We tell ourselves stories in order to live” claims Joan Didion, a modern American writer who has thought lots about stories. “We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five,” she continues. “We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience” (*White Album*, 11). We tell ourselves stories in order to live, especially, I might add, if we are veterans of modern warfare, living by imposing a narrative line upon the shifting and chaotic phantasmagoria of wartime memories. In some fashion, we all select the most workable option to make sense of our world with stories. We all cherish the stories that help organize and order our world. We all seek the stories that give it meaning. But that search for meaning is especially important to veterans of modern conflict, to men and women who so often struggle with memory in the hope of finding meaning, and through meaning, to find hope.
Let me be clear at the outset: I believe that memory and meaning are often negotiated in the arena of narrative. As another American writer, Reynolds Price, a former professor at Duke University, puts it:

A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species *Homo Sapiens*—second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives, from the small accounts of our days’ events to the vast incommunicable constructs of psychopaths. (qtd. in Gregory, 35)

Man—and woman—the storytelling animal. Second only to physical sustenance is our hunger for stories, the dominant sound of our lives. The symposium at Regis University last fall focused deliberately on a special brand of stories, the “soldiers’ tale” as Samuel Hynes would have it. We joined together those who study war stories for a living and those who bear witness to modern war as they tell their tales, as they share their stories. Just where do the experiences a man or woman encounters during wartime intersect with the stories he or she subsequently tells about them? Does a primal need for narrative, as Reynolds Price suggests, provoke these stories? If so, where might the memories of experience intersect most fully with a corresponding quest for meaning? To what extent is every narrative something made, something formed—something, for example, with a beginning and an ending; something that has a completeness because of its narrative shape; something, finally, that exceeds the gritty details of actual experience (those details that are so often beyond comprehension in the actual moment of experience, yet the very essence that insistently begs for this comprehension nonetheless) in its essential cry for meaning? Samuel Hynes in *The Soldiers’ Tale* spends much time thinking his way through these complex intersections. Here is how he begins to pin down the essence of war narratives early in *Soldiers’ Tale*:

If war narratives aren’t travel writing, aren’t autobiography, aren’t history, what are they? *Stories*, first of all: responses to that primal need we all have to tell and hear individual experiences, and so to understand our own lives and imagine the lives of others. Stories answer the question that we ask of any experience, whether our own or somebody else’s: What happened? What was it like? How did it feel? The soldier asks those
questions of his war life and answers them in the telling of his story, and so discovers its meaning and gets his war straight in his mind. We, his readers, ask those questions too: they are our motive for reading. (16)

Hynes raises a number of key points in this quotation, ones that I want to dwell on briefly because they will help illuminate some of the papers that follow from the symposium. Why are stories, especially personal narratives, so important to our understanding of conflict? Hynes suggests, in part, because they begin to answer the most basic questions we ask of any experience, something I too believe. In addressing these questions, a personal narrative invites memory to coalesce into meaning, inviting both the storyteller and his or her audience to “get the war straight” in our minds. Yet as we do so, ever more urgent questions begin to interrogate the narrative we are forming. After all, how do we know what war means? By the way, what does war mean? How does war mean? Why does war mean what it means? Whose stories have the power to give war such meaning, and which stories lead us to the greatest clarity about how and why war means? Put differently, how do you tell a true war story and why are such stories vitally important to us, as readers or hearers, even as they help the teller discover the meaning of his or her own war experience?

These are among the questions various participants in the symposium Twentieth Century Warfare and American Memory took up, each from his or her own perspective. In the papers assembled here, each author approaches his slice of the truth cautiously, contingently, probing the details of lived experience in the hope of locating a locus of meaning within it. In his reflection titled “War Memories, Archives, and Friendship,” Daryl Palmer blends a reading Willa Cather’s novel of World War I, One of Ours, with a “reading” of the personal archive of his father’s World War II memorabilia. Suggesting that Cather is one of our “great American writers because she is our preeminent novelist of memory,” Palmer goes on to explain how a “readerly experience of attachment has everything to do with memory”—with how we remember, what we remember, and ultimately with what such rememberings in the guise of stories come to mean. “Does anyone, male or female, ever really tell another person’s stories of war?” Professor Palmer asks. “Or are we always telling our own story?” Although he intentionally leaves this an open question, it is in the telling of his own story, reading in the personal archives of his father’s war, that he ultimately locates a true war story that invests his experience with meaning.
Yet whatever limits we face in telling another’s story, in order to comprehend the complex legacy of modern wars, in order to approach—however tentatively—the truths stories about them seek to articulate, we must try. Today we are embroiled in what Dexter Filkins calls the Forever War in Iraq and Afghanistan, wars that often seem to defy meaning, wars whose human costs will weigh upon us for decades to come. So it seems especially important to tell all the stories about these wars that we possibly can because the legacy of modern conflict is a lasting one, one that endures at the individual level for a lifetime. Ed Wood, in his powerful meditation, “Memory and Myth: What Was World War II Really Like?” reminds us that various myths associated with his war have “led us to deny the reality of World War II, to conveniently forget what happened to a whole generation of young men in combat, to civilians killed and wounded, to cities destroyed, to millions of refugees without homes.” Wood tells his own story briefly as he recounts the larger tragic story of the Army Specialized Training Program, a program that subjected marginally trained replacement soldiers during late 1944 and early 1945 to a brutal casualty rate in the European Theater of Operations. Probing the “mythical nature of memory,” Wood argues that our belief in key myths associated with World War II has made it difficult, perhaps almost impossible, for us to remember what World War II was really like.

And remembering what war—any war—was really like is a theme that punctuated virtually every presentation during the symposium. Terry Rizzuti, a marine during the Vietnam War, desperately wants us to understand the importance of stories in that remembering. In his case, trying to tell a true war story consumed his life for almost 25 years as he wrote and rewrote the novel that seeks to invest his experience with appropriate meaning (The Second Tour, 2008). In modern conflict, Rizzuti suggests, things go wrong and then you live with the consequences—consequences where the human spirit is tried and sometimes broken. The story of consequences, then, both individual and collective, becomes Rizzuti’s theme as he explores the life-long impact of PTSD, or the therapeutic perspective associated with writing, or the way in which such writing might open doors for readers to rarely discussed subjects such as veterans rejecting veterans. As Rizzuti explores these issues, he focuses on the “tricky” nature of memory, and on the way the “necessary imaginings” associated with daily life on patrol—or with telling “whoppers to keep that beer flowing” in the enlisted men’s club—constantly shape his consciousness of real events, constantly contextualize the memories that provide the concrete details his narratives are always rooted in. Most tellingly, the longer Rizzuti works with these fraught dimensions of memory, the more convinced he becomes that

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“psychological blurring can bring historical blurring, not only for an individual but perhaps also for a nation that experiences war year after year after year.” In his own way, Rizzuti is engaging the same question of myth that interests Wood, the same question that animates the inquiry addressed above about what, how, and why war comes to mean what it does—both for individuals and for a nation.

These questions also provide a central locus for many of the narratives collected in the archives of the Regis Center for the Study of War Experience over the past fifteen years. An interdisciplinary enterprise whose archive contains hundreds of hours of video-recorded testimonies of war veterans and thousands of items of personal war effects, the Center’s archive is a sizeable repository of war memories and an important location of primary source research materials. The entire collection is catalogued and the Center operates as a professional working archive open to students, scholars, and the public. The Center’s Director, Dan Clayton, narrates some of the history of the Center in his essay “Remembering World War Two at Regis University,” even as he notes the way in which his memories and those of his father—a World War II veteran who traveled with Patton’s Third Army in their drive across France and Germany, 1944-45—intersect with the many stories collected in the archives, refining, among other things, his understanding of the myth of the “good war” and the “Greatest Generation.” For example, Clayton notes that “for a long time, the World War Two in our heads did not include memories of African-Americans fighting the war both at home and abroad, Japanese-American citizens held in our version of concentration camps, or women in the Armed Services.” Echoing the comments of Wood and Rizzuti, Clayton questions the consequences of presenting “a highly sanitized and romanticized narrative” of the Good War “which effectively removed its horrors from our collective memory.” Given the force of such a seductive myth of World War Two, Clayton focused an entire panel during the symposium on how WWII should be remembered. Orchestrating a conversation between literary critics, historians, best-selling authors, and veterans of the air war in Europe, the ground war in the Pacific, and the home front, Clayton reminds us that “memory is a slippery process, and the task of using memories as evidence of actual experience is complicated by all the ambiguities associated with them.” And yet. Even with the challenges memory poses, negotiating the meaning of these experiences through narrative remains a vital enterprise. Given the urgency associated with such telling, then, Clayton suggests “if we seek to elicit a bigger ‘truth’ from these stories, perhaps the best we can do—and we try to do this at Regis—is to keep both sides of the dichotomy in our consciousness. WWII needed to be fought, but that doesn’t make it ‘good’ in all respects. Like all wars,
WWII had its fair share of sadistic, brutal, and insane behavior, but it was also filled with acts of extraordinary courage, honor, and heroism.” As Hynes reminds us, “collectively these narratives contribute, by a shifting process that is gradual and probably not conscious, to the emerging, evolving story of their wars, a story that is neither history nor memory, but myth—a compound war-story that gives meaning and coherence to the incoherences of war-in-its-details” (“Personal Narratives and Commemoration,” 220).

The necessity to locate such meaning and coherence, and the astonishing costs of living with incoherence, provides the framework for Ron Langer’s insightful essay “Combat Trauma, Memory, and the World War II Veteran.” Langer’s work as a psychotherapist with the VA brought him into contact with many WWII veterans whose PTSD appeared or reappeared after a long period of dormancy in mid-life. Speculating on the phenomena of “delayed-onset PTSD” Langer suggests that the large blocks of unscheduled time most retirees encounter often leads to introspection, which can lead to self-deprecating thoughts and excessive regret for past actions. “A satisfying life must have meaning,” Langer argues, “and unfortunately for many of us that meaning is tied up in our work. A life without meaning leaves plenty of room for PTSD.” Through his work with hundreds of veterans, Langer is able to offer a unique perspective on the relationship between memory and meaning. “Remarkably,” Langer observes, “memories and dreams of the war remain vivid, even more than 65 years later. However, the vividness and subjective sense of their immutability does not necessarily prove their accuracy, since they are necessarily mediated by language and meaning.” And it is this process of mediation that all of these essays engage from various perspectives.

Given this enormously complex intersection between memory and meaning, and given the essential role narrative plays in negotiating the two, it is tempting to simply say that each experience is unique, as is each teller, so in the end we can’t ever tell a true war story (in both senses of tell: a veteran can’t really share the full truth of his or her experience in a telling any more than any reader or listener can tell or discern its truth value). But deconstructing the power of narrative into such meaningless relativity also has grave consequences, and in Clayton’s words we must do “the best we can do” to locate whatever elusive truths lurk behind these tellings. Marshall Gregory, an authority on narrative, argues that “the vicarious experiences of narrative create the potential for real and significant effects—ethical, emotional, intellectual, political, and so on—in readers’ lives” (36-37). In brief, Gregory argues that stories are built from concrete details, which allows them to actively engage a reader’s imagination, which then provokes vicarious experiences
in readers that educate and connect us, thus giving narratives—giving stories—a power that has real and significant effects, a power that actually can change the world. Little wonder, then, that we have needed narrative from the dawn of human history. As we more fully consider the way in which American war experience is remembered, as we chart the many ways such experience is mapped and narrated, as we continually probe the vital intersection between memory and meaning, we discover the ways in which these powerful stories have actually formed who we are today. In short, the stories that have formed us, and those that we form, because they are firmly rooted in often overpowering and incomprehensible details, yet also energized with an imaginative force that connects us, draw us into vicarious participation with them. Most importantly, this vicarious participation located at the intersection of memory and meaning gives these narratives the power to continually shape our world.

Although each of the following essays makes this point in its own unique way, I’d like to illustrate it with a brief concrete example from a personal narrative of conflict. This narrative comes from a B-17 bombardier who also served as a gunner defending the Flying Fortress on its way to and from the battle...a bombardier very special to my family because the diary I’m quoting from belonged to my wife’s father, Bobby Metcalf.

Bobby Metcalf trained in B-17s much of 1942 and deployed for Europe on Jan 20th, 1943. On Feb 8th the crew delivered the B-17 they had flown to South America, to North Africa, to Spain, and finally to England, where they began training for combat at Bovington on Feb 10th. After 10 days of “school” their “very green crew” was assigned to the 364th Sq of the 305th Bomb Group. “Contrary to our former beliefs,” Bobby confides, “the Fortresses are going down. We now start sweating out 25 raids! At that time it’s U.S. bound! No doubt the future will prove very interesting with FW-190’s and flak playing the leading roles!” As you listen to Bobby’s account of the next six months, note how his image of war—the “war in his head” as Sam Hynes would put it—is slowly reshaped by the actual experience of combat. The sense that this experience is just an extension of boyhood school lessons and that all the actors involved are merely playing roles in some larger drama quickly gives way to a less coherent narrative for his overwhelming experiences, yet one that nonetheless invites us to join it vicariously, and in so doing, to help its author discover what it all means. Here is the account from his diary:

2-25-43 Our first raid, and Sam and I didn’t get to go...today was my first day of waiting for the boys to come back. Bobby, Tim, and Ham returned...
safely, but still no news of Wally and Swede. We still have hopes. Lakey, Wells, and Moberly came back all shot to hell. They were plenty lucky.

2-27-43 Another raid today. Bobby, Tim, Ham and John safe. Still no news of Wally and Swede! No news is good news, but they were shot up pretty bad...

3-8-43 Haven’t had time to write here lately. I was on a raid to Lorient, France on Saturday...We really blew it to hell. My bombs blew up two bridges and perhaps two trains. Not much enemy action. Two 17s went down. Sam got a telegram today that Pat is gong to have a baby in Sept. Bobby is now a 1st LT. Ham got a hun today on his fifth raid. Nice. Rose got one a couple of days ago—I guess Wally and Swede have gone West as there is still no word of them. Art Spatz was seriously injured today by “Jerry.” I sure hope he will be OK...

And so goes the narrative, slightly less connected than a fully realized story might be, because it is written one entry at a time. Nonetheless, the concrete details, the invitations to join Bobby Metcalf in his hopes for lost comrades, his joy at success against the “jerries or huns” and his sorrow at the loss of his friends all resonate with the narrative elements I highlighted above. On March 18th, Bobby records his “biggest and luckiest day so far. We raided Vegasack, Germany. It was the farthest we have ever penetrated into Germany. Met very stiff fighters and flak. We also set a new record for accuracy! The target was demolished. We only lost two bombers, one 17 and one 24. Our new navigator is OK only he can’t handle a machine gun yet. But he’ll learn!” A month into combat and the individual chronicle of names—those who fly, those who die—has given way to “only” losing 2 planes. And the novice of last month has become the seasoned veteran ready to critique and teach his new navigator. Given the loss rate during the combined bomber offensive over Germany—for example, later that year, on Aug. 17, the targets were Schweinfurt and Regensburg, deep inside Germany; 60 of the 376 bombers were shot down, the AAF’s most disastrous air battle to date. On Sep. 6, the target was Stuttgart; 45 of the 262 attacking bombers were lost; dozens more were so damaged that repair was impractical—perhaps the change in the tone and detail of Bobby’s story makes more sense.
3-31-43 brings the following account: Wow what a day! We raided installations and shipping west of Rotterdam, Holland. We were under a very heavy fighter attack by the “yellow nose”—God what pilots! They’re unequaled. They peeled off in squadrons. My right nose gun ran away, but still got in some good shots. Ash was knocked down and had his crew bail out and he crash landed on the English coast. So far all but one reported OK. We had a mid-air collision in the 303rd. Ten killed....We were lucky beyond words. I thought our number was up today!"

4-4-43: “As I write this it’s still hard to realize that I’m alive. We raided Paris today. The bombing was the best ever recorded. The complete target area was demolished. I saw the Eiffel Tower and Arc de Triumph very plainly. When we left the target area, the flak started and then the fighters. There were between 75 and 100 of the hottest apples Jerry’s got. They choose our squadron and then started head-on attacks that seemed to last an eternity. On the first attack a .30 cal explosive burst a few feet in front of me, blowing off my sights. I had to shoot by tracer after that. I used up all my ammunition on the first ten fighters, and had to transfer ammunition three more times. They were coming by in droves, while we fired like men possessed. I got my tracers on one and pumped at least 70 rounds into him. He was on fire and passed just under my nose and exploded just behind our tail. The one just behind him tried to ram us head on. I was looking him square in the face. I think he may have been dead. Bobby and Sam pulled up just in time and he passed about ten feet under us. I may have got two more and I know I hit at least six but its hard to tell unless you see them break up or in flames. They ended up by getting our entire second element. Jonesey went down. He was one of the greatest. His cockpit blew up and he spun in. There were four chutes seen. Our squadron alone definitely destroyed 30 with as many more probables. I’ll never understand why we came back. I still can’t believe it! I said every prayer I ever knew and some new ones too! ... But what a sight with “Dry” all shot to hell on our left wing, fighters screaming towards us, fighters blowing up and spinning in, forts going down, chutes blossoming, all hell breaking loose. I’ve never been so proud of anything in my life as I am of my crew... [one with a wound in his knee, one with a punctured lung—“God what guts he showed”—only 14 rounds of ammo left out of
2200 when they landed...] there were thousands of shells with our name on them but it just wasn’t our time. What we went through yesterday could never be put into words, it is something beyond comprehension…”

There are dozens of other days like this one in the missions ahead. By the time his crew gets 13 combat missions to their credit, Bobby is leading the group, and when planes break and leave formation, he even leads the wing on occasion. He records these as the “most important days in my life” even as he searches for what all this must mean. In August they attack the heart of the Ruhr valley, Gelsenkrchen, and then on Aug 17th go to Schweinfurt…”probably the greatest air battle in history” Bobby records, a “mad melee of planes all over the sky.” “Our left wing was pretty well torn up by cannon fire, also our left stabilizer and rudder. Once again, I can’t see how we were spared.” On September 7th Bobby finishes his 25th mission and sets sail for the U.S.: “boy it’s a wonderful feeling to be finished.”

Amazement at surviving punctuates Bobby’s diary, mission after mission, loss after loss. Pride too, at being the best bombardier in his group, at earning the honor of leading. Beyond the calculus of war—how many bombers and friends lost, how many “jerrys” shot down, how many bombs on target, how many missions accomplished and how many left to go—Bobby seems uncertain of how best to make sense of this overwhelming experience. Like so many other soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines, he turns to the limited narrative of his diary, faithfully recording his own personal account of his moment in history. At the end of his opening chapter of Soldiers’ Tale, Sam Hynes comes back to the elements of personal narrative one last time, contrasting them with the imaginary wars any of us might greet battle with, the romantic notions that turn war into fictions, into “shapely untruths.” In contrast, he maintains, “personal narratives are not like that: they subvert the expectations of romance. They work at a level below the big words and brave sentiments, down on the surface of the earth where men fight. They don’t glorify war, or aestheticize it, or make it literary or heroic; they speak in their own voices, in their own plain language” (30). As I hope you have heard in Bobby’s story, these narrative voices ring loud and clear with the individual personalities of the teller. They stand in awe at things like heroism, bravery, guts, but that’s not really why they fight. And finally, that’s not really why they share their stories either. Although their experiences often seem beyond human comprehension, as Bobby Metcalf writes, they still need to share their stories with us, across wars, across time, across even the great divide of death.
In describing these stories for you, I have oversimplified them in an attempt to help you understand what it means to be in the presence of a soldiers’ tale. Doing so, I join a long tradition of writers and critics who try to help us understand the powerful complexity of these narratives. In closing, consider the words of a writer who deals frequently with the literature of the Vietnam War, Donald Anderson: “These stories are more complex than I have described them. They are about memory and love and resentment and loss and disbelief and defiance and humiliation and earnestness and blame and shame and blood and sacrifice and courage and sorrow. These are stories that, even if set in a past, seem to be written in an urgent and immortal present. Such stories are about what we must live with after any fought war, soldier or no. They identify us, these stories. They are about us.” (*Aftermath*, xxxi). Not only are these personal narratives vitally important to the men and women who tell them, but they are equally important to us. They do indeed identify us; they are about us. In the final story of his collection *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien makes this claim: “This too is true: stories can save us.” Need I add that, in their quest to wrest meaning from memory, I believe our need for narrative comes down finally to the quest for such redemption? We identify with these powerful stories, in the end, because they can...and must...save us.

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