

"Searing stories from the war zones of Afghanistan, Iraq, and the USA
by warrior writers. *Fire and Forget* is about not forgetting.
It is a necessary collection, necessary to write, necessary to read."

—E. L. DOCTOROW

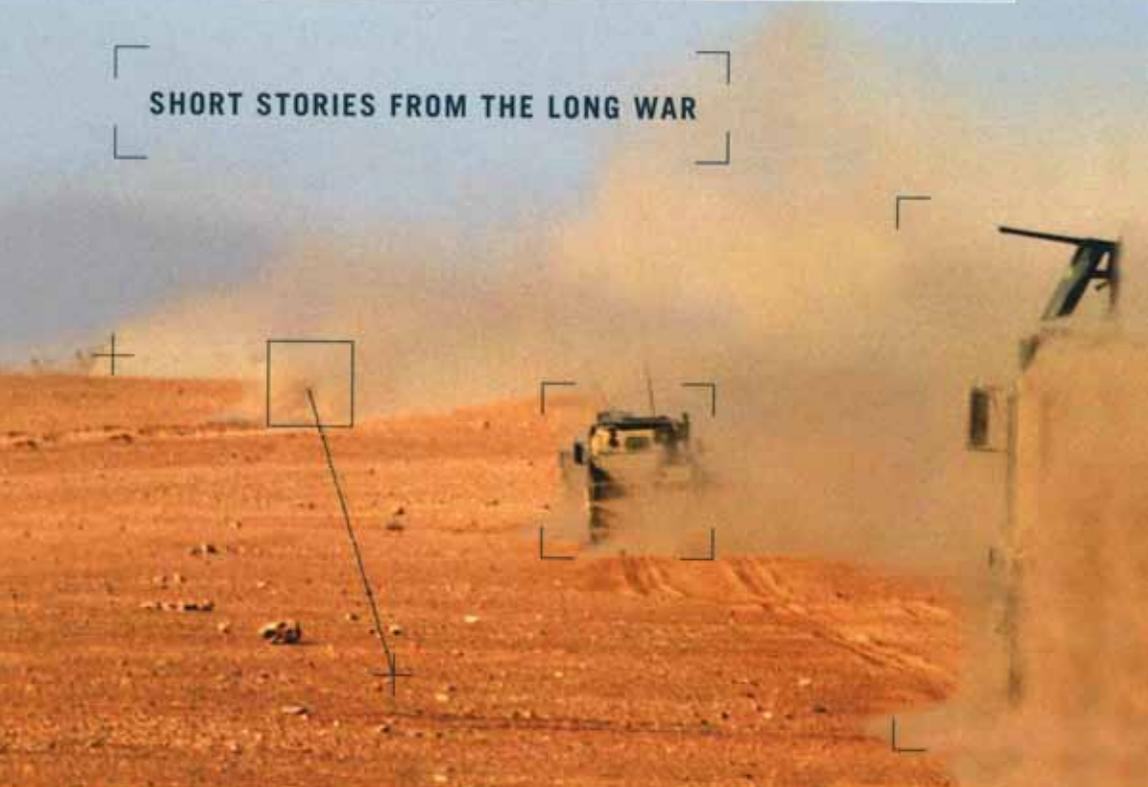
FOREWORD BY

COLUM McCANN

FIRE AND FORGET FIRE

EDITED BY ROY SCRANTON AND MATT GALLAGHER

SHORT STORIES FROM THE LONG WAR



Fire and Forget

I was on my honeymoon during 9/11. The owner of an Italian restaurant in Triberg, Germany's Black Forest, spoke no English, but hustled my husband and me back to his kitchen. There, on a postcard-sized television screen, we first saw the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon unfold. Although we spoke some German, we had a difficult time comprehending the reality of those horrific, surreal images. A military officer on the Headquarters staff, I returned to my unit at Ramstein Air Base, Germany and joined an underground command post team working 12-hour shifts. We worked this rotation for 47 consecutive days in dimly-lit, cramped workspaces punctuated by grandiose status boards and briefings from intelligence officers. During one of my above-ground shift changes, I found myself staring in the distance at sunlit military members entering and exiting the base commissary; the industry of their routine movements and manners resembled ants in a homemade ant farm. When I finally got in my car, I pushed aside what was left of the lunch my husband had packed for me. I wondered if he had been to the commissary. My, albeit mundane, moment of disconnectedness echoes across the 15 stories in *Fire and Forget*, which, as an anthology, is anything but forgettable. Graphic, riveting accounts of the carnage of war serve as the backdrop for warriors' personal stories of brokenness and lives again fractured by coming home. As Colum McCann's aptly reveals in his foreword, "the authors deal not just with the raw reportage of war, but with its aftermath too."

I want to talk about the ways in which this collection deepens and simultaneously disrupts familiar challenges veterans face when returning home. As a whole, the stories put pressure on everyday Americans' well-intentioned cultural responses to

veterans coming home; they speak to the depth of soldiers' physical and mental wounds. In this respect, the stories are not unlike what we have come to expect in war narratives. However, this anthology differs from other war narratives in its ability to create piercing levels of cognitive dissonance among its characters while simultaneously heightening our own. In other words, these short stories so saturate us with irreconcilable events and images, we are reminded that the "sameness" in the conditions of wars' horrors doesn't create identical veteran experiences; the processing of horror is isolating and personal business.

Jacob's Siegel's "Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere," the very first story in the anthology, reminds us that the process begins with order: "ordering...spaces is a soldier's job," so much so that when three former soldiers reunite they want to get back into "the rhythm [they] knew from overseas." Order and routine guardrail the vets' troubled minds. Yet, as this and other stories in the anthology demonstrate, time at home distorts and disrupts personal understanding. As these characters come to realize, time races, slows, and blurs events both under fire and at home until they can no longer decode their respective environments. In Brian Turner's sobering "The Tale That Takes Them Under," a sandstorm makes "the turning of day nearly indistinguishable from night." The characters' inability to make distinctions with respect to the passing of time disorients them, and worse, deadens them. Roy Scranton's "Red Steel India" highlights characters' struggling with war's monotony: "we got off shift. Daytime, nighttime. I slept about five hours. When I got up, I worked out, then cleaned my rifle and watched *Malcolm in the Middle*. Reading slept. We lost track of the other guys, the daily patrols, what the fuck was happening." Returning home also exacerbates the veteran's disorientation. In another example from Mariette Kalinowski's "The Train," a returning female vet expresses, "every day feeling like every other and she [begins] to feel stuck, unable to keep track of the weeks turning into months." In contrast to the negative depictions of time in these stories, David Abrams' "Roll Call," uses the luxury of an action-packed schedule to stave off the memory of a fallen comrade: "we'd already been at it all day, and still had a full shift waiting for us when we got back—not even any rack time, just pull up, load up, get the coordinates, then roll back out. We didn't have time to get distracted by Carter and his fucking dog tags slapping the side of his rifle." Accelerated time Band-Aids the need to think about the toll loss takes on warriors—until the veteran comes home that is. This collection captures how returning veterans must wrestle with unpunctuated, adrenaline-less time that both magnifies and diminishes their new normal.

McCann comments, “We are scripted by war,” yet it is the magnitude of unscripted events in *Fire and Forget* I find jarring. So, let me turn now to the remarkable voice of the writers who, collectively, juxtapose images in ways which rupture the psyche of human behavior. In “Play the Game” by Colby Buzzell, a returning soldier witnesses a blonde-haired girl killed in a hit and run. Initially, it appears our returned vet witness will do something to ensure justice for the bleeding, dead girl. But after a failed attempt to get the car’s license plate number, he looked back at the girl again, and stared at her lying there in the middle of the road. Then [he] felt kind of tired, so [he] got back in bed and went to sleep.” How do we reconcile this degree of apathy and distance with the ache of the scenes that follow? Specifically, later in the story, we learn this returning job-less veteran wants to “preserve his dignity.” He agrees to be a sign twirler despite the insensitivity of his employer who tells him how easy this will be “since you were in the army, and it’s just like when you twirl your rifles around and stuff at parades.” Gasp.

Similarly, Andrew Slater’s “New Me” puts us in tilt from the very first line: “I joined the Army after my girlfriend Renee drowned because I felt that some people in my hometown would be unable not to blame me.” There’s no pre-packaged, flag-waving rhetoric in his admission. Instead the dissonance and distance grows, disrupts, and forces us to understand human beings. As with the previous story, this returning vet has no meaningful employment. The returning soldier, Aaron, works (but really does nothing) in Tractor Supply. It isn’t until Aaron wanders off from his job to witness a car fire that we realize the haunting numbness of his psyche: “The strangest thing about watching people burn to death inside a vehicle is the fact that you don’t have much choice about it.” His chilling observation, “when you finally get into that truck you will realize that ants have a higher tolerance for heat than people do,” leaves me speechless.

Readers might expect to find characters who are angry veterans; however, what’s unexpected in this anthology is the way in which the veterans’ stories erupt—at times volcanic, almost by accident, and complete with whiplash from having tripped a wire in the minefield of simmering hotspots.

Brian Van Reet’s “Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek” brings together Rooster and Slead, both severely disfigured by war. As Rooster tells us: “I caught a glimpse of myself reflected in a passing SUV. From a distance, I didn’t look half-bad. The only thing off was the size of my head: swollen as it if had been stung by a thousand bees.” Through most of the story Rooster is supportive of his friend Slead’s injury whose groin area is “a mess, down there, like a chewed-up Ken doll.” But in a Hemingway-esque back-drop of the river, Rooster’s anger surges:

I let out a primal yell, grabbed the fish, brought it to my mouth, and wrenched its head the rest of the way off with one powerful chomp. As I pulled its tail away, stomach, liver, swim bladder, and intestines were stripped from its carcass and fell, a chain of organs, onto my chin. I spit then and the attached head into the water. Black wisps of blood eddied and curled in the shallows of the dark pool. Another trout shot to the surface to strike at the remains. My anger was gone as soon as it had arrived. I laughed, tasting bleeding gums pricked by scale and bone, and threw the carcass as far as I could into the woods.

Matt Gallagher's main character, Will, in "And Bugs Don't Bleed," also haunts us. One moment Will calmly talks to a little girl named Sunny. He hears about her "favorite thing in the whole world," a pet rooster named Bob. And seemingly without provocation the story ends with this scene: "Walking around to the back of the house, he clutched the rooster by its neck and repeatedly smashed it against the cement pavement until it ceased to move and squawk. He walked around to the front of the house and tossed the rooster into a cooler. He cleaned his hands on the grass, and sat back down on the couch. 'There it is,' he said. 'There it is.'" Indeed, there it is.

As happens in a number of other points in this collection, it's clear we can't anticipate these stories, we can't imagine the trap doors in the sequence of events; we simply have to have our seat belts on, buckle-in, and prepare for the ride.

Phil Klay's "Redeployment" collapses the jarring effect of a returning veteran most powerfully. His main character needs order: "Looking out, I sort of knew where I was, but I didn't feel home. I figured I'd be home when I kissed my wife and pet my dog." And we learn even in the smallest of gestures, there's a process to detoxing from the ever-toxic environment of war: "That was the first time I had been separated from it in months. I didn't know where to rest my hands." But again, the culture shock comes in new and unexpected ways. The returning veteran can't read his "home" and the players at home can't read him. These "people who have no idea where Fallujah is, where three members of your platoon died. People who spent their whole lives at white" can't relate to him. He's bombarded with cultural messages which don't synch up with his new normal: "Off to the side there were picnic tables and a Marine in the woodlands grilling hot dogs. And there was a bouncy castle. A fucking bouncy castle."

The writers in this collection understand the stakes are high. As Klay's character comments, "...you realize that everybody's life, everybody's life, depends on not

fucking up. And you depend on them.” They remind us of the intensity of war semi-removed from the battlefield and relocated it in the minds and perceptions of veterans returning home.

Survival, we learn, isn't in the training/guidance manuals—under fire or at home. Any expectation of procedural precision is undone by Gavin Ford Kovite's "When Engaging Targets, Remember" and Siobhan Fallon's "Tips for a Smooth Transition." Kovite interweaves a war-time instruction manual with real-time thinking in combat operations, but ultimately reduces the experience of the soldier to this: "You will find it hard to concentrate and your mind will frequently wander. You will stew in anger over insults that you imagine in daydreams. You will want to kill again, for a time. You will never quite be the same, although of course, no one can be certain whether or not this is a bad thing." Fallon's story also interweaves an instructive voice. In a series of italicized entries, we learn along with the soldier's spouse how to navigate his return: "*When your soldier returns, take it easy, take it slow. Your own backyard might be paradise enough for a soldier who hasn't seen grass in a year. Let him just sit in a hammock and relax.*" As we might guess, despite this advice the spouse struggles in trying to reconnect with her returning husband's need for "adventures" and sex that's now "a sudden mauling as if Colin [her husband] is a teenager with no control over his urges." Fallon expresses the power of this tension with amazing lines such as "She keeps a mouthful of wine on her tongue while Colin speaks, as if afraid the sound of her swallowing will stop him." However, unlike Kovite's piece, Fallon ultimately concludes on a far more positive note, perhaps letting us off too easily in the end: "You're OK. I'm here... Colin is here now and Evie is content. At last she is certain of what she needs: her arm around her husband's chest, his warm breath on her wrist."

But we will never be content. The vision of Siegel's characters when they look upon an empty construction site resonates, "Among the offices shut down for the night and the residential towers where people slept were half-built shells, skeletons of steel you could see clean through, menacing us with their cranes and lifts hanging like gargoyles in the shadows." We need these stories to menace us, to haunt us. I agree with Colum McCann: "One story becomes all stories. And we have to keep on telling them. It is our duty to continue spinning the kaleidoscope." *Fire and Forget* sheds a blinding light on those gargoyles in the shadows.

KATHLEEN HARRINGTON is the long-time Head of the English & Fine Arts Department at the United States Air Force Academy. She is also the Managing Editor of **WLA**.