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Setting the Record Straight on William Wantling

Readers of *War, Literature & the Arts* may recall an essay of mine not too long ago, “Soldier-Poets of the Korean War” (9.2 Fall / Winter 1997), in which I asserted that the poet William Wantling had been seriously wounded in combat in the Korean War, that he had been given morphine for his wounds, that he had subsequently become addicted, and that he had ended up in the California State Prison at San Quentin as a result of his addiction.

In the course of additional research, however, I began to come upon a number of observations and reflections on Wantling that made me start to wonder. Author Samuel Zaffiri, who had known Wantling in the late 1960s and early 1970s at Illinois State University, said of Wantling, “He was a manipulator and all with whom he came in contact, whether best friend or casual acquaintance, were game for his wiles. He wheedled, begged, lied.”¹ Wantling scholar Kevin E. Jones wrote that “Wantling lied, cheated, ripped off his friends, shat in their bathtubs.”²

But by the time I became suspicious and began to dig deeper into the life of this fascinating but deeply troubled man, I had already repeated—in print and on more than one occasion—a number of falsehoods concerning Wantling that I had picked up from other published sources. Indeed, a good deal of what little we thought we knew about Wantling turns out not to be true.

We do know that he was born on November 7, 1933, in what is now East Peoria, Illinois (it was then the twin towns of Robein and Valley View). After graduating from high school, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps, serving in Korea for most of 1953. Released from active duty in 1955, Wantling soon settled in southern California. He mar-

ried a woman named Luana and they had a son. He ran afoul of the law and was sentenced to San Quentin in 1958. While he was in prison, Luana divorced him and he lost custody of his child. He also began to write poetry, taking creative writing classes offered at the prison. Released in 1963, he returned to Peoria, married Ruth Ann Burton nee Cooper—a woman he'd known in high school, herself now divorced and with two sons—in 1964. In 1966 he enrolled as a student at Illinois State University in Normal, earning BA and MA degrees over the next seven years. He was teaching at ISU, apparently on a one-year non-renewable appointment, at the time of his death on May 2, 1974.

The official cause of death was heart failure, but this was certainly brought on by years and years of massive drug and alcohol abuse, for Wantling's post-San Quentin life in Illinois, according to Zaffiri, was "a constant search for things which would get him drunk or high."³ What Wantling did to get sent to prison in the first place, however, we do not know. Both Jones and Wantling biographer John Pyros say it was for possession of narcotics—as does A.D. Winans of Second Coming Press,⁴ who published Wantling's posthumous collection *7 on Style*—and possibly forging prescriptions. The ultimate source of this information, however, seems to be Wantling himself. In a letter to Edward Lucie-Smith, quoted in Lucie-Smith's introduction to *The Awakening*, Wantling said he was "imprisoned for forgery and narcotics."⁵

Wantling claimed that his addiction and subsequent incarceration were the result of combat injuries he sustained during the Korean War, further implying that his later drug problems also stemmed from that initial addiction. "When I was in Korea," Wantling said, "they gave me my first shot of morphine. It killed the pain. It was beautiful. Five years later I was in San Quentin on narcotics."⁶ War injuries led to addiction led to prison and a lifetime of problems, according to Wantling.

But what happened to Wantling in Korea? "I think he got hit with a flamethrower but I'm not sure," says Len Fulton of Dustbooks, who published Wantling's book *The Source*, "I think he was the youngest sergeant in Korea (17)—or I remember him writing that somewhere."⁷ In his letter to Lucie-Smith, Wantling wrote, "Enlisted US Marine Corps age seventeen. Volunteered for combat duty and sent to Korea War Nov. 1952. Was youngest Marine Sgt. in combat (eighteen) during winter campaign '52-'53 . . . Morphine in Korea field hospital due to burns[.]"⁸ "Wounded in Korea," Pyros writes of Wantling, "ten days in a coma, eight weeks in a hospital, a leg which remained permanently

scarred[.]”⁹ More recently, Zaffiri wrote that Wantling “had a large scar on his leg. He claimed he got it when the jeep he was riding in hit a landmine, which also caused a 50-gallon barrel of gasoline on the jeep to ignite, burning him. He claimed then that he got hooked on morphine recovering from his wounds. This, in turn, he always claimed, caused him to get hooked on heroin.”¹⁰

But again the sole source for all of this information is, finally, Wantling himself. Fulton, Lucie-Smith and Pyros all published accounts of Wantling’s Korean War service (Zaffiri’s comments came in a private, unpublished letter) based on Wantling’s word alone. These accounts were then accepted at face value by anthologist Walter Lowenfels, scholar H. Bruce Franklin, critic Robert Peters, doctoral candidate Jones—and myself—and reproduced in one form or another in a number of other published sources spanning more than thirty years.¹¹ Everyone, until now—again, myself included—simply took Wantling at his word, and this in spite of the fact that at least some of these people knew Wantling to be, however likeable, a liar.

Wantling’s own military records, which I obtained under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri after my suspicions were finally—if belatedly—aroused,¹² reveal that Wantling enlisted in the Marine Corps on January 23, 1952—when he was 18 years, two months, and two days old, not 17 as he claimed—and did not actually begin active service until March 4, 1952. He was trained and deployed as an aircraft radio repairman. He did not arrive in Korea until January 7, 1953, at which time he was assigned to Marine Composite Squadron 1. According to the squadron’s command diaries, provided by the Archives Unit of Headquarters Marine Corps,¹³ the squadron was engaged in electronic countermeasure warfare. Wantling himself was not on flight status and did not serve as air crew. The squadron was based at an airfield designated K-3, which was located at Pohang, a city on the southeastern coast of Korea about 150 miles south of the 38th parallel and the front lines, which had become fixed and static by mid-1951.

Wantling, therefore, served “in combat” only in the most loosely defined sense of that word, since all of Korea was considered the war zone. His claim to have been in a jeep that struck a landmine is doubtful. While a certain amount of communist guerrilla activity did take place behind the lines in the earlier stages of the war, most guerrilla activity had been eradicated by 1953.¹⁴ In addition, had he been wounded in

combat or as a result of enemy action of any kind, he would automatically have been awarded a Purple Heart Medal, but his decorations are listed as these: the National Defense Service Medal, the Korea Service Medal, the United Nations Service Ribbon, the Korean Presidential Unit Citation, and the Good Conduct Medal. There is no Purple Heart. Lastly, the record indicates that Wantling spent his entire time in Korea—January through November 1953—as a private first class; he did not make corporal until January 1954, and did not earn his sergeant's stripes until October 1954.

It is within the realm of possibility that Wantling sustained some sort of non-battle injury that led to hospitalization and the administering of morphine (his medical records from the Marine Corps are not available under FOIA, being subject to federal privacy laws), but even this is questionable at best. In any case, we now know with reasonable certainty that he was never wounded in battle, that he was never a sergeant during the Korean War—let alone the youngest Marine combat sergeant—and that he greatly embellished his wartime experiences in relating them to those who knew him only well after the fact.

Indeed, those who have tried to reconstruct Wantling's biography prior to his return to Peoria, Illinois, after his release from San Quentin in 1963 have relied entirely on Wantling himself and on those who knew him after he returned to Illinois. A good deal of what happened to him in the last eleven years of his life can be verified by people who knew him in those years, but of the years Wantling spent in the Marines, in southern California, and in prison, there is no one to offer corroboration.

Wantling did serve in prison, this is certain. Though I have been unable to obtain any court records for Wantling, and thus cannot ascertain what he was charged with or convicted of, the California Department of Corrections does have an inmate number for him (A45522) and a discharge date (September 1963). Various letters and documents among Wantling's papers—which are housed at the McLean County Historical Society in Bloomington, Illinois—corroborate his incarceration and the fact that he took courses and began writing in prison.¹⁵ As to Wantling's first marriage and subsequent divorce while in prison, Jones writes, "there are a series of letters in the archives in which Wantling, post divorce, pleads for custody of Cardo [his son]. Probably wisely, the state of CA sent him to foster care."¹⁶

Wantling's later behavior would certainly suggest an addictive per-

sonality, but whether he became a heroin addict in the mid-1950s, how and why he became an addict, and what exactly got him sent to prison, we simply do not know and may never know. Contrary to his own accounts, however, it was almost certainly not the result—directly or indirectly—of combat injuries sustained during the Korean War. Says James Harbaugh of *Dionysos: The Journal of Literature & Addiction*, “It’s not unusual for people who abuse pain medication to make up lies like that.”¹⁷

Does any of this invalidate his poetry, especially his Korean War poetry? Not necessarily. It is possible that Wantling was indeed affected by his Korean War service, even if he never heard a shot fired in anger. “Many vets feel a sense of guilt to this day because they did not share the sufferings of the grunts [infantrymen],” Patience H. C. Mason writes in *Recovering from the War*. “I discovered that [many veterans] often had extremely painful traumatic experiences or entire tours, but feel that by comparison with the grunts, it was nothing—so they have no way to deal with the pain except to discount it, and, by discounting it, bury it.”¹⁸

Did Wantling actually see a Korean civilian summarily executed, as he suggests in his poem “The Korean”? Did other Marines tell him stories about their own fighting experiences that Wantling transformed into art, as Bryan Alec Floyd did so successfully in *The Long War Dead*?¹⁹ Maybe he was simply able to apply his own imagination creatively and effectively. Certainly Wantling came closer to war than Stephen Crane had at the time Crane wrote *The Red Badge of Courage*. And Korean War poet William Childress readily admits that he was never in combat, yet we value his Korean War poems no less for that.

The difference, perhaps, is that Crane and Childress and Floyd never tried to represent themselves and their own actual experiences as anything other than what they were; they did not conflate their personal lives and the art they created. “It is always dangerous to confuse the various voices of poetry, to insist that the speaker of the poem is indeed the author of the poem, and that the persona is the person,” warns Jones.²⁰ Yet he too falls prey to that confusion, as has everyone else who has written about Wantling until now, as did I in a number of the inferences and conclusions I drew in “Soldier-Poets of the Korean War.”

Perhaps even Wantling himself began to believe his own stories. “I’m not at all surprised you found some bullshit on Wantling,” Fulton wrote when apprised of Wantling’s actual service record, “He was a long-tall-

story teller trying to lift lying up to mythmaking.”²¹ Be that as it may, it is no excuse for bad scholarship, and I offer none. I can only try to correct the erroneous record I have helped to perpetuate.

Among the poems Wantling left behind at his untimely death are more than a few that are worth keeping alive, and some that should be treated as genuine classics. “Initiation” is a harrowing poem about the life of an addict. “Poetry” is one of the best prison poems ever written by anyone, compelling enough to be quoted in full by both Franklin in *Prison Literature in America* and Peters in *Where the Bee Sucks*. And “Korea 1953” and “I Remember” are among the most memorable poems of the Korean War.²² Nevertheless, it is important to set straight the historical record on Wantling because what little we know about his life has already become distorted and mythologized, fiction made fact by constant repetition.

Notes

1. John Pyros, *William Wantling: A Biography & Selected Works* (Peoria, IL: Spoon River Press, 1981), 27.

2. E-mail from Jones to WDE dated May 7, 1999. Jones’s doctoral dissertation on Wantling is “Finding Jewels in the Awkward Mud: A Reconsideration of William Wantling and His Poetry,” Illinois State University, 1994.

3. Pyros, 27.

4. November 15, 1999 letter from Winans to WDE.

5. Quoted in the introduction to *The Awakening* (London, UK: Rapp & Whiting, 1968), 7.

6. *The Source* (El Cerrito, CA: Dustbooks, 1966), 3.

7. E-mail from Fulton to WDE dated February 12, 1997.

8. *The Awakening*, 7.

9. Pyros, 13.

10. Letter from Zaffiri to WDE dated December 5, 1999.

11. At a minimum, in addition to *The Source*, *The Awakening* and *William Wantling: A Biography & Selected Poems*, the list includes *Penguin Modern Poets 12* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1968); *San Quentin’s Stranger* (Cardiff, UK: Second Aeon Publications/Dunedin, NZ: Caveman Publications, 1972); *Small Press Review* #19; *William Wantling: A Commemoration* (Normal, IL: Babbitt’s Books, 1994); *Prison Literature in America* (London, UK: Oxford UP, 1989); *Where the Bee Sucks* (Santa Maria, CA: Asylum Arts, 1994); *War, Literature & the Arts* 9.2; *American Poetry Review* 27.6, *Poetry Wales* 34.2, *Retrieving Bones* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1999), and *The Encyclopedia of the Korean War* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2000), along with Jones’s unpublished doctoral dissertation.

12. Records were sent to WDE in three batches dated April 28, 1999; October 14, 1999; and November 22, 1999.
13. The records were sent to WDE on November 24, 1999.
14. See Chapter 6 of General Paik Sun Yup's *From Pusan to Panmunjom* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 1999), especially 179-194.
15. See Jones's doctoral dissertation and his e-mails to WDE dated May 7, 1999, and October 27, 1999.
16. E-mail from Jones to WDE dated May 7, 1999.
17. Quoted in a letter from David Roskos of Iniquity Press/Vendetta Books to WDE dated January 16, 2000.
18. Mason (New York, NY: Viking, 1990), 37 & 38. Mason is writing about the Vietnam War, but her suppositions apply equally to the Korean War—or to World War Two or any modern war, for that matter.
19. Floyd was a chaplain's assistant based at Quantico, Virginia, during the Vietnam War. The 44 poems in *The Long War Dead* (New York, NY: Avon, 1976) are based on stories told to him by Marines who had fought in Vietnam; Floyd himself never served there. See also W.D. Ehrhart's *Unaccustomed Mercy* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech, 1989), 69.
20. "Finding Jewels in the Awkward Mud," 33.
21. Letter from Fulton to WDE dated May 21, 1999.
22. "Initiation," "Poetry," and "Korea 1953" first appeared in Wantling's *Down, Off & Out* (Bensenville, IL: Mimeo Press, 1965). "I Remember" first appeared in Walter Lowenfels's anthology *Where Is Vietnam?* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1967). "The Korean," referred to earlier in this essay, first appeared in Wantling's 1966 *The Source*. All of Wantling's Korean War poems are reprinted in *War, Literature & the Arts* 9.2.

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