I was curious what would happen when he took on a subject I knew.

My conclusion is this: Gladwell is right about Air Force pilots being obsessives, but completely wrong about the object of their desire. Which is surprising, because if anyone should be able to understand amoral perfectionists, it's a wanna-be

Tech Bro like Gladwell.

*

Before I go further, a relevant admission: I tried to write a Gladwell book once. Or, more specifically, I had a book proposal that several editors said would be more successful as a Gladwell book. Meaning, crush the narrative inside a big unifying theme that obliterates nuance but provides more reader satisfaction, that simplifies reality into an easily digestible 220-page pill with a plain white cover. “Gladwell on IEDs” or “Gladwell on Modern War.” This was the editorial feedback.

My second book, *All the Ways We Kill and Die,* was this book. The only vestige of the Gladwellian feedback is the biz-speak ubiquitous white cover. Any airport bookstore patron can tell you that a white cover with a single centered object says this is a book with easily digestible ideas.

But the Big Idea in my book—that my friend Matt Schwartz had died because he was targeted by the Taliban individually, just as the United States fights the “War on Terror” by targeting individuals as well—was really always more about personal pain than an objective critique of American SOF policy. My friends died and lost arms and legs and so instead of writing a revisionist counterfactual I wrote about grief and suffering, which are not really business seminar topics. That Matt’s death was premeditated murder, and not just random violence, was confusing, and more hurtful somehow. Working with the right editor, I eventually found the unifying theme, but never the hubristic clarity. And without an application for corporate America, my Gladwell cover did not have the effect my publisher’s sales department hoped.

Gladwell’s Big Idea in *The Bomber Mafia* is that in the 1930s and 40s there was a deeply moral initiative by a small group of pilots at the Army Air Corp’s Tactical School in

Montgomery, Alabama called the Bomber Mafia. Their secret plan was to "make all that deadly, wasteful, pointless conflict on the ground obsolete" by strategically bombing key pieces of enemy infrastructure, forcing them to surrender. This "dream" is embodied by two men, the flawed true-believer Haywood Hansell, and the hardcore Curtis LeMay who betrays the cause and falls to the "temptation" of winning World War II through the indiscriminate firebombing of Tokyo.

It goes without saying that such a fable ignores plenty, including most of the people in said mafia who worked on the doctrine and were responsible for its conception, implementation, and later revision. For example, Gladwell makes much of the fact that to prove the efficacy of precision air strikes LeMay led an exercise bombing US Navy ships in 1937, while ignoring that Billy Mitchell did the same thing to prove the same point, but sixteen years earlier, in 1921.

But a short book only has room for a few characters, a hero and a villain, plus a few cherry-picked anecdotes disguised as the discovery of something new, the surprise of the "overlooked and misunderstood" papering over the messy reality. *The Bomber Mafia*'s small pages, large font, and conversational tone are noted in every review, but it bears repeating: this book should appear on creative writing syllabuses at colleges all over, as a cautionary case study in the major differences between writing for the eye and the ear.

The idea that the strategic bombing campaign of World War II in Europe and the Pacific is overlooked is laughable on its face – few campaigns have been discussed at greater length, or in more detail. Presumably Gladwell has written his book because he believes we misunderstand the campaigns, then, and the misunderstanding is the deeply moral nature of the effort.

Reviews at *The New Republic* and *The Baffler* have thoroughly discussed the repugnancy of this view. Say what you will about the military necessity of strategic bombing, it should be

beyond question that killing millions of civilians as a by-product of that bombing was immoral. Gladwell is not interested in considering how the ends may or may not have justified the means.

Instead of discussing Gladwell's ethical stance, I'd like to address his central conceit: was the Bomber Mafia motivated by morality? Were their intentions pure? Were pilots and leaders animated first and foremost by a shining ethical ideal while planning and executing one of the most harmful events in absolute terms in the history of warfare?

Here, not only does Gladwell misunderstand how events unfolded, he misunderstands the part that speaks to his supposed greatest strength as a journalist: corporate organizational culture. The Air Force, dominated as it is by pilots, has a distinct culture from the other branches. To Gladwell, the precision daylight bombers are early Silicon Valley pioneers, just trying to make the world a better place through scientific advancement.

Whether Gladwell misjudges all Tech Bros, I cannot say. But at least he misunderstands pilots. Precision daylight bombing is not a moral undertaking. It is an amoral obsession with perfection.

Pilot culture is about never making mistakes while operating in extremely complex situations. When a mistake is made, and a plane crashes, investigators will spend hundreds of pages documenting every error and failure. The goal is absolute perfection at all times.

In *All the Ways We Kill and Die*, I wrote about this culture, through the eyes of an F-15C pilot named Evil. He explained to me that being a pilot is about tactical thinking.

"First breaking a problem down into its component variables, and then solving the equation repeatedly as each variable changed second by second: …. air speed, heading, altitude,

missiles, gun, radio, radar, wind speed, direction, cloud ceiling, the Cons, restricted airspace, wingman's location, wingman's heading, target, tactics. Double that number to consider the enemy's equivalent of each. Computing and computing and computing every second."

Relentless problem-solving and obsessiveness, according to Evil, permeated everything. "It's why our wives hate us. We are all competitive, and we all try to make everything perfect," he told me.

Missing a target with a bomb is not primarily a moral question, to this culture. It is a mistake. It is inefficient. Unprofessional. Flawed. Culturally, precision daylight bombing was an opportunity for pilots to maximize their equations. A greater chance to be perfect.

In the Cold War, the search for the perfect bombing campaign expanded, from a strategic theory to the entire reason for the Air Force's existence. At its heart, the Air Force's main goal is to fight and win wars all by itself. Small wars are distractions from this purpose. The Air Force exists to win the Big One, all alone.

Being able to win a war solo is still fundamental to the Air Force identity. It's why the Air Force became a separate service, why it so jealously guards its budget and chip-on-its-shoulder heritage. On a basic level, the Air Force believes that everything the Army and Navy might do in Big One will be secondary to the main fight. Evil told me once that he trained his whole professional life for the first hour of fighting over Iran and the first 24 hours over Taiwan, in which he needed to be no less than perfect.

In the decades after World War II, the service worked to develop the technology to win the perfect campaign. TV-guided weapons, then laser-guided, then GPS-guided, and now automated weapons that synthesize information and guide themselves. As

the Cold War turned hot in Vietnam, the leadership of the Bomber Mafia gave way to the Fighter Mafia, as the best pilots and top leaders followed the action. But as fighter pilots took over key leadership posts in the Air Force, the pursuit of perfect precision remained.

And so the Air Force has never really gotten the war it wanted. In the last 80 years, it has come close twice: Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s. All military objectives achieved from the air, no messy boots on the ground during the fighting, only for the boring stabilizing afterwards. Not the Big One, but almost a Perfect One.

In the late 1990s, when I was studying to become an Air Force officer, I read serious articles in academic publications, like *Airpower Journal*, that predicted the end of ground combat had arrived. Airpower had finally lived up to its potential, specifically when led by the Air Force, which allowed the Navy a few sorties as a goodwill gesture. As late as the Winter 2001 issue, the last pre-9/11 edition, authors were still writing articles with titles like "Airpower versus a Fielded Army: A Construct for Air Operations in the Twenty-First Century," about strategies for the Air Force to defeat enemy ground forces singlehandedly. There is a certain wistful tone. Yes, the Air Force existed to strategically crush the enemy's overall will to fight, but they could tactically destroy soldiers too as required. Air Force weapons were so precise, the scalpel so sharp, they could slice off fingers individually as well as carve out the heart, just tell them where to start cutting.

That the enemy would put their hands in their pockets, or hold hands with children, never seems to occur to the grand strategists; this is a perfectionist pursuit, not a moral one.

*

Gladwell provides no primary source evidence that the Bomber

Mafia generals themselves saw precision bombing as a moral undertaking. Instead, he provides quotes from two modern historians, Stephen McFarland and Tammi Biddle, as proof of this belief. (There is no bibliography, and according to the notes the book is based on interviews with eleven people.)

And yet the evidence that the Bomber Mafia were obsessed with perfection rather than morality is to be found in the book itself. LeMay, a dyed-in-the-wool member of the mafia, eventually dismisses the strategic bombing plan as nothing but late-night grad school discussion, calling it "trying to find something to win the war the easy way, and there ain't no such animal." LeMay was cold-blooded in balancing aircrews lost versus bombs on target. He counts percentages of cities destroyed, as later generals would do body counts in Vietnam and "AFRICOM assesses four terrorists killed" press releases about drone strikes today. When he talks through the details of his tactics, how they kept trying different methods, practicing take-offs in the fog, changing formations so all his pilots flew in straight over the target (even Robert McNamara later called him "brutal" for doing it), Gladwell sees a moral stalwart rather than someone focused on continuous improvement. Later, Gladwell quotes Conrad Crane, the former director of the US Army Military History Institute, who calls LeMay "the Air Force's ultimate problem solver." But also, "he was one of those guys that, if you gave him a problem to fix, you didn't ask a whole lot of questions how he was going to fix it." Correct, and also hardly someone engaged on an ethical crusade. It is someone doing the best he can with the tools he has.

The American general Ira Eaker, in selling his bombing plan to Churchill, says that if the British bomb at night and the Americans by day then "bombing them thus around the clock will give the devils no rest." Biddle tells Gladwell that it is "very odd" that Arthur "Bomber" Harris of the Royal Air Force (who bombed at night) and Eaker would become such good

friends. But it's only odd if you think the Bomber Mafia was about signalling virtuous behavior rather than achieving success.

If Gladwell had chosen other quotes by those characters, the case is even stronger. Yes, LeMay is famous for saying he would bomb his enemies back to the Stone Age. But even that same Ira Eaker, briefing President Truman in June 1945, about the upcoming invasion of Japan, said that he agreed with General George C. Marshall that "It is a grim fact that there is not an easy, bloodless way to victory in war."

The ugly truth is that LeMay was not "tempted" to do a bad thing, in the firebombing of Japan. Neither temptation nor salvation were on the table. Rather, the perfectionist simply saw firebombing as the best amoral option, the best solution to the problem. LeMay isn't cruel, he's indifferent. And ultimately, the Air Force continued LeMay's problem solving mindset to fix, ironically, the process he had derided as "the easy way." As the technology has gotten better, "the easy way" has remained the goal.

Gladwell writes as if the way history happened is the only way it could ever have been. That any attempt to imagine another historical path is to misunderstand an inevitability that only he can explain. By providing the counter-intuitive "revisionist" version of this history, he aspires to sound doubly convincing. My new explanation is air-tight, he implies confidently. A Calvinist dressed up in a pedantic sociologist's clothes.

Jewish people in the Garment District were destined to run law firms and LeMay would inevitably fall to temptation. Hansell was too pure to succeed, LeMay too gruff to stay true.

Couching the bombing campaign in terms of a tragic character flaw, rather than a choice, makes Gladwell's offhand descriptions of the firebombing itself more grotesque. Nothing

more than the cast-off by-product of one of his obsessives. It's jarring and incongruous. Is this truly a moral issue, or just a bad business decision, as he would cover in his other books? Gladwell engages with the actual horror of war as he would a quarterly loss report, and yet even manages to praise the actions in the end. Japan surrendered and gave LeMay a medal in 1964. Maybe it wasn't lost profit after all? Maybe the firebombing was an investment that paid off.

*

Gladwell ends the book with a chatty roundtable of current Air Force generals at the Chief of Staff's elegant home on Fort Myer, Virginia. From the quotes provided, the journalist Gladwell was seemingly asking such hard-hitting questions as "Tell me again how great airpower is," a continuing of his tendency to go to the leaders of organizations to find out what it's like to be a peon.

After listening to the generals brag about the precision of today's weapon systems, Gladwell concludes "Curtis LeMay won the battle. Haywood Hansell won the war."

Which is more than simply confusing and factually incorrect. It also presumes that Hansell didn't just "win" the ideological battle within the Air Force, but that he was objectively correct as well.

Air strikes are regularly cited as a swiss army knife solution to seemingly every international problem, from Yemen to Afghanistan to Ukraine. Last July, during anti-government protests in Cuba, Miami's mayor floated the idea of bombing the country.

Which is why it is noteworthy that Gladwell never asks this basic question: what is the evidence that strategic precision bombing works? He cites no cases, either positively from Kosovo or negatively from, well, anywhere else. A la *Outliers* and the illusions of the meritocracy, this is perhaps not the

kind of question Gladwell tends to ask of his obsessives.

So let's instead ask a similar question on the book's own terms: what is the evidence that strategic precision bombing is more moral? Or that it simply kills fewer civilians?

Azmat Khan's reporting in the *New York Times* has put to bed the lie that the American-touted bombing campaigns spared civilian lives. Rather, officials denied civilian casualties, or failed to investigate, to ignore the true cost. Khan reported that one American official broke down when he realized that though the US had seemingly taken great pains in precision attacks in Raqqa, and the Russians had no such precautions in Aleppo, in the end both Syrian cities were utterly destroyed.

"Eventually I stopped saying that this was the most precise bombing campaign in the history of warfare," the official said to the *New York Times*. "So what? It doesn't matter that this was the most precise bombing campaign and the city looks like this."

The Russians purposely target hospitals and chicken farms, the Americans accidentally hit them; either way, the results are the same.

And is it not results, measured quarterly, that are most important to Gladwell's MBA readers?

In many ways, contemporary Russian attacks in Syria and Ukraine are closer to what the American World War II generals actually wanted in their bombing campaigns: both precision and impunity. The ability to target a hospital, hit it precisely, and get away with it. Modern American generals enjoy immunity in other areas. Drones strikes, on average, kill ten times more civilians than attacks by manned aircraft, and yet have a reputation for precision and cleanliness, and thus largely, until recently, get a pass by the general public.

Are precision strikes a moral way to win war? Not yet. Strategic bombing campaigns remain bloody, messy, often ineffective, and still of arguable necessity. This ambiguity is difficult for even experts to handle, and Gladwell's entire raison d'etre is not to write as an expert but as an amalgamator of expertise. *The Bomber Mafia* isn't an honest or earnest look at what experts have written and thought about America's air campaigns during WWII. In the end, the book's central flaw resides at the core of Gladwell's supposed greatest strength. The Gell-Mann Amnesia Effects predicts sociologists and sports psychologists would say the same for his other books.