

William Newmiller

***A Real Good War*
Recollection and
Conversation
with Sam Halpert**

Sam Halpert has these words for Tom Brokaw: “We are not the Greatest Generation. You missed it by one. Our dads, now that’s who I’d call the greatest generation, but thanks for the compliment.” Four years before Brokaw’s call to tell the stories of World War II, Halpert published his World War II story (and first novel), *A Real Good War*. Halpert was 77 at the time. He had been writing for ten years. His two earlier works, both non-fiction, *When we Talk about Raymond Carver* and *Raymond Carver: An Oral Biography*, pay homage to his inspiration. In 1987, Halpert, then 67, attended a writers’ conference in Port Townsend, Washington, where Carver was to appear. The conference would prove pivotal in turning an avid reader into a writer. Halpert explains:

I hadn’t a clue to the purpose of a writers’ conference. I hadn’t written anything when I read in a literary journal that Carver would appear at one in Port Townsend. But I knew I wanted to meet Ray Carver, a writer whose work I admired to the point of idolatry. I applied for admission to the conference and received a packet of admission forms along with a request for a short story as a sample of my writing ability. As I had never written a short story before, I had no trouble knocking off a story in about five or six hours. Filling out the many pages of application forms took considerably longer. Nevertheless, I was accepted, and drove my Nissan pickup from my house in Miami to the conference. After seven days and six nights of truck stops and 7-Elevens, I made it to Port Townsend. When I actually did meet Ray Carver at the conference and told him that I had driven from Miami specifically to meet him, he shook his head like a dog shuddering off water and grabbed my arm saying, “From Miami, Jesus!”

Carver told Halpert he had the makings of a writer. “On the energy of that remark,” says Halpert, “I drove all the way back to Miami, and I’ve been writing ever since.” The intervening years have brought a stack of short stories, two books on Carver, a Pushcart Prize for a piece in the *Paris Review*, and now this widely acclaimed novel. Robert Olen Butler has praised *A Real Good War* as “gritty, funny and rich with authenticity,” and calls it “the long overdue debut of a very talented writer.” Susan Minot describes it as “a wonderful, unique and human book,” where “Sam Halpert shines his light on war and gives us material glowing with stoic humor and crusty humanity.” And Leonard Michaels declares, “if you want to know what WWII air war was like, the blood, fire, and hell for American boys, *A Real Good War* is the book to read.”

The narrator of *A Real Good War* is an apprentice typesetter from Buffalo who becomes a B-17 navigator for the Eighth Air Force. The book’s characters would have been at home in a Ray Carver short story, but their voices hearken to a more distant past, to a time when pump factory workers and field laborers found themselves thrust into roles that would shape nations. Sam Halpert gives them their voice, a voice that rings true to Brokaw’s greatest generation. In it I hear the voices of my uncles who on rare occasions (usually after considerable drink) would recall their World War II stories, stories of innocence aging in an uncertain, dangerous, new, and strange world, the world of World War II where poor kids—kids who a few months earlier had been struggling through the great depression, who’d never left home before, who’d grown up in hand-me downs—now wore uniforms and rank and carried guns and, Good Lord, flew airplanes. Hear the voice of the book’s narrator the day before his crew was to ferry a new B-17 from Kearney, Nebraska to England:

Only a year ago, neither I nor anyone else on our crew had even come close to being inside a plane. Earl was then a part time grease monkey in a Milwaukee gas station, Cavey was pining away his freshman year at Wyoming having all that trouble with his girl, the Mouse was just goofing off after graduating from Skokie High, and I was an apprentice typesetter in a grimy Buffalo print shop making the forty cents and hour minimum wage and forget overtime no matter how many hours I put in.

The other guys didn’t have it too much better. Eriksen was a stock-room boy in a pump factory in Wichita, and Skiles busted his balls on the loading dock in an Akron tire plant. Conrad Lopez was a picker for whatever was in sea-

son in the Imperial Valley and had been beaten up and kicked off of every job he ever had for trying to organize. Comrade Conrad. Zibby had just started on his first job in a Denver lumber yard, and our waist gunners, Jojo Cooper and Fearless Fosdick were farm boys. Jojo on a small dairy farm outside Rhinebeck, New York, and Fearless on 384 prime acres in soy beans and corn near Huron, South Dakota.

Well, baby look at us now. Lieutenants and sergeants in the U.S. Army Air Force can you believe it. Aren't we the cat's meow and each one of us making a lot more money than our dads. Ten plain Joes out here in Kearney, Nebraska with this brand new four engine B-17 airplane they've given us, and sometime tomorrow we'll be taking this great big silver bird up into the wild blue yonder and fly it across the Atlantic fuckin' Ocean. (36)

The war in Europe looked pretty good to those queued up for it, but the notion of a good war wears off quickly after deployment. I asked Halpert about his book's ironic title, *A Real Good War*:

Following our disastrous participation in Viet Nam, World War II came to be known by contrast as The Good War. Of course there is no such thing as a good war. War is hell, as every man in combat knows too well. Returning from a mission to Cologne after having the crap kicked out of us, one of our gunners muttered, "You know, you just can't beat a real good war." That attempt at gallows humor, his way of dealing with the situation, remained with me all these years. It is quoted in the book. You don't throw away material like that. Anyway that's where the title comes from.

In the book, Captain Hartak, the commander of the 324th Bomb Squadron, stamps out any romantic notions of aerial warfare that might remain in the boys after they've suffered the grinding rhythm of long-range bombing missions, heard the flak showering the skin of their planes, watched their comrades die, and voiced their fear:

[A]ll you guys make the same fuckin' mistake. You still have some shit-ass notion that you're hot shots because they made you lieutenants, gave you spiffy uniforms and more money than you know what to do with plus flight pay....

Yeah, it was going to be a nice little game you could play with leather jackets, silk scarves, and loving broads, and now it's turned out to be shitting your pants surrounded by terror, hard labor, and boredom. That shiny toy they gave you to fly is nothing but four engines mounted on a great big piece of tin that can explode into flames at any minute. They're cranking them out by the thousands, and they have more than enough twenty year old punks like you, ready, willing, and eager to take your place. (142)

Halpert was well acquainted with a WWII commander like Hartak, a squadron C.O. who would often order a 360, taking the squadron back around to the bomb run's initial approach point, exposing them a second time to the heavy flak (more deadly accurate now that the Germans had the range), because he believed the formation just wasn't tight enough on the first bomb run. "We hated him, but...." Halpert paused. Such men, like Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, seem to live a bullet-proof existence, surviving and thriving in the midst of carnage, exhorting men to die and loving every minute of the experience. Unlike Kilgore, Hartak runs out of luck in Halpert's book, falling victim to a random piece of flak as they approach Berlin on the narrator's last mission. Halpert continued:

But maybe we needed guys like that in the war—people who are in the military as a career, who have dedicated their lives to that career. I can respect that, and understand that. Not a choice I'd endorse, but I'm glad some people are doing that. If you question anything the military has done, to them it might appear like you're questioning their God or their family or their children. You're attacking something they've devoted their entire lives to. Of course, I'd like to think that we've been on the side of good mostly. But we've done some rather evil things in war. It would be useless to deny that.

Halpert's military time was brief, but intense. He flew his required 35 missions as a B-17 navigator with the 91st Bomb Group, 324th Squadron out of Bassingbourn between 9 September 1944 and 3 February 1945. His mission list includes six missions to Cologne, strikes at Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Nurnburg, Bitberg, Remagen, and culminates with an 8 hour 50 minute mission to hit government buildings in Berlin. Despite the similarity between Halpert and the narrator in his novel, he is quick to say that "any resem-

blance is purely coincidental.” Still, the resemblance is there, in part, because the novel began as a memoir. The novel’s narrator tells of a mission to Merseberg, where they pick up heavy flak. After releasing the bombs, they climb to 24,000 feet. He notices that “the instruments seem out of focus,” and he’s overcome by “a strange heavy weariness” (181). He blacks out and is awakened by a fellow crewmember, Skiles, who replaced his flak-damaged oxygen hose with an undamaged hose, thus saving his life (182). It’s a scene reminiscent of Halpert’s 35th (and last) mission, the mission over Berlin, when crewmember Earl Sheen revived him. Halpert gives tribute to Earl Sheen:

I met him just once, and that was inside the nose of a 17 on the cold pre-dawn morning of February 3, 1945. We were on our way to Berlin, my 35th mission. He was the toggeler, and I the navigator on the #2 ship, alongside the squadron lead ship leading the entire wing that day. All went well until over target at bombs away. A burst of flak demolished the lead ship, breaking it in half at the waist. Then we lost the #3 ship. We were the only ship left in the lead element. I didn’t know that the hose between my mask and the oxygen regulator had been severed by flak. When I failed to respond to a call from the pilot, Sheen turned around and saw me slumped on the floor. Thirty seconds without oxygen at our altitude and you are gone. I’ll never know how long I was out, but he managed to revive me by hooking me up to one of those walk around oxygen bottles. We didn’t talk much about it afterward.

With such autobiographical material to work with, one might wonder why Halpert wrote a novel instead of a memoir. “It began as a memoir,” he says.

But after I was about half way through it, I knew it wasn’t working. It seemed egotistical. When I tried to tone down, I found I was pulling back from the action, omitting major parts of the story. Another writer suggested I create a character other than myself as narrator of the novel. That worked, freeing me up to write it as a novel.

Tim O’Brien probably doesn’t remember, Halpert says of a conversation with O’Brien that helped clarify his choice to fictionalize his memoir. It was a brief thing, but I remember him saying something to the effect that if it sounds like the truth, it’s probably fiction, if it sounds like fiction it’s proba-

bly the truth. Those words are on a 3x5 card taped to my computer.

When asked how much of his novel is actually true, Halpert replied, “Actually true? Hell, I’d have to say all of it, but keep in mind it is fiction—and fiction is defined as work of imaginative narration in prose form. I’ll stand by that.”

An example of Halpert’s fiction appears in this edition of *War, Literature & the Arts*. He describes this short story, “The Best Day I Ever Had,” as the “port of embarkation” for the novel. In it he finds the voice that becomes the voice of the narrator in *A Real Good War*. The short story’s point of view, unlike the book, is located in the memory of the broken old soldier, now in the veterans’ hospital and recalling his best friend, Barney, who jerked sodas with him and then joined the Army Air Force with him after Pearl Harbor. While the short story’s action takes place before and after the war, the novel’s action largely takes place during the war, much of it on combat missions. A particularly gripping scene from the novel comes on the narrator’s 28th mission when an attack by German fighters kills Parsons, the copilot, and seriously injures Earl, the pilot. The narrator and the gunner, Skiles, leave their positions to tend to the wounded pilot:

I manage to scatter the sulfa around and into the hole below Earl’s collar bone, and press the patch bandages over it while Earl screams with pain under his oxygen mask. Skiles and I struggle to heave and tug Parsons’ body out of his seat. I’m soaked in his blood and he keeps slipping from our grasp until we drop him in the passageway behind his seat.... Skiles climbs into the co-pilot seat and tries to wipe away Parsons’ blood spread on the spattered windshield. He stops when it becomes mostly frozen smears. (238)

In addition to the advice and inspiration he received from Tim O’Brien and Ray Carver, Halpert credits the influence of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*. He says, “I prepared myself for writing the fictional part of the memoir, that is, what became the novel *A Real Good War*, by reading and rereading *All Quiet on the Western Front*.” Like Remarque’s novel, *A Real Good War* explores a young man’s awakening to the real meaning of war and the consequent loss of innocence. However, death’s gurgling sounds, so prevalent in *All Quiet*, disappear in *A Real Good War*, drowned out by the sounds of more modern combat: flak blasting and piercing aluminum skin and exploding aircraft. Death now happens at a distance; survivors are more isolated from casualties. Terror’s spans are

shorter now. The times crews spend between missions let their survivors' guilt range with little distraction. The weekend pass, the town girls, the drink only intensify the guilt, heighten the absurdity of war, and make more remarkable their repeated return to the flak-filled European sky.

With three books to his credit and a number of short stories, it should not be surprising that Halpert continues to write. Halpert likens writing to a "release." He says, "It is a great release. There are many thoughts that I put into the novel, thoughts I've been walking around with a long time. You can't just buttonhole somebody and unload those thoughts on them. And sometimes you can't even talk to your own family about it. So I loaded it into my fiction."

Still, he's not willing to reveal his writing plans. "I don't like to talk about stories that I'm writing or planning to write," he says. "If you talk about it, you'll never write it." Nevertheless, he's "always thinking about it, always working on it." And he admits to his share of false starts: "I've been known to spend two, three months writing something, thinking I'm doing it right and then I hit the big delete key and knock it all off, and it vanishes. In the old days, it would at least make the waste basket. Now I don't know where it goes." As to what drives him to hit the delete key, he says he tries to read his draft "as though it were written by somebody else. If it's the kind of thing that I want to turn to the next page, and the next page, and so on, then I know it's good. As soon as I lose interest, as soon as I don't care about these people or the situation, then I know it's bad writing."

As I turned the pages to *A Real Good War*, I found myself caring for these young airmen whose voices echoed the timbre of my father's generation. They were on the edge, swept to it by the excitement for flight just forty years after the Wrights flew at Kitty Hawk. They flew B-17s in combat while Orville Wright still lived. That these airman flew at all, much less flew successfully in combat is astonishing. Halpert points out that a year or two prior to combat "nobody on my crew had even been inside an airplane as a passenger. And the ground crew had the same lack of experience. That we got those planes up everyday," remarks Halpert, "and flew under such terrible conditions—it was an amazing stunt. Who would stay on an airliner today if the Captain announced that he just got his license ten months ago or that the ground crew's most experienced member graduated from high school last June?"

Exactly 59 years after he flew his tenth and eleventh B-17 combat missions—a pair of six-hour-plus flights to targets near Cologne on 15 and 17 October 1944—Sam Halpert visited the United States Air Force Academy. Invited as part of the Visiting Writer Series sponsored by WLA with support from the Air Force Humanities Institute, he met with cadets in English class-

es during the days of his visit and read from *A Real Good War* for the Air Force Academy community on the evening 17 October. As he read, the events since World War II turned transparent, and the aging baby boomers in the audience had a clarified view of their fathers' generation; the maturing cadets may have seen for the first time the images of their grandfathers as young men, images of youth and goodness and courage, of facing combat in a way that no others had faced it before: in thin-skinned aluminum containers suspended over deadly territory surrounded by exploding shells. Many failed to return; *A Real Good War* reminds us well of their sacrifice, and of the lasting and inestimable value of the stories we receive from those who did.

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