

My War: Killing Time in Iraq

Colby Buzzell. New York:
Penguin Putnam, 2005. 336 pp.
\$25.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by Matthew Hill,
University of Maryland, College Park

Since the Great War, the memoir has become one of the most prominent genres in the literature of modern warfare. Non-fictional remembrances of the gruesome realities and cultural upheaval caused by war such as Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War*, Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, and Robert Graves' *Good-Bye To All That* were, as Paul Fussell points out in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, at the center of literary production on the war, revealing the horrors of combat to a largely ignorant reading public. Memoirs, in this sense, serve often as "secret histories" of conflicts, offering a counterpoint to sterilized, politicized, "official" representations of warfare, representations often awash in terms such as "glory" and "honor" and "patriotism."

Michael Herr's memoir of his experiences as a journalist during the American war in Viet Nam, *Dispatches*, seeks self-consciously to write a counter narrative of the conflict, penetrating the rigid constructs of the "straight" history put forth by politicians, generals, even mapmakers. He writes in the book's opening pages of an old French map hanging on the wall of his Saigon apartment:

If dead ground could come back and haunt you the way dead people do, they'd have been able to mark my map CURRENT and burn the ones they'd been using since '64, but count on it, nothing like that was going to happen. It was late '67 now, even the most detailed maps didn't reveal much anymore; reading them was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind. (Herr 3)

Herr's memoir reflects this anti-authoritarian suspiciousness, eschewing both traditional, "official" journalistic sources and conventional narrative structure to tell the secret history of the war—and his place in it—from a grunt's perspective.

Chronologically fractured, politically subversive, profane, and brutally honest, *Dispatches* is in many ways the archetype of the postmodern war story.

Anthony Swofford's memoir of his experiences in the first Gulf War, *Jarhead*, is in much the same tradition, serving as a quiet exposé of the over- (and under-) sexed, hyper-masculine culture of the early 1990's all-volunteer military. Swofford's opening discussion of war films frames the hopeless conflation of sex and violence that permeates the entire book. Arguing that all "Vietnam war films are pro-war, no matter what the supposed message" (6), Swofford writes that

[Soldiers] watch the same films and are excited by them, because the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man; with film you are stroking his cock, tickling his balls with the pink feather of history, getting him ready for his real First Fuck. (Swofford 6-7)

Such frankness about the imagined pleasures of war is something that Herr only dares to hint at in *Dispatches*. Surely this would be a truth about war that, according to Walt Whitman, would never "get in the books."

In the tradition of *Dispatches* and *Jarhead*, Colby Buzzell's *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* is a secret history as well, a book offering unvarnished insights not only about the author's experiences as a machine-gunner during Iraq war, but also about the complex problems and consequences of writing about that conflict in his public online journal, or "blog." As a war memoir, Buzzell's book covers much of the same ground as other examples of the genre, chronicling the author's pre-war civilian life, his decision to join the army, the transition to military life, deployment, and combat. What distinguishes *My War* from more run-of-the-mill narratives, however, is Buzzell's stance as narrator. Shockingly informal, biting, and often hilarious, Buzzell's narration frames his story as at once tragic, noble, and absurd. One gets a sense, reading the opening pages of *My War*, of peering into the slightly distorted world of a fiercely intelligent, fiercely bored twenty-something who joined the military simply to have something to do that wasn't telemarketing or temp work in his home town. Disabusing his reader of any romanticized notions of patriotic duty as a motivation for his service, Buzzell writes frankly of his own frustration with his life:

I didn't necessarily enlist in the military because I was a product of the suburbs and was afflicted with self-induced

poverty or anything dumb like that, and I didn't join the military because I was all traumatized over September 11. I joined because, like they say in the old recruiting commercials, I wanted to "Be all that you can be," and more importantly, "It's just not just a job, it's an adventure."

I was sick of living my life in oblivion where every fucking day was the same fucking thing as the day before, and the same fucking routine day in and day out. Eat, shit, work, sleep, repeat. (21)

Stripped of all literary artifice, Buzzell's writing is profane and unpretentious, embracing the traditional GI tell-it-like-it-is aesthetic, "there it is." The first third of *My War* approaches the earliest phases of Buzzell's military experience—basic training, life on post, and deployment to Iraq—in a similar mode.

The book is most compelling in its latter stages, when the author begins discussing his experiences blogging about the war from his Mosul duty station. It is here where Buzzell's book departs from the conventional war-memoir form, becoming both a reprinting of his "CBFTW" (Colby Buzzell Fuck This War) blog entries and a commentary on the circumstances—and consequences—of their creation. The blog entries, as reprinted, are Buzzell's no-holds-barred commentaries on daily life in Iraq, evoking the boredom, frustration, and fear that plague all soldiers living and working in a war zone.

More importantly, Buzzell's writing insists on talking about the war, and his place in it, in the most common terms possible, rejecting the sterile, politicized, and often misleading representations of the war purveyed by military officials and the media. Buzzell's ad-hoc, on-the-spot observations are most telling in his representation of combat, when his charged, informal style strives to capture the frenetic pace of an urban firefight:

We were driving down Route Tampa when all of the sudden all hell came down around us, all these guys, wearing all black, a couple dozen on each side of the street, on rooftops, alleys, edge of buildings, out of windows, everywhere, just came out of fucking nowhere and started unloading on us. AK fire and multiple RPGs were flying at us from every single fucking direction. IEDs were being ignited on both sides of the street. I freaked the fuck out and ducked down in the hatch and I yelled over the radio, "HOLY SHIT! WE GOT FUCKIN'

HAJJIS ALL OVER THE FUCKIN' PLACE!!! They're all over goddamnit!!!” (250)

Buzzell's abject frankness, his willingness to admit, in coarse, imperfect language, to things such as “freak[ing] the fuck out” during the firefight positions his narrative as in opposition to what Michael Herr refers to in *Dispatches* as “the jargon stream,” the torrent of euphemistic, evasive, individual-erasing language that governments and armies use to describe the industrialized killing of warfare.

This does not escape Buzzell's notice. As in some ways not just a historian of the war, but also as a meta-historian, a writer concerned with not only recording events as they happened but also commenting on the language in which that history is recorded, Buzzell notices the discrepancy between what he wants to say about an event versus what the Army says—or rather, how he says things versus the Army's way of saying them. The most important example of this is Buzzell's description of the aftermath of a particularly destructive firefight near a mosque in Mosul. Members of his unit were instructed to:

Not say that TOW missiles were used in the attack, but to instead say that “internal weapon systems” were used.

Whatever, that's no big deal, that's like saying instead of telling the media that you returned fire with your M4, tell them you returned fire with your “self-defense mechanism.” (138)

Pointing out instances such as these—when what happens and what is said to have happened conflicts—is a main project of both Buzzell's book and his blog, calling out with punkish attitude and post-adolescent coarseness the hypocrisy and disingenuousness of those “authorities” outside the ground-level experience of the war.

Overall, *My War: Killing Time* is an unintentionally successful secret history of the war in Iraq, one that like *Dispatches* and *Jarhead* is profoundly ambivalent about its subject, uncovering the ugliness of war but honest about its dark attractiveness. Michael Herr says in *Dispatches* that many journalists covering the war remembered it fondly, despite its blood and horror, remarking famously that “Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods” (Herr 244). Likewise, Swofford's *Jarhead* remorsefully recalls the seduction of killing, saying that for years afterward, “his hands remember the rifle and the power the rifle proffered.

The cold weight, the buttstock in the shoulder, the sexy slope and fall of the trigger guard” (Swofford 123). Buzzell’s book, working in the same tradition, lays bare what the writer sees as the lies that permeate both Army life and the war in Iraq, but nonetheless is honest about how being in the war made him feel: like he was living through something thrilling and important:

But after carrying around a 27.6 pound M240 Bravo machine gun for a year in Iraq hunting down noncompliant forces, how the hell can I go back to data entry? Temp work? Valet parking? Or any “normal” job, for that matter? (354)

The thrill is so much that Buzzell concludes his book by saying that he’d do it all again. If his battalion commander called and asked him to go “Punish the Deserving” once again, he would “probably tell him ‘That’s a good copy, sir, let’s roll.’ Hell yeah” (354).

My War is perhaps the finest and most genuine writing to come so far out of the war in Iraq, uncompromising in both its criticism and its praise, willing to admit the ugliness of violence and the exhilaration that it breeds.

Articles of War

Nick Arvin. New York: Doubleday,
2005. 178 pp. \$17.00 cloth.
\$12.95 paper.

Reviewed by William Newmiller,
United States Air Force Academy

As I read Nick Arvin's psychological novel about an Iowa farm boy's confrontation with the terrors of the post D-Day slog across France, I recalled Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Arvin's protagonist, George Tilson, is nicknamed Heck because he avoids profanity. Heck explains to a comrade, "I promised my mother, when I was little. And now she is dead" (69). Heck comes to war with an endearing sweetness, a naiveté, but also with self doubt. After arriving at Omaha Beach, he awaits orders to the front. Arvin's description of Heck's inner state must ring true for many young men languishing in boredom while anticipating combat: "Heck could not wait to be sent forward and he dreaded being sent forward: the two emotions alternated and on occasion commingled into a single piercing physical ache. He tried to listen only to his ennui and to have no other feeling" (2). Like Crane's Henry Fleming, Heck experiences terror as both hero and coward—both states drawn in this extraordinary book with realism, artistry, and empathy. While Crane relies upon color to paint a canvas that contrasts the heraldic hues of war's glory with the dark shades of its reality, Arvin uses the recurring imagery of dark, tight places, of caves and foxholes, places carved beneath the surface, where Heck can find painful survival in a hostile world.

Arvin's inspiration for his novel is historical. The book opens with the letter written by Private Eddie D. Slovik to General Dwight Eisenhower shortly before Christmas, 1944. In it Slovik pleads for mercy and for the chance to redeem himself by continued service as a good soldier. Less than seven weeks later, Slovik would face a firing squad, the first and, to date, the only US soldier to be executed for desertion since the American Civil War.

Though Slovik haunts *Articles of War*, this story is first and foremost the story of Heck. And Arvin tells it with wrenching honesty and uncommon grace. As Heck rides towards his assignment to a rifle unit, he sees with mounting fear the

gruesome effects of war—not upon men at first, but upon the horses the Germans had used:

Their bodies were mauled, disemboweled, torn into pieces, they were rotting and swelling hideously. In one place the horses had been piled and were burning, creating streamers of black smoke and a rancid, choking stench worse than any smell Heck had known. As they passed by, one of the bloating horses in the fire exploded with a loud, moist noise. (40-41)

Soon, the carnage becomes human, and Heck finds himself the target of war's capricious ferocity.

Whether Heck's actions are heroic or cowardly, they are always comprehensible thanks to Arvin's keen psychological portrait. Heck's flirtation with desertion places *Articles of War* with other modern tales of combat, such as Heller's *Catch-22*, O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. But unlike the fanciful desertions of Orr, who rows to Sweden, and of Cacciato, who walks to Paris, or the romantic escape of Frederick and Catherine, Heck's is a simple matter of staying behind in the relative safety of his foxhole when his unit moves on, a sensible action (or non-action) as sniper fire and shelling suddenly concentrate more heavily on his position: "A brief hissing noise of descent and a brutal explosion announced a renewal of the artillery attack, and Heck felt again terror but also a tiny lilt of relief as he pressed himself to the earth and allowed himself to forget any idea of moving out of this hole" (51). Later, a desperate Heck exposes himself to enemy fire, hoping for release from the ferocity of combat.

That modern literature about war has examined desertion with both sensitivity and sympathy is a departure from earlier literature's glorification of war, and does much to advance an emotional understanding of the incomprehensible. Heck, though always (and reasonably) fearful, is nevertheless heroic when he sees the need for brave action. Early in the book, before he goes to combat, he runs across a mined field to rescue a young boy injured by an exploding mine. He conquers his fear later in combat and becomes the first to reach the top of a contested hill. He knows the elation of surviving onslaught when he first comes under fire: "He'd been frightened, but now he was okay. He was alive; it was a shocking and fabulous thing, to be alive" (48). But when smoke and darkness and raining shells drench the battlefield with doubt as well as danger, when indecision gnaws, when the images of war's grisly consequences fill the void of uncertainty, when the fear overwhelms, when love for a woman beyond reach pulls at the heart while death stalks, what can be a reasonable response? Or does no reasonable response exist?

Still, despite his youth and inexperience, Heck, the boy who won't swear, has to participate in the greatest of profanities. Nick Arvin's finely wrought debut novel has gained high praise. *Articles of War* has won the American Academy of Arts and Letters 2006 Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award. It's earned a place for itself among the best literature offering insight into humankind's most calamitous behavior.

*Where Soldiers Fear to Tread: A
Relief Worker's Tale of Survival*

John S. Burnett. New York:
Bantam, 2005. 335 pp. \$24.00.

Reviewed by Eric Ensley,
United States Air Force Academy

John Burnett's new memoir contains almost all the elements of "reality" TV and slapdash romance novels: lovers who quarrel and separate, exotic locations, sailboats, speed boats, and a tall, mysterious woman wearing dark glasses. And on first glance, Burnett himself seems like the perfect protagonist for such a tale: an ex-reporter, Congressional speechwriter, commercial fisherman, sailboat captain and who knows what else—Burnett comes across as a hard scrabble vagabond and alumnus of the school of hard knocks. His book's epigraph, from Aeschylus, reinforces this Odysseus meets Joe Conrad image: "Men are not made for safe havens. The fullness of life is in the hazards of life."

Yet Burnett's memoir is anything but a romance. Instead of going to fashionable places like Nice, Capri, or any number of pleasant tropical islands, Burnett takes us to the southern tip of Somalia during the flood relief operations in 1997 and 1998—then, as now, a stark and recklessly dangerous place. And instead of meeting a collection of starlets, divorcées, and otherwise loud Americans, we discover a tangle of humanitarian relief workers, so spiritually and emotionally wounded, they make you wonder whether they will love again, if they ever knew how in the first place.

But neither is this book the "rousing adventure story" one of its more prominent book jacket quotes touts it to be. Not that Burnett's memoir falls flat. On the contrary, it runs over with interesting human beings put into interesting situations, most of which create more suspense than the clean finish of death: planes *almost* crash, child-soldiers *occasionally* jam their Kalashnikovs in someone's face, hippos *almost* flip motor boats that stray too close. But for the most part, everyone survives to live with their scars and ask themselves the difficult questions life demands us to at least attempt to answer. Are they making any difference? Are they perhaps making things worse? Will Somalia's floods, famines, suffering and brutality ever disappear? Throughout most of this book, Burnett honestly confronts these

questions and mostly avoids giving answers, so that readers get the sometimes refreshing impression that he genuinely does not know the answers.

This book's title also reinforces its misleading adventure story mis-marketing. "Where soldiers fear to tread," a twist on the old saying that "fools go where angels fear to tread," contains a certain implicit premise: that Somalia was too dangerous for soldiers, yet not for the relief workers who volunteered to go there; therefore, these relief workers were somehow more fearless than the soldiers who would not go there. Questions of courage, motives, and political expediency aside, soldiers—especially American ones—clearly die more often than relief workers. In contrast with Iraq, for instance, none of the relief workers in Burnett's direct company are shot at, or otherwise die from unnatural causes during the time he is there.

Readers interested in Africa's western horn and the perennial saga of humanitarian relief efforts occurring there should find this book exciting, troubling and enlightening, especially regarding the "real world" of relief workers and the challenges they face. In fact, Burnett's strongest writing comes when he examines the paradoxes involved in relief work. At times tempted to view himself as an idealist, he has the wisdom to recognize that he is clearly not, although like most people perhaps, Burnett initially harbored the image of relief workers as altruists or near-saints—a preconception totally shattered by the end of his narrative. Like most of the relief workers he meets, Burnett enjoys the rush he experiences in the face of danger and the "selfish satisfaction" of saving lives; he also admits liking the good money he gets paid for this work and chronicles his sometimes bewildering transformation into a "disaster junkie." And like field workers (and soldiers) everywhere, he rightly detests the very bureaucracies created to support them.

Only in the end, however, in the epilogue and the afterward, does Burnett begin to shift from the limited perspective of his own narrative to a macro, more pointed critique of UN relief operations and the extremely poor policy making that led to the bombing of the UN compound in Baghdad on August 19, 2003. More than anywhere, one finally senses here the depth of Burnett's righteous indignation: readers see the emotive criticism of a more seasoned expert, as when he physically lists the names, ages, and nationalities of the 22 relief workers who died in this tragically preventable attack, then states, "They died serving humanity." Only in these sections does this memoir transcend its flaws and move readers to compassion. Perhaps ironically, in the end, our sorrow reaches out almost not at all towards the Somalis and Iraqis Burnett and his fellow relief workers were sent to help, but towards Burnett and his all too often wounded colleagues. But we also admire their courage.

Here, Bullet

Brian Turner. Farmington, Maine:
Alice James Books, 2005. x + 71 pp.
\$14.95 paper.

Reviewed by Major Jeffrey C. Alfier, USAF,
Ramstein Air Base, Germany

The poets are always right: history is on their side.

—Bukharin to Stalin, 1934

Brian Turner, who holds an MFA in Creative Writing, served as an infantry team leader during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. *Here, Bullet* is his debut book of 46 poems representing his combat experience. The book's cover depicts the near monochromatic geometry of a soldier who blends into the mid-ground of a desert, evoking the Cubist scheme of devastated landscape in Paul Nash's painting, *We Are Making a New World* (1918). And like the Cubist rendering of that war-torn world, the people of Turner's poems are melded to the canvas of war.

Turner selects no existential heroes as he probes the immense pathos of Iraq at war: "You hear the RPG coming for you. / Not so the roadside bomb" (9). Throughout, he forces us to face the terror: "Believe it when a twelve-year old / rolls a grenade into the room" (11), even illuminating the suicide of an American soldier who "... has found what low hush there is / down in the eucalyptus shade, there by the river" (20). Elsewhere a dying soldier has "just enough blood / to cough up and drown in" (15), and a civil affairs officer stares at his missing hands (44). In 'Autopsy,' a dead soldier's heart is weighed by a mortuary affairs specialist who wonders how fast that heart once beat on the occasion of the soldier's first kiss, no lovers in his future now save some sweet eulogist to toss a handful of dirt onto his coffin. Turner revisits some terrible paradoxes as in 'The Al Harishma Weapons Market,' where "an American death puts food on the table, / more cash than most men earn in an entire year... / There are men who earn eighty dollars / to attack you, five thousand to kill" (8, 10). Still, in 'Sadiq,' "no matter what adrenaline / feeds the muscle its courage, / ... it should break your heart to kill" (56).

Turner draws deep affinities with history. His epigrams include quotations from the Koran, Iraqi poets and proverbs, and Rousseau. As such, his thematic vision is broad as his poems work their visceral relationship to Iraq's timeless landscape. In 'Hwy 1,' he reminds us that the invasion of Iraq was incipient in "the Highway of Death" of the first Gulf War, and even more anciently, along "/ ... the spice road of old" (6). As well, a local man wounded in the 1980's Iran-Iraq War attempts to cover a bullet-riddled wall with mud, "like dirt-filled sockets of bone which he smoothes over and over" (24). Poems like 'Katyusha Rockets' and "R&R" portend how war will haunt the peacetime future of the veteran. 'Observation Post # 978' takes on the contradictions of unrequited sexual longing present in soldiers deployed in war (41). In 'In the Leupold Scope,' an evocation of the death of all transient creatures, a soldier scans the horizon for enemy positions, only to behold an Iraqi woman hanging laundry, knowing that she is one of many "women with breasts swollen with milk" who is essentially "... dressing the dead, clothing them / as they wait in silence," (7). Very often when Turner, as soldier-poet, is confronted by the war's traumatic experience he is taken aback before its inhumanity, resulting in a bewildering *déplacement* in time and space. We see this exemplified through a particularly telling image in 'The Baghdad Zoo,' where an escaped baboon wanders the desert "confused / by the wind, the blowing sands of the barchan dunes," (5) a distantly hominoid metonymy of modern man's endless reversion to primal violence. Turner does remind us that there are brief moments of respite amid the withering toll on human life, as when a soldier—for once, "didn't comfort an injured man / who cupped pieces of his friend's brain / in his hands; instead, today, / white birds rose from the Tigris" (47).

The inscription of Turner's experience as poetry is valuable, and readers are fortunate for what is likely the first printed volume of poetry to come out of the war. Yet overall, there are not many artistically memorable verses, and little expression of the dynamic capabilities of language that could have undergirded a rich poetic imagery.¹ The best poems are 'A Soldier's Arabic,' 'Here, Bullet,'—both peering into the poet's psyche; 'Easel,' 'Sadiq,' and 'To Sand.' Still, *Here, Bullet* is a poignant and brutally lucid evocation of war and the terror of human contingency that reads like a daily battlefield Situation Report where we feel like the man in the Dostoyevsky story who is offered the terrible choice of being stranded on the precipice of a cliff, perched forever over solitude, storm, and darkness.

Notes

1. One would anticipate Turner's war poetry maturing in coming years, much as Vietnam War soldier-poet Bruce Weigl's did between *Song of Napalm* (1988) and his later works that include poems of the war, such as *Sweet Lorain* (1996) and *The Unraveling Strangeness* (2002). Though certainly not aphoristic, there is something to be said for distance, that element Simon Weil called "the soul of beauty," specifically how time intervals—admittedly indeterminate in length—between an event and its re-envisioning as poetry incrementally benefits the imagistic power of creative expression, especially for traumatic events such as warfare.

Echoes of Armageddon, 1914-1918

B. Cory Kilvert, Jr. Bloomington,
IN: Author House, 2004. 239 pp.
\$17.50 paper.

Reviewed by Kathryn Atwood

It would not be an exaggeration to call B. Cory Kilvert, Jr. the Shelby Foote of “The Great War.” The attention to detail in Kilvert’s book, *Echoes of Armageddon, 1914-1918*, is so striking, there is sometimes the sense (as was the case with Foote in relation to the Civil War) that Kilvert was not only circling high above the battlefields, marking every troop movement of every battle, but that he was also a fly on the wall, listening firsthand to the blustering European heads of state who initiated the catastrophe now known as World War I.

Kilvert was not actually present, but he had a few other advantages at his disposal that give his book a tremendous sense of time and place: a massive personal library containing thousands of books on British military history, medals from eight British soldiers and officers killed in the war, and an insatiable curiosity which compelled him to uncover the details of their lives and deaths.

The result is not only a masterpiece of organized information on the prelude to and significant battles of World War I, but because each chapter focuses on the life, military career, and death of a single man, this global tragedy is given a face. Eight faces, to be exact. Knowing that Private Albert Armitage, who was married a mere two months before the war began, fathered a child he never met, or that the mother of Captain William Thomas Payne-Gallwey became a recluse after her son’s death, brings the massive carnage of the war to particularly tragic but comprehensible terms. Each chapter ends not only with a photo, but also with a moving and almost poetic account of Kilvert’s visit to each man’s grave or memorial.

Although Kilvert’s book is a masterpiece on many levels, it’s not exactly a piece of great literature. Kilvert is a passionate researcher, not necessarily an exceptional writer. He is, however, a straightforward and eminently readable one, and his book, while not claiming pretensions to literary grandeur, reverberates with so much immediacy that it distinctly deserves a place on the shelf with the greatest books on “The Great War.”

*The Poetry of Shell Shock—
Wartime Trauma and Healing
in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney
and Siegfried Sassoon*

Daniel Hipp, Jefferson, North
Carolina: MacFarland & Company,
Inc, 2005. v + 218 pp. \$35.00 paper.

Reviewed by Major Jeffrey C. Alfier,
USAF, Ramstein Air Base, Germany

All men were children once who smelled of peace.

—Yehuda Amichai

Daniel Hipp, assistant professor of English at Aurora University in Illinois, has produced a thorough and engaging study of poetry's role in healing the mental trauma wrought by warfare. Culling 152 sources, he focuses on World War I British soldier-poets Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon, three of the most studied poets of the war.¹ In particular, Hipp sought "to provide a broad understanding of the role that shell shock played . . . artistically, in providing the impetus for [their] poetry" (3).² The literary and exegetical precedent for the healing work of these three poets is found in the rebirth and redemption passages of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Eliot, who suffered from his own mental trauma, believed that "structures of stability" and meaning out of disorder" could be achieved through creative writing, especially poetry (7).

By 1917, thousands of soldiers were unambiguously experiencing shell shock from combat on the battlefields of Europe. 'Shell shock' is an umbrella term, not simply a reference to mental or psychic damage caused by exploding artillery shells.³ Specifically, it is "a series of complex conditions brought about by the individual soldier's heightened state of anxiety during warfare and by his participation, observation, and complicity within the horrors of the trenches and the battlefield" (16). Through a highly informative 28-page chapter, Hipp introduces his readers to the clinical background of shell shock, providing the

history of its diagnosis during and after the war. Originally thought to be brain or nerve damage—or even simple cowardice—its psychological basis underwent a vast therapeutic and clinical evolution as a result of the war, incorporating advances of emergent analyses including Freud's psychotherapy. The range of therapies ran from electric shock to gardening. But as Hipp informs us, the voices emerging from the poets show the inner workings of their minds which academic and medical studies—and the attendant therapies—could only approach from a distance (14). Indeed, psychological therapies, especially those of Freud and psychologist W.H.R. Rivers (1864-1922) of Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh—where Sassoon and Owen were treated—proved “most relevant when considering the role that the artistic representation of war could play as therapy for those traumatized by the experience” (38).

Lieutenant Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) entered Craiglockhart in June, 1917, to be treated for the symptoms of stammering, disorientation, and nightmares brought on by months of combat that culminated in a particularly horrific bombardment. Under the treatment of Arthur Brock's ergotherapy Owen was given impetus to further represent the war in poetic form. In his early war poems, Owen brought the chaos of war down to a tightly manageable form, one subject to his creative control. At the heart of his poetic impulse was an unconscious realization that the task of leading his men on the battlefield led to their destruction. His poetry thus confronted the terrible way war isolated and incapacitated individual combatants (66). While at Craiglockhart Owen met Sassoon from whom he learned to hone the irony and vernacular of his later poems which would reflect psychological and metric complexity (Owen mainly wrote sonnets). The progression evident in Owen's work attenuated the nightmares of his wartime experience. Unfortunately, he was killed in action one week before the Armistice was declared.

Ivor Gurney (1890-1937) spent his war years writing both music and poetry. A brilliant student before his enlistment with the potential of becoming a composer, Gurney was hospitalized in 1922 with a condition the medical establishment named “Deferred Shell Shock.” Wounded in April 1917 and gassed in September of that year, he became increasingly aware of his deteriorating mental state—likely a bipolar disorder that arose prior to his military service. The character and purpose of Gurney's poetry was somewhat different from Owen's and Sassoon's in that his did not contain overtly anti-war protest elements. While questioning the nobility of dying for one's country, Gurney had a more personally urgent concern in his verse: to distance his mind from the source of emotional pain as he fought the resurfacing of mental illness. As such, through the psychological wreckage of war's aftermath he sought to “draw strength from visions of beauty that exist in [the] natural world” (135). His poetic imagination turned the obliterated landscapes of

France into an “emotional anchor” where “art can, if not heal altogether, at least offer relief” (149). Regrettably, full relief never came for Gurney whose mental and physical deterioration led to his untimely death in 1937.

Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) was also a patient at Craiglockhart, and was treated by W.H.R. Rivers. Like Owen, his hospitalization was due, in part, to “his anxiety about his role and responsibility for the sufferings of those he commanded” (152). His diary entries underscored the mental strain he was under. However, Sassoon’s entry into Craiglockhart was primarily due to political reasons: he had protested vehemently against what he considered was Parliament’s complicity in needlessly prolonging the war. In Sassoon’s case, hospitalization was the attempt by British authorities to hide away—if momentarily—one of its decorated officers. Through an eloquent use of irony and satire, he believed his poetry could educate his readership “to a reality from which they were shielded” (154). But by his second volume of war poetry, *Counter-Attack*, Sassoon began to represent the war through “the potentially curative technique of confession and autobiography” (156); he needed to redress the way war increases the separation between he as an officer, and his subordinates, the ones who suffered the cruelty he witnessed and wrote so much about. Hence, his need to return to the front to be with his soldiers took precedence over his earlier protests which looked to an immediate end to a war he had no control over. This thematic shift was due in large measure to Rivers’ treatment of Sassoon, the goal of which was to “elicit his feelings toward the noble dimensions of the war” and toward his men in particular (176). This feeling had been exacerbated by his belief that he did not belong at Craiglockhart, a place he believed was only for serious cases. Though anger and resentment were part of his natural response to wartime loss, in the end, he perceived reconciliation with the men he believed he had abandoned through his time away from the front.

What these poets produced was some of the most powerful and enduring poetry of the twentieth century. For the majority of British soldier-poets the true enemy was not the Kaiser and his army but the senseless slaughter inherent in any human warfare. Hipp’s careful explication of several poems skillfully charts the poetic progress Owen, Sassoon and Gurney made in using imaginative aptitude to heal the deleterious effects of mental trauma wrought by war. By turning to the arduous road of healing, these poets’ oeuvres are redeemed from being relegated to a poetic subset of political protest literature. Although some scholars of the poetry of the First World War may find little new in Hipp’s fine work, it will remain enlightening and heuristic for a wide audience of students and literary enthusiasts, and thus a valuable contribution. Moreover, Owen, Gurney, and Sassoon are relevant not only to literary history but to our own day when the US Veteran’s Administration estimates that nearly 17% of Iraq war veterans suffer

from mental trauma. No doubt this war will witness, once more, healing through imagination and art, for which Owen, Gurney, and Sassoon are the exemplary forerunners.⁴ As such, Daniel Hipp has provided us with an important grasp of the legacy and impact of these great writers.

Notes

1. As a review this brief cannot do justice to the lives and works of these great poets, several excellent introductory works are available to those unfamiliar with the poetry of the First World War. In addition to critical journal articles this reviewer recommends Dominic Hibberd and John Onions' *Poetry of the Great War: An Anthology* (Palgrave MacMillan, 1986), and Samuel Hynes' *War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (Collier Books, 1992). Several biographies of Owen, Sassoon and Gurney are in print; see Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Journey from the Trenches* (Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 2004); Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: The Truth Untold* (Orion, 2003), and the excellent earlier biography by Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography* (Oxford, 1988); Gurney's biography may be found among several sources, including issues of *The Ivor Gurney Society Journal*, and Robert Giddings' *The War Poets: Lives and Writings of the 1914-18 War Poets* (Bloomsbury, 1990).
2. Scope prevented Hipp from including Edmund Blunden, another major British soldier-poet who had also been wounded in the war. One only needs to consider Blunden's poem 'The Midnight Skaters' to understand the haunting grip the war held on him. Although Blunden's war poetry would have fit the argument of his book, Hipp's stated his approach was "to limit the focus to those who suffered more classic symptoms of psychological breakdown, requiring hospitalization. That common thread allowed me to look at what the medical and psychological communities thought about and did with the huge numbers of traumatized soldiers whom the war wounded so deeply." Personal communication to author. 10 September 2005.
3. Studies of shell shock have modern antecedents in the late 19th century. Two examples are E.A. Duchese *On the Railroads and Their Influence on the Health of Engineers and Firemen* (1857), and John Eric Erichsen, *Concussions of the Spine, Nervous Shocks, and Other Obscure Injuries of the Nervous System* (1882).
4. The VA reference mainly refers to soldiers who experienced ground combat, including roadside ambushes. See Martha Brant, "The Fallout: The Things They Carry; The psychological toll of war and how the military has learned to treat stress disorders since the Vietnam era." *Newsweek* (August 29, 2005): 36.

*Private Perry and Mister Poe—
The West Point Poems, 1831*

Edgar Allan Poe, William F. Hecker,
ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State
University Press. 2005. lxxv + 165 pp.
\$19.95 hardcover (facsimile)

Reviewed by Major Jeffrey C. Alfier,
Ramstein Air Base, Germany

Editor's note: *Lt Col William F Hecker, USA, was killed by an IED in Najaf, Iraq in January 2006. The following essay was written before news of his death reached the reviewer.*

Commenting upon his edited work of Edgar Allan Poe's 124-page edition of 1831 poems, Army officer and former West Point professor William Hecker states that "It had become apparent that no one had truly put together a detailed assessment of Poe's four years of military discipline or seriously tried to connect that experience to his aesthetic."¹ One of the main reasons for writing this edition of Poe's West Point era poems is the dearth of scholarship on his military experience, particularly that of his West Point years. A widespread misinterpretation among academia and wider audiences concerning Poe is that he disdained his military experience. Hecker carefully lays to rest this misperception.

Poe (1809-1849), who enlisted in the Army in 1827 under the name of Edgar A. Perry, will always be an American favorite. Millions of school children read his horror stories and poems, all wrought from his supremely macabre twist on the anti-Classical nature of Romanticism. Perhaps his most enduring poems are from the 1845 collection, "The Raven and Other Poems." Notwithstanding, the crux of Hecker's thesis centers around the fact that "Just as biographers dismiss the important connections between Poe's military life and his poetic visions, critics, likewise, fail to consider the possibility that military culture might be embedded in his poetry" (liii). For example, Poe's training in constructing and firing artillery

rounds could have contributed to the apocalyptic visions of “The City in the Sea” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” (xiii). In the book’s Foreword, noted poet Daniel Hoffman states, “It is remarkable that no biographer, scholar, or critic of Poe’s life and writings has, until now, inquired what... were the effects of his army experiences on his literary work” (xii). Hecker goes far in correcting this situation; one of the more enlightening angles he explores is the affinity between Poe’s prosody and his concept of military order, particularly field movement and close-order drill: both needed metrical precision to be effective.

Poe made a puzzling choice to enlist in an era of American history when enlisted service was disdained as the degrading occupation of the low-born. He lived the arduous regimen of that life, learning the discipline and precision of an artilleryman. Through contemporary documents, Hecker builds an accurate picture of what enlisted life for Poe must have been like. He outlines in detail the reasons behind his enlistment and his ultimate dissatisfaction with that way of life. Hecker also tracks Poe’s changes in motivation and perceptions of the officer corps which would culminate in his dismissal from West Point’s Corps of Cadets in 1831 on charges of “gross neglect of duty.”

The most valuable part of the book are Hecker’s 60-page Introduction, and Gerald A. McGowan’s 38-page Afterword which provides further enlightenment on Poe’s poetic language and identity, as well as his employment of martial names throughout his oeuvre. They provide valuable interpretations of Poe’s life and literary works and valuable insights into his brief place in the American military milieu. In the end, Hecker hopes that “critics would begin to explore and publicly discourse about the critical and symbiotic relationship between the American nation, its literature, and its military” (lxvii). As for the poetry itself, these 1831 poems will likely prove, for most, to be quaint irrelevancies compared with the Gothic genius most of us enjoy so much in “The Raven and Other Poems.” The selections of 1831 poems Hecker discusses in his Introduction could have alone sufficed to get his valuable thesis across to his audience. Still, this is a scholarly work, one that adds to our understanding of American literature’s infamous dark genius.

Notes

1. “Iraq-Bound Army Major Publishes Poe’s Military Poems”. *Book News*, Louisiana State University Press (2005).

*Lost Battalions—The Great War and
The Crisis of American Nationality*

Richard Slotkin. New York:
Henry Holt and Company. 2005.
xii + 639 pp. \$35.00 hardcover.

Reviewed by Major Jeffrey C. Alfier,
Ramstein Air Base, Germany

Richard Slotkin, Olin Professor of English at Wesleyan University, is widely known for his revisionist writings on American myths of the frontier.¹ In *Lost Battalion—The Great War and The Crisis of American Nationality*, Slotkin tackles the national myths of early 20th century America amid a wider milieu where democracy had yet to resolve “the most fundamental issues of its own national organization: Who counts as “American,” and what civil rights must citizenship guarantee” (3). Ruling elites, mesmerized by the pseudo-science of eugenics, believed in a nation run by an original racial stock invested with intellectual and moral elitism. By the turn of the century America witnessed “the development of the most nativist movement in US history,” eminent in organizations such as the Immigration Restriction League and sundry groups calling themselves “progressive” (17). America’s involvement in the First World War brought these issues into heightened salience as emergent ethnic-based military units would reflect and bear the brunt of those “violent forces of nationalism, racism, and class conflict” that shaped the course of the war (3).

Of these ethnic military units Slotkin is primarily concerned with the 307th and 308th Infantry Regiments that were part of the American Expeditionary Force’s (AEF) 77th Division, and the African-American 369th Infantry Regiment often known as the “Harlem Hell fighters.” These units fought successfully in countering the German Meuse-Argonne Offensive of late 1918.² They were commanded by officers who were trained under the Plattsburgh military training movement, men who approached their subordinates “imbued with the Progressive theory of heroic leadership” (99). One of the most famous officers—and most tragic—was Harvard-educated lawyer Charles Whittlesey. He would command what became known as the “Lost Battalion,” the 308th Infantry. Because of its vast ethnic composition the 77th Division was referred to as the “Melting Pot” Division, and

it consisted of many newly-arrived immigrants from Eastern Europe and Asia, many of whom—particularly the Italian and Jewish immigrants—came from the lowest-paid end of working classes. The officers who mustered them into service initially looked with disdain on their recruits who were separated “from the social mainstream by the combination of social prejudice and discrimination, poverty, and differences of language and culture” (83).

Ethnic-based units came into existence against the background of institutional racism. Organizations such as the United States Commission on Immigration said, as early as 1907, that immigrants arriving in Ellis Island lacked the intelligence to be a true part of the American democracy, even as industrialization was luring waves of immigrants from Europe and Asia. Meanwhile, by 1917 approximately one-eighth of the US population were African-Americans who suffered institutional and social racism from their government in the form of Jim Crow laws. In 1915, the second year of the Great War, the film *Birth of a Nation* was released. It depicted African-Americans as “a race of semi-human brutes,” and praised lynch laws and the Ku Klux Klan. In that same year, Pancho Villa’s raid on Columbus, New Mexico, fueled more racist theories. Additional trouble would come throughout the war years, including the horrific race riots in East St. Louis in 1917 in which at least 125 African-Americans were killed (66).

Racist and jingoist forces besides Jim Crow laws were also at play. The influential Theodore Roosevelt fomented a widespread “Gospel of progressive Nationalism” that called for a “Strenuous Life” program and a belief that war could be healthy for a nation. In his beliefs Roosevelt was not unlike many European intellectuals who, prior to 1914, believed that too much peace was causing homosexuality and bad humor, and that war could potentially cleanse Europe of so much bourgeois dross. He also believed in the racial inferiority of Blacks, once remarking how he met Germany’s Kaiser before the war, “when he was a white man” (*op. cit.* 113). Other leaders of American life, such as newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst, also operated from malevolent or discredited racial theories. Similar attitudes prevailed among many in America amid an atmosphere repressive of basic civil rights and Constitutional liberties. The Postmaster General had the authority to ban newspapers and magazines critical of the war (215), a new Military Intelligence Division (MID) began spying on American citizens, while Theodore Roosevelt propagated the idea that vigilantism was an American duty. Yet, the dilemma of Anglo dominance of American social and political life was that “The Great War provoked a crisis in the way American leaders thought about the nation’s racial and ethnic diversity” (34). As such, at the start of the war the fundamental question for African-Americans was should they fight “to defend a nation that treated them as pariahs” (47). This debate ranged through the nation’s

African-American leadership, for the rhetoric of much of the anti-German propaganda that fueled America's pro-war movement could also be applied to African-Americans as well as Jewish, Italian and Chinese immigrants, since it fostered derogation of race, culture and ethnic identity.

Training in the south, the all-Black 369th struggled under Jim Crow laws and a pervasive racism so atavistically depraved as to defy the descriptive powers of human language.³ In addition, the training of the 369th was not a high priority for US military authorities, and when they entered combat in 1917 to counter the massive German assault that had crashed through the British 5th Army, the 369th had less preparation than any front-line unit in the AEF (127). But assigned to the French 16th Division they received French weaponry and equipment, and valuable training to counter mustard and phosgene gas attacks. Early in their combat experience they began to prove themselves and individual heroes began to emerge. And yet, senior-ranking White officers in the AEF were shocked by the French awarding the Croix de Guerre to Black soldiers for combat prowess. Henry Johnson, a soldier of the 369th, gained early fame when he slew several Germans in hand-to-hand combat while being seriously wounded. His exploits became noteworthy in the Stateside press and in the African-American community. "But the Henry Johnson story played into a culture that presumed that Blacks were socially inadequate until proven otherwise" (149). Moreover, all-Black units were betrayed by the AEF staff who would direct their French allies to act in accord with Jim Crow customs (253).

In June, 1918, the 369th advanced against German units that had reestablished themselves on the edges of the Argonne forest. They were fighting a two-front war, for "the stress of combat was augmented by the stress of racial feeling"—they knew they were still a segregated unit despite proving their equality in combat (187). The veterans of the 369th became heroes to African-Americans, though the major presses were continually subverting their achievements. But after the war when the parades faded, African-Americans truly wondered whether or not the military achievements of the 369th "were making Whites more willing to address their grievances" (236); the persistence of Jim Crow and the incipient Red Scare's inferences that Blacks were susceptible to Bolshevik influences never left the dispiriting answer in doubt. Amid a racial and jingoist atmosphere as ludicrous as it was virulent, how could a book like "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" not come about as it did in 1917? By 1939 a public opinion poll revealed that most Americans thought Jews and Italians made the worst citizens (529).

The units of the 77th Division entered combat in Baccarat in June, 1918—the same month the 369th did. They were attacked with gas, followed by infantry assaults. One platoon suffered 40 to 50 casualties. Their combat apprenticeship

had ended. The 77th's 308th Infantry became the infamous "lost battalion" when it was cut off and unsupported for five days in a slowly dissolving pocket of defense near Charlevaux Mill. The regiment's leader, Lt Charles Whittlesey, gave his men all the encouragement he could through repeated attempts at their relief during the long failure to break out of the pocket, which finally occurred when Jewish-American soldier Abe Krotoshinsky slipped through enemy fire and summoned relief. Whittlesey was stalwart throughout the crisis, but one man remembers how he cried in his sleep, a portent for later years when he stepped off the back of an ocean liner at midnight, having never resolved the deep-seated fear that he caused so many men of his regiment to perish, a regiment that emerged from the pocket with a 72% loss rate in a battle, which, despite the mythmaking back home, was one Whittlesey quite likely believed was an "unnecessary, and quite possibly pointless ordeal" (362, 380).

Many times, what battlefield breakdowns and human losses there were among ethnic formations occurred for the same reasons they did for any American unit: a failure of American commanders to learn what their Allies had in nearly four years of fighting, that frontal assaults against entrenched gun emplacements raised casualties on a steep increment. In the course of it all, both the 369th and the units of the 77th suffered days of combat typical of that war—endless hours of bombardment by both high explosive and gas artillery shells, aggravated by "Pershing's plan to clear the St. Mihiel Salient before shifting forces to the Meuse-Argonne" (246). A crisis in morale affected most of the AEF forces by late September and early October of 1918. Despite this, the 369th took and held Bellevue Ridge on September 28th. Meanwhile, White officers that served with African-American regiments did their best to counter myths of Negro inferiority and to remind the public of their battlefield accomplishments. Indeed, though the high command of the US Army would continue to show ethnic and racial prejudice long after the war, their prejudices were "offset by the daily demonstration of trust by most of the company [grade] officers" (106).

The combat successes of the 307th and 308th regiments should have been a permanent rebuke to anti-Semitism in the States, but such a lesson was lost on a nation filled with many trying to pin the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) on New York Jews. Such a belief was fueled by furtive fallacies of the worse kind that saw Bolshevism as "an anarchistic offshoot of Kaisersism" (232). Incredibly, in 1917, the US Army War College identified "Negroes and immigrant races as the destabilizing elements" in a potential national uprising (448). In 1919, Black militancy and White resentment clashed in violent riots (436). By the late 1920s many of the war's veterans began to see the "war to end all wars" for the myth it was. By the time the Depression hit in 1929, 805,000 veterans were out of work,

and many were indifferent to the veteran's plight, symptomatic of the larger phenomenon of the discrediting of American nationalism (523). The failure to make the world safe for democracy meant the idealization of state power had fallen out of vogue.

In the decades after the war, praise for veterans of the 369th and the 77th came mainly from their own communities at home, while conservative newspapers praised by sleight-of-hand, saying that various ethnicities were becoming better at boxing and wrestling (234). Though the press was kinder to the multi-ethnic soldiers of the 77th Division, the "double image of Black soldiers as heroic Hell Fighters and ridiculous Sambos was mirrored in the bipolar image of Jewish-Americans as loyal members of the Lost Battalion and sinister agents of Yiddish Bolshevism" (412). Soldiers of both Jewish and Italian descent were praised for their fighting, but slyly denigrated as gunmen and thugs. Though public life was measured against a "White Anglo-American standard" all was not lost (509): "Pride in the achievements of immigrant soldiers lent confidence to their communities and a sense of moral authority to their demands for social and economic justice" (503).

There is little to criticize in Slotkin's work. Maps and illustrations are sparse but the ones that are there are helpful, and Slotkin is certainly aware that such items are legion in archival realms for those interested in pursuing them. The book flows like a good novel, and though he must touch a large range of subjects he never loses his focus. Slotkin offers carefully detailed accounts of battles, particularly those of the 369th and the 307th and 308th Infantry regiments, the crux of his thesis. Readers familiar with the Lost Battalion story and the ethnic units of the AEF will find much that is familiar here.⁴ Still, as a broader social history, *Lost Battalions* makes a significant contribution to military studies and studies devoted to the achievements and struggles of ethnic soldiers, asking readers to "understand the political forces and ideas" that undergird America's all-too imperfect attempt to emerge as a "democratic multicultural and multiracial society" (9,10). The work is thoroughly researched and documented, and includes 36 pages of notes. This reviewer found Slotkin's work a complimentary and expanded examination of social, political, intellectual, and military themes of America's entry into the Great War exemplified by Meirion and Susie Harries earlier work, *The Last Days of Innocence: America at War, 1917-1918* (New York, 1998). In the end, *Lost Battalions* is not simply a compilation of the errors of our distant past. It is important today because the ideologies of racial nationalism that "plunged both Germany and Japan into dictatorship and wars of conquest that proved ruinous to themselves and the world" is a lesson no nation or national leader should ever forget (561).

Notes

1. See especially Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Oklahoma, 2000); *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Oklahoma, 1998); and "Unit Pride: Ethnic Platoons and the Myths of American Nationality." *American Literary History* 13.3 (2001): 469-498.
2. Fellow all-Black units were three regiments of the 93rd Division (Provisional) that fought in the Monthois/Sechault battlefield (247).
3. Slotkin cites an incident where a pregnant African-American woman hanged by her feet, set on fire, and her womb cut open by a mob. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported that she had "made unwise remarks" (op.cit. 145).
4. Thomas Johnson and Fletcher Pratt's *The Lost Battalion* was originally written in 1938 and reissued by the University of Nebraska Press in 2000. On the 369th and similar units see Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri's *The Unknown Soldiers: African-American Troops in World War I* (Cambridge, 1996).

most succinctly bred

Alex Vernon. Kent: The Kent State
University Press, 2006. 100pp.
\$16.95 cloth.

Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel Bill Roy,
United States Air Force Academy

Alex Vernon, the former tank commander and Gulf war vet, swivels his turret toward the searing memory of his war, places his finger on the trigger, and squeezes. But unlike the near-atrocity he describes in his taut memoir, *most succinctly bred*, Vernon does not riddle the ominous specter of that old haunting beast: a soldier's war remorse. Instead, he holds it in his sights for the longest time until he realizes—and we realize—this erstwhile enemy, unprovokable and now rendered powerless, cannot be killed and should not be feared.

Most succinctly bred is an intensely personal and pleasingly insightful reflection of a thinking soldier's journey. Vernon recalls his West Point days with a touch of cadet-like cynicism, and then quickly zeroes in on the illusive apparition of a war fresh fought. In 1991, US Army 1st Lieutenant Vernon rode at the point of a tank battalion, leading his troops into war. Cradled in the womb of an M1 Abrams tank during Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the author is in a perfect position to deliver a blow-by-blow account of the Mother of All Wars.

But he doesn't. Instead, he offers "a nonfiction book about war... with hardly a war story in it." That may be exactly the point: the truth of the war for Vernon is a long way from the truth of war for Tim O'Brien, whose "war stories" are much heralded by the author for their ability to relate a grunt's visceral sense of soldiering. For Vernon though, who now traffics in fiction as an assistant professor at Hendrix College in Arkansas, the truth unfolds in a concise mustering of the psychological effects of the war, of his war, and the complicated repercussions that echo through our society like a mortar blast. The sections "The Gulf War and Postmodern Memory," and "Orion in the Ivory Tower" are particularly revelatory. Societal complicity and individual innocence transcend wartime trope, explains Vernon, and he helps us understand this: we're all in the arena, and none of us escape. Hence, think.

In a holdover habit from my own cadet days 25 years ago, I flipped first to the epilogue of Vernon's compact 100-page memoir. There he contrasts the startling conflagrations of the current war in Iraq with the reveries of his tow-headed toddler, then he sidearms this phrase: "It's time to get that peace symbol tattoo. I can already hear her: 'Daddy, what's that?'" What's that indeed, I wonder. A new-age activist? A war hero gone awry? Hardly. In truth, Vernon earns his peace symbol through thoughtful and often painful explications of his past, and he harkens to Hemingway and Vonnegut, Milton and Morrison, to place a philosophical context around his participation in the war. Yet he also realizes—and agonizes—that if those voices cannot warn us away from violence, neither will his.

Still, *most succinctly bred* succeeds by making us hotly consider the fire we're playing with. According to Vernon, war, death, destruction, and the inevitable collateral emotional damage inflicted upon the players may seem quite *un-*inevitable, but even the perceived sterility of the Gulf war burned a scar on the soldiers' conscience that is still roughly forming. Even in the "just" wars of bygone eras, including the "kinder and gentler" patina of the first line drawn in the sand, soldiers, like Vernon, suffered.

The largest part of Vernon's suffering stemmed from his soulful ambivalence toward soldiering. In the memoir's most intimate offering, "Back in the World," Vernon details his post-war separation from military service and says, "Because of my years in uniform, and despite my resignation, I remain a soldier; but I never was, never could have been, a warrior." While stumbling through the predictable transition to civilian life, he landed in a movie theater and had this experience:

I watched the... Kenneth Branagh film *Dead Again*, about the persistence and resurrection of past violences. I sobbed, I gusted, for hours. My soul had come untucked and then some. It was the knowledge of my participation in the infliction of suffering and death that undid me that night. Recovering alcoholics—who are forever recovering, never recovered—stand up at meetings and declare: *I am an alcoholic*. That night in like fashion I stood up inside myself and declared: *I am a killer*. A taker of human life.

Such confessions give us pause, wonderful pause. A Melville scholar and mentor from my Academy days, Colonel Victor Thacker, once slipped me this definition of an officer: a reluctant killer. Sadly, it wasn't until I absorbed Vernon's sobering exclamation that I finally—perhaps nearly three decades too late—realized the profundity of that definition. Yes, in the profession of arms we must be prepared

to kill. And yes, as members of the officer corps, we can hate every bit of it. Vernon's peace symbol gains dimension.

Long before we get to the peace symbol, we march with Vernon through several captivating pieces. We reach out to embrace endearing Lieutenant Katie Richardson in "Desert Farewell," only to discover that she's a figment, and worse yet... well, perhaps you'll wish to wrench through her story yourself. We see the real-life near-atrocity that finds Vernon's classmate, Rob, one trigger pull away from wasting "50 dismounts just sitting on the sand in a big group" some of them "one last ignorant breath away from death." Then we're hurled through time ten years after the war to the wedding of Alison and Glen, Vernon's friends, for whom this belated wedding follows delays imposed by 9/11, and whose reception room nearly overlooks the smoking holes of the twin towers. The cultural mix at the wedding, along with the swooning delight of the partiers, excites a hopefulness in the author that exceeds even the pomp and pageantry of the grey school. But Vernon is unapologetic: "Provincial. Naïve, you say. Well, I say. Fair enough. It's a condition I don't care to don't dare: relinquish." Symbol and peace before the peace symbol.

Counting my tour as a cadet, I've woven a career through the Air Force Academy in seven different assignments, including twice as an English instructor. I know this: Cadets love a "war story," and I've told them many. Could I weave *most succinctly bred* into my literature survey course for sophomore cadets? There would be risks. Perhaps Vernon's veiled indictment of West Point would incite the cynical, and his lack of shoot-'em-up action would bore the battle-hungry. But Vernon could connect with them in a way that I can't: He's a combat veteran, more a warrior than he'll admit, and as much a soldier as I'll ever be. Thus, he could tell them what it is, peace symbol and all, to be an officer. That's something they need to hear, we all need to hear.

In the preface of *most succinctly bred*, Vernon writes, "I hope this book proves useful. I hope it is true and pleasant enough to read." It is all of those. It may also be something he can recite or hand to his daughter when she's really ready to hear the answer to her question: "Daddy, what's that?"

*Generation Kill: Devil Dogs,
Iceman, Captain America, and
the New Face of American War*

Evan Wright. New York: Berkley
Trade, 2005, 368 pp. \$14.00 paper.

*One Bullet Away:
The Making of a Marine Officer*

Nathaniel Fick. New York: Mariner
Books, 2006, 400 pp. \$14.95 paper.

Reviewed by David J. Lawrence,
Santa Barbara, California

As a teenager I remember watching a PBS documentary on the Vietnam War with my father. I wondered aloud whether or not the kind of privation and hardships young soldiers endured in Southeast Asia in the late 60's would be similarly suffered by my generation. My father, who taught high school social studies all his adult life and was well acquainted with underwhelming slackers, didn't radiate with much optimism.

As the 1990s drew to a close I, too, occasionally and in the abstract wondered about the mettle of our fighting forces. Operation Desert Storm tried the resolve of logisticians (and grunts' patience, as the 2005 film *Jarhead* demonstrates) more than "the fighting spirit," while Operation Allied Force in the Balkans was more a test of the relationship between US politicians and the military brass than anything else.

Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom would, among other things, provide answers to the questions I once uneasily posed myself. Two books in particular, *Generation Kill: Devil Dogs, Iceman, Captain America, and the New Face of American War* by Evan Wright and *One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer* by Nathaniel Fick, speak with unflinching clarity to the kinds of

emotional and physical crosses Marines bear in far off places like Kandahar and Al Gharraf, and how those young warriors cope with those burdens.

Wright's book, which began as a three-part series for *Rolling Stone* in 2003, tells the story of 2nd Platoon, Bravo Company, 1st Marine Reconnaissance Battalion as they pushed their way into Iraq in the spring of 2003. Wright himself speaks to the "low-bar" issue to which my father often bore witness in his students: "[Present-day Marines] are kids raised on hip-hop, Marilyn Manson, and Jerry Springer," Wright says in his prologue. "These guys represent what is more or less America's first generation of disposable children[...] Before the 'War on Terrorism' began," he states, "not a whole lot was expected of this generation other than that those in it would squeak through high school without pulling too many more mass shootings in the manner of Columbine." Faint praise, indeed.

The embedded reporter, a phenomenon of the 21st century and subject of great debate, joins up with his Marines in a tent city called Camp Mathilda some thirty miles north of Kuwait City. The Marines, who'd already been on the ground over six weeks, greet Wright's arrival largely with indifference, save perhaps to have him satisfy their curiosity on such trivial pop culture matters as the well-being of Jennifer Lopez. One of the officers he meets, Lt. Nathaniel Fick, a Dartmouth classics major-cum-Recon Marine officer, strikes Wright with his affability, candor, and intellect. It's for these reasons, Wright says, that he decides to team up with Fick's platoon—a fateful and fortuitous decision for all involved.

From the outset the fog of war and the old adage that no plan survives first contact with the enemy demonstrate their inevitability. There's the inertia of the US forces amassed on the Iraqi border that must be overcome, in spite of communications and logistical hurdles; there's the anxiety caused by the concern over the chemical weapons threat; there's hand-wringing over the rules of engagement and the fear that Iraqi soldiers would change out of their uniforms in a moment's notice only to take up arms at the opportune moment dressed in civilian clothes. And there are the *shamals*, wind and dust storms that sweep into the Middle East in the spring, reducing visibility to near-zero while having debilitating effects on equipment and machinery. And this is before the balloon goes up.

When Wright's coverage of actual fighting begins, however, his writing often replicates the temporal distortion said to occur in battle. He describes the mayhem of incoming artillery rounds; in the next paragraph he takes a break from the linear description of the scene to explain, in almost clinical fashion, the effects of different weapons systems on the human body. Wright deftly recreates in the written word what is more readily achieved in film: the camera slows momentarily and the audio fades, before quickly picking up again as the actors regain their

senses. Wright employs this device with some frequency, especially towards the beginning of the book, lending it a cinematic feel:

An enemy mortar explodes nearby. A mortar blast is different from artillery. You hear the blast as an artillery shell is fired, then the sound of it whizzing through the sky, followed by the boom as it hits. Mortars come out of nowhere. There's no warning, just a blast, and a column of black smoke where it hits. If they're close you feel a sharp increase in the air pressure. The sonic vibrations make the hairs on your body tingle, and your teeth feel numb for an instant.

Another mortar bangs outside. [Corporal] Person [who's driving the vehicle Wright is in] smiles. "You know that feeling before a debate when you gotta piss and you've got that weird feeling in your stomach, then you go in and kick ass?" he says. "I don't have that feeling now."

As the book continues this technique all but vanishes, underscoring the idea that the Marines and even Wright himself are getting inured to all the violence taking place around them. As Wright concedes less than half-way through the book, "Since the shooting started in Nasiriyah forty-eight hours ago, firing weapons and seeing dead people has become almost routine."

Wright also excels in his ability to flesh out a colorful cast of diverse, complex characters. There's Lt. Fick and Cpl. Person (the latter of whom shoves an M-4 into Wright's hand as they're speeding through Ash Shatrah, telling the reporter, "What do you think? You're just gonna eat all our food, drink all our water for free?"); there's their intrepid Kuwaiti interpreter, Meesh, a stoner more preoccupied with having lost his pot than Fedayeen sniper fire. There's the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ferrando, who occasionally refers to himself in the third person and whose previous assignment was the parade commander at the Marine Corps' headquarters in Washington. He asks Wright rhetorically whether or not he made the correct decision when ordering artillery rounds on a building in a populated area. There are stalwarts, like team leader Brad Colbert, and there are a handful of others (who go by such pseudonyms as "Captain America," "Encino Man," and "Casey Kasem") with a penchant for self-aggrandizement and incompetence that exasperates their fellow Marines and the reader alike. Wright provides just the right amount of context and nuanced background information on these individuals that each one's voice is maturely developed by the conclusion of the narrative.

Several themes emerge over the course of *Generation Kill*. There is of course the chaos of pitched battle. There's also the unspeakable frustration and sense of injustice that emerges from the dangerous combination of dubious leadership and combat—some of Wright's vignettes could just as easily have been lifted from the pages of *Catch-22*. But most importantly there is the undaunted courage and resolve, demonstrated time and again over the course of the book, of these unflappable Marines. "Stand by to die, gents," team leader Sgt. Antonio Espera coolly tells his men as they're given the order to remain in place while mortars land ten meters from their open-top Humvee. By this time the reader is thoroughly invested in these characters. The relief he feels upon concluding the book at not having to see one of them killed—a miraculous fact, given the circumstances—is palpable.

One can only imagine how excited the publishers at Houghton must have been during book deal negotiations with one of the most favorably-depicted (and pedigreed) characters, Lt. Nathaniel Fick, in Wright's award-winning essays and book. Unfortunately, the beginning of Fick's *One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer*, creates the distinct impression that Fick is trading on the modicum of notoriety he earned in Wright's material.

The first 75 pages of the book, subtitled "Peace," are largely forgettable preamble. It's clear that Fick has a greater, more important story in store for us. Indeed, if one has already read Wright's book, the reader *knows* there's better stuff to come. However, Fick's need to contextualize everything for his readers compels him to include this nondescript section. I was reminded of John Glenn as he's portrayed in Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*. The image that emerges here is that of a fairly stock character, a Dudley Do-Right of sorts. "I took one of the guns from the corporal," he says when describing slogging through Afghanistan on foot with his men,

and resolved that I would never again cut a corner in training or accept an excuse when it came to the physical fitness of my men[...] Television commentators could pontificate from their climate-controlled studios about technology and the "revolution in military affairs," but out on the battlefield that night, long history marched unchanged into the twenty-first century. Strong men hauled heavy loads over rough ground. There was nothing relative about it—no second chances and no excuses. It was elemental and dangerous. It was exactly why I'd joined the Marines.

The self-consciousness, the idea that Fick is creating an impression of himself for posterity's sake, is conspicuous.

The second, larger section of the book, "War," struggles to emerge from the lethargy of the preceding section. But once Fick, who cut his teeth in Afghanistan, begins from the perspective of a newly-minted recon officer organizing his platoon at Camp Pendleton before departing for Iraq, the storytelling and insights proceed apace.

Fick is clearly a meticulous man, conscious of the fact that the devil is in the details, and he expects the same attention to detail from those both superior and subordinate to him. At times, he seems to take pains in trying to re-create his careful battle preparation, going on at some length about training sessions, in language laden with just enough technical jargon so as not to lose the garden-variety civilian reader, while providing just enough to satisfy the wannabe Ramboes.

Fick hits his stride in earnest half-way into his book when he and his battalion head into Iraq. One of the interesting things about this book, especially in relation to Wright's, is the fact that Fick, despite having the benefit of hindsight, limits his perspective to a tactical one. Wright, who had access to everyone from privates to two-star generals, gives his reader a more strategic view. Fick, meanwhile, limits his vantage point, re-creating for the reader the sense of frustration the operators often feel by being denied the bigger picture. So much of what they're ordered to do seems to beggar sense.

Fick's narrative also gives the reader a glimpse into how these Marines process all the carnage they're observing and wreaking. The sense that the Marines are becoming habituated to death, a notion hinted at in Wright's book, becomes explicit in Fick's. "We saw Iraqi's too," he says at one point.

A truck full of anti-aircraft guns sat in the southbound lanes, with the driver's bullet-riddled corpse hanging from the cab by his feet. His head nearly touched the ground. Another man lay in the street, where dozens of tracked vehicles had smashed him nearly flat. His torso spread across the pavement in a red smear. The Marines referred to him afterward as "tomato crate man."

In this passage and others, it's as if *All Quiet on the Western Front* meets the 21st century.

Despite it all, Fick demonstrates himself to be the ever-loyal subordinate, especially in his relatively favorable treatment of his battalion commander,

Lieutenant Colonel Ferrando. Wright depicts him as one fueled by ambition—a charge that seems justifiable given some of the statements and actions attributed to him. But Fick—who left the Marines shortly after his stint in Iraq—takes a different approach. “The Marines thought that Colonel Ferrando was cavalier,” he concedes in an especially poignant passage, “that he sent them on missions with more regard for his career than for his men. Again, I disagreed. Command is a mask. A leader can agonize behind it, should agonize behind it. I knew I did. I suspected the colonel did too, but he couldn’t show it.” The notion of Ferrando as an agonizing commander is new to the reader, and perhaps even seems a bit implausible. But we take Fick’s word for it, given that he’s so often been put directly in harm’s way at Ferrando’s orders. Fick here earns the cachet of objectivity, and it underscores that it’s not just the young Marines who bear the emotional crosses of war, but many of their superiors as well.

Both Wright’s and Fick’s books have been met with considerable critical acclaim. Those who do find fault usually take issue with timing—both books went to press too soon after the experience, they suggest, and are thus devoid of adequate reflection. The standard critics often trot out in this argument is Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. I would contend this kind of thinking to be somewhat myopic (try to make that line of thinking stick where the trench poets of World War I are concerned). Every situation is different; everyone processes information and experiences, and thus tells stories, differently. It was Tim O’Brien himself who posited that stories do indeed save us, a notion Fick embraces while still on the battlefield. “Every fight is refought afterward,” he says when describing the way Marines regale themselves at night with tales of the day’s fighting. “The telling and retelling are important. [...] Some officers squelched the stories, considering them unprofessional and distracting. I encouraged them, as psychological unburdening and as improvised classrooms where we sharpened our blades for the next fight.” If more veterans and correspondents take the same kind of pains Fick and Wright did in their respective stories, service members and those who try to understand them will be the beneficiaries.

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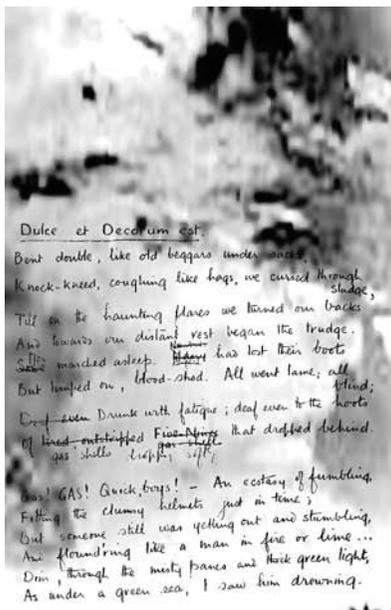
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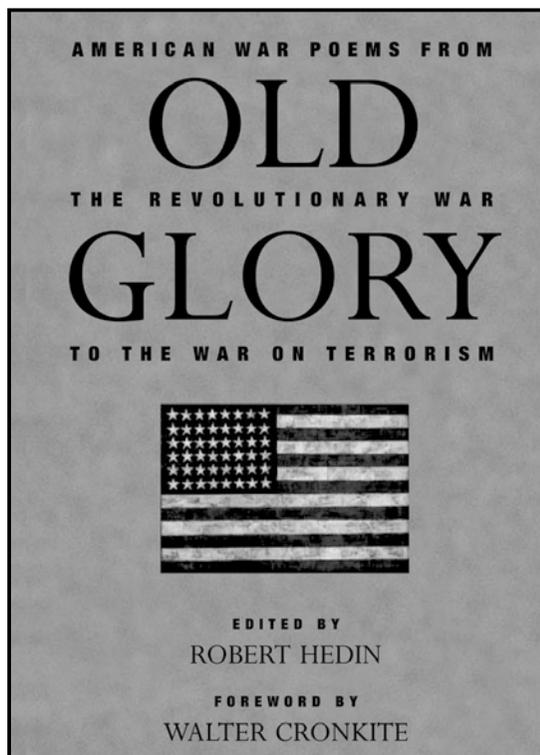
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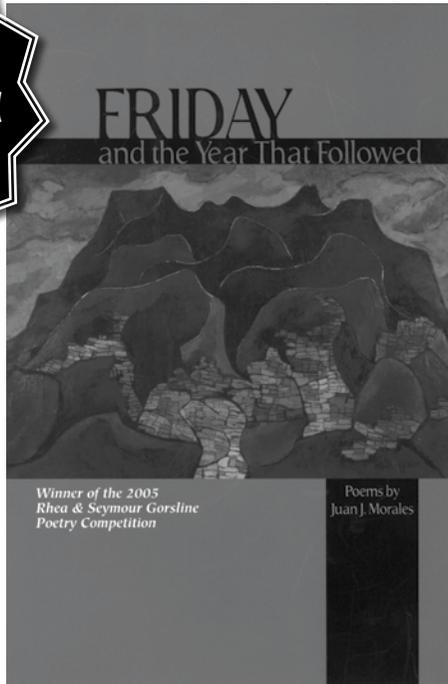
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