A Dispatch from Fort Atwater

Nostalgia is another word for history, but only our personal, petty, smalltime histories; history is all about the size of the frame, and nostalgia is a 3×5 photograph cropped around the perfect images of memory, and never more than in love and war. In these recent days, as veterans like me confront our old military bases named after Confederate traitors, I thought about nostalgia's allure; it's a loyalty, created by once being stationed at places like Fort Bragg, Benning, or Gordon, making us resistant to any modern change to those wartime memories we sort of loved.

In nostalgic memories, my mind's-eye zooms in tight on "Bragg." Not the person or his history, not the place, just that name; of course I'm nostalgic for the identity I found at Fort Bragg, where all Army roads lead. "Bragg" is shorthand – the real Army, the Division, the Corps. I wore airborne patches on both sleeves – never earned either one in some eyes, including maybe my own, because I never went to airborne school. An airborne sandwich with no meat in the middle is a strange sight at Bragg; yell if you want, I'm an airborne sandwich all the same.

So I know what I am trying to convey when I say, "When I was at Fort Bragg."

I know what I am trying to convey when I say, "When I was at Fort Belvoir." A sleepy post during my time there, the opposite of Bragg in every way that matters. I used to run through the leafy streets of the officer's housing and down by the Potomac's edge – motivated myself because it was the kind of post without organized PT.

When I think of those places, I don't think of William Fairfax's slaves working on his Belvoir Plantation, or of the

Confederate traitor Braxton Bragg. I think of Army days when I was young and life must have been so simple. Isn't that a trick of memory, when it wants to fool us? How it smooths out the rough patches, so our life feels like a simple, straight path to whoever we became.

My first Army assignment was to Fort Gordon, Georgia, and the Public Affairs Office where we produced *The Signal* newspaper. I would browse clippings from the 1960s that felt so ancient. As a teenager from New Hampshire, I knew nothing about the South's view of history: the 1960s were five minutes ago; the 1860s last week or the week before.

I once represented Fort Gordon, and by default John B. Gordon, the Klansman the place was named for. I was my battalion's, brigade's, and finally Fort Gordon's Soldier of the Month. Three times I stood before boards of more and more intimidating First Sergeants and Sergeants Major, answering questions now lost to my memory. I remember a question I missed: who was a military officer murdered in Lebanon? I was ashamed I didn't know, mostly because the fearsome training brigade CSM was the one who asked. While I've forgotten his name, I remember the correct answer of Lt. Col. William Higgins.

A perk of victory was attending a rotary breakfast in Augusta, Ga., where the emcee introduced me and I stood up in my Class As with a single Army Service Ribbon, and the place applauded like I'd done something. And they came up to me after and talked in strange accents about how impressed they were and I was a solid young man representing America, representing them, and for that brief time, a living, breathing representative of John Gordon, a Confederate and a traitor.

Am I angry? Of course not. I didn't care who John Gordon was. To me, Fort Gordon is a place of my first Army friends and hanging out on the second floor of those barracks, road trips to concerts in Columbia, parties at my off-post apartment, and

a cute legal specialist who grew up to be a judge. Angry?

—

Simplicity is another word for nostalgia. It's simple to let Fort Gordon stay as-is, and ignore each traitor's name tacked on to pop-up military compounds during the build-up to World War II, names that stuck as the bases grew into economic engines of provincial towns. At the time, weren't they named by chance, more than any deliberate intent? They needed a name, so why not those names? Let the southern rubes have their trinkets of the past—what do I care?

Without being African-American, I think anger might feel frivolous – the Confederates are villains but they have no connection to me. It's important to maintain perspective, to let those with the moral righteousness of earned anger own this moment for themselves. What the world doesn't need is another white man making it about himself.

Still, I want to write something, about the comfort and the shame of these names, that conflict between simplicity and reality, nostalgia and history. I cared – care – about Bragg, and Gordon, they mean something to me; I want to confront that feeling, to defend it, dismiss it, deride it but at least demand that measured, disciplined, objective search inside myself. So I do some digging, to find something Civil War-related in my past, some touchstone I can build on. A great-great-grandfather was Brig. Gen. Nathan Augustus Monroe Dudley, but he was a staff officer, too above-it-all. I do a little research into Samuel Stevens, a wagoner with the Sixth New Hampshire Regiment. He was the son of my great-great-great-grandfather's brother, so a first cousin, three times removed. I want a more direct lineage fighting for the Union, and it's a sting that the family tree is so mundane.

In my wish for a wartime connection, can't I then empathize with the effort it would take from the other side, to feel

forced to explain away a heritage connecting back to an officer for the Confederacy? It would no doubt be easier to lean into courage and rebellion, flawed and vile though it was. If I was from the South, wouldn't I believe some first cousin, three times removed, had courage of their convictions? Is it so wrong to keep names from that misguided version of courage alive? Do I have a better idea?

I have Samuel Stevens. He returned to New Hampshire, died in an accident in 1866, is buried in his hometown. I know him from a daguerreotype image, tight-cropped in a small frame, a relic of family history. To my child's eye, the history of the Civil War appeared in his face, reduced to 3×5 simplicity. It's a place to start, a nostalgic place, a simple place.

Take that tight-cropped photograph of an ancestor's picture, or the name of a fort, any of that nostalgia in your mind's-eye frame and you will discover that it has edges that can be unfolded. So to find more information on the war stories of Samuel Stevens, dates, actions, I unfold the Sixth New Hampshire.

Tim O'Brien once wrote that true war stories don't have morals, that there's no lesson in destruction and death. Roy Scranton lacerated the idea of heroic trauma, the rationalization that war stories can find paths to healing. They examined war stories as literature with an artistic intent, but maybe war stories are no more literature than nostalgia is history. War stories aren't that complicated.

War stories are only Noir thrillers, pulp paperbacks with simple plots and dark results. Dialogue is the melodramatic vernacular of a particular place and time; stakes are low but personal; a lurid cover entices readers with promises of schemes and sin; in Noir, the narrator thinks he's a hero, but becomes the rube. That is Noir's important part: a revelation

uncovers a bitter secret, changes the world the narrator thought they knew, answers a question they didn't know they asked.

Writing a war story is writing for that twist, where the story you thought you were writing becomes the story that you are writing.

So this was never Samuel Stevens' story.

For when I skim the Sixth New Hampshire's roster, a single Webster is also among the names, and I'm immediately certain we share some relation. His hometown is East Kingston, not far from Hampton, where my earliest American ancestor grew my roots.

My line of Webster's traces back to Thomas Webster, arriving to America in 1636, settling in Hampton in 1638. He had been born in Ormsby, England, where his father died and his mother remarried but didn't change her only child's last name. Thomas Webster journeyed overseas at just five years old. On such thin limbs do family trees continue.

Thomas and eventual-wife Sarah had nine children, with three middle sons – Ebenezer, Isaac, and John. Ebenezer was grandfather to New Hampshire legend Daniel Webster; Isaac started my line, was my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather.

Those genealogies are well-researched, so new digging is not hard. There are false starts, finger pricks in information's tangled bramble where nostalgia turns into history, but my wife and I connect the dots.

We discover that Thomas' son John Webster begat Jeremiah, who begat Jeremiah II, who begat David, who begat John Augustine Webster in 1827, my fourth cousin, three times removed.

John Augustine Webster is who I find on the roster of the

Sixth New Hampshire Regiment. He mustered into the unit in November, 1861, and then headed south to do his duty.

The Sixth fought at Bull Run, Antietam, the Overland Campaign, and others. On May 28, 1864, at some skirmish northwest of Richmond, near Virginia's Totopotomoy Creek, several members of Company I were captured, including John A. Webster.

From Richmond, a railroad took Confederate prisoners, like John Webster, on a week-long meandering journey through Charlotte, Columbia, Augusta, and Macon, to the terminus at Andersonville Prison.

—

John Webster would have arrived at Andersonville in early June, just as summer's heat coated the open-air prison camp. Of Andersonville's conditions, Union prisoner John Ransom had written on May 28: "It really seems as if we are all going to die here. I don't seem to get hardened to the situation and am shuddering all the time at the sites."

Ransom had arrived at the prison in mid-March, 1864, and after the war, he published his account as *Andersonville Diaries*. On June 3, he wrote that new prisoners arrive all the time; that was about a week since John Webster's capture, about the length of a train's journey to Andersonville's 27-acre swamp, where 45,000 prisoners were jammed in.

On June 15, Ransom writes, "My teeth are loose, mouth sore, with gums grown down lower than the teeth in some places and bloody." On June 28, "Can see the dead wagon loaded up with twenty or thirty bodies at a time, and away they go to the grave yard on a trot."

On July 19, he wrote that, "Nine out of ten would as soon eat with a corpse for a table as any other way. In the middle of last night I was awakened by being kicked by a dying man. He was soon dead. Got up and moved the body off a few feet, and

again went to sleep to dream of the hideous sights.”

His July 25-28 entries hit the bottom: “Am myself much worse, and cannot walk, and with difficulty stand up…Swan dead, Gordon dead, Jack Withers dead, Scotty dead…Hub Dakin came to see me and brought an onion. He can barely crawl himself…Taken a step forward toward the trenches since yesterday and am worse. Had a wash…Battese took me to the creek; carries me without any trouble.”

Then an ever-so-small rebound.

July 29: “Alive and kicking. Drank some soured water made from meal and water.”

July 30: “Hang on well, and no worse.”

Ransom recovered enough to be transferred to another prison, and he escaped later that year, aided by freed slaves on his journey back to the North.

John A. Webster would make no turnaround. He had died of diarrhea on July 28.

My fourth cousin, three times removed, was laid in Plot #4156, one of 13,000 naked corpses that filled the trenches.

Imagine, diarrhea and dysentery and scurvy in the rain and the mud and the sun and the heat with the flies and the maggots and mosquitos of central Georgia in late July without toilet paper or fresh water while living in rags under a hand-sewn tent next to men pissing and shitting and stinking and dying and trying to evade former comrades turned into thieves and turncoats and murderers and hoping at the end you have a friend still healthy enough to carry you to the creek or bring you an onion.

—

How do I know the fate of my cousin, John A. Webster, in Plot

#4156?

Dorence Atwater, a teenage messenger boy for a Union Cavalry unit, had been captured in 1863, and arrived in Andersonville later that year. He had good handwriting, so he was tasked with keeping up with the hospital's death list. He was no fool, and knew the list kept by the Confederacy might – or might not – be seen by prisoner's families down the road. So he kept two lists, hiding his own secret list after chronicling each day's dead.

In a war with 150,000 unidentified Union dead, Atwater's list of names matched with numbers carved on wooden slats above the trenches represented the most accurate catalog of the 13,000 who died at Andersonville, and in what spot of Georgia dirt they lay.

After the war, Atwater returned to Andersonville with Nurse Clara Barton to mark out the cemetery with the proper names. The U.S. government then tried to take control of his list, not necessarily intending to publish it. Atwater was court martialed for stealing the "government property" of his own list of names. He spent time in a Federal prison before a Presidential pardon – imprisoned by both forces of the war, devoted to his list of men killed by one side, ignored by the other.

It made some sense for the U.S. government to try and cover up 13,000 dead men – not their deaths, but where they died, in such squalor, when prisoner exchanges would have saved so many.

"Secretary of War Edwin Stanton was afraid that the public would ask who in the federal government was responsible for Union prisoners of war being abandoned to the Confederate prison system," wrote Edward Roberts in *Andersonville Journey*. To Stanton, "it was in the interest of the Republican Party that the families of the dead men continue to assume that

their loved ones died in glorious combat to save the Union rather than starving to death in a filthy Confederate prison.”

Working with Barton and newspaper publisher Horace Greeley, Atwater’s full list was published, giving families from all the Union states that final accounting. Today, Andersonville’s white headstones identify most of the cemetery’s tight-packed occupants, rows and rows of names and names.


Andersonville National Cemetery

—

John A. Webster’s journey from the Totopotomoy Creek to Andersonville likely traversed Augusta, Ga., eventual home to my home for 18 months: Fort Gordon.

When we name a Fort, it’s not supposed to be nostalgic — it’s supposed to convey sprawl and history in as big a frame as one can imagine — not small men of evil causes. Patton, Eisenhower, Grant, so many better names. In 2020, Fort Gordon is now the Cyber Center; it makes no sense to leave it named after John Gordon, a failed commander, a traitor, and a Klansman.

Cyber warfare exploits the cracks in a network — finding the one place where a line of code has left a gap, an exposed breach where a careful series of actions can work through the failed defenses. Dorence Atwater broke the code of Confederate prison guards and Union bureaucrats, exploited gaps with good handwriting and grim patience, wormed his list of names through the obstacles of distance and disease, carving a trail across a century. Atwater was a primitive cyber-warrior, teaching any young soldier that time and death are no excuse: some messages simply must get through.

Fort Gordon is named with petty nostalgia, a tight frame around a dead and useless man. Dorence Atwater is history, his

list pointing to John A. Webster's grave 150 years later, one of 13,000. In my mind's eye, the frame expands, Gordon shrinks, fades, overwhelmed, forever, by Dorence Atwater.

—

It's a three-hour drive from Fort Gordon to Andersonville, a doable day trip. If I had known all this back then, it's a mini-adventure I would have done some Saturday when I was bored. If I had known, I might have felt a bit of shame representing John Gordon, might have written about Dorence Atwater for *The Signal* newspaper. So I like to imagine. Nostalgia is another word for that wistful revisionism.

Now, the chance of visiting my cousin's gravestone is on the bad side of low.

I can see its picture. A white headstone, a touchstone, a keystone proving that a Webster took a stand. All the relatives of 13,000 men can say the same. Nostalgia is another word for pride, that confidence in what was right.

Nostalgia is another word for privilege, to have that backward-facing sanctuary of simplicity, safety, certainty and selfishness.

Even those 13,000 white headstones are in a tight, nostalgic frame. My relative is long dead and in his place of honor, my white life safe, sound, slightly better informed. Unfold Andersonville, all the tragedy and terror, and it becomes a white speck in the middle of a black canvas – of bodies disappeared into frog ponds and deep forest holes, of city streets hiding the wood of broken coffins and shattered ancient bones, no places or names to remember, no genealogy that can be tracked by curious dilettantes.

Like I said, war stories are Noir stories. A headstone in a far-off cemetery, low stakes, but now it's personal. Andersonville, Totopotomoy, the Sixth New Hampshire, all

melodramatic language of the Civil War. The righteous schemes of Dorence Atwater. The lurid horrors of corpses in a trench. Me, thinking I was the hero, thinking I could examine my "*feelings*" about Confederate-named forts with a measured, disciplined, objective perspective. Instead, I stumbled into mysteries I didn't know I was exploring, a rube who didn't know my history.

THE WORDS ON THE INTERNET SAID MICHAEL HERR HAS DIED

Where were you when Michael Herr died in 2016? What were you doing? Did you listen to the opening voiceover of *Apocalypse Now*? Martin Sheen's main character said "all I could think of was getting back into the jungle. I wanted a mission and for my sins they gave me one." Did you watch Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* at the helicopter scene when Matthew Modine's Joker asks the doorgunner "How can you shoot women and children?" "Easy," the gunner replies, "you don't lead 'em so much." Or did you go right to the original source, a first edition of Herr's *Dispatches* from the bookshelf and flip to the passage when Herr overheard a bunch of infantrymen watching a helicopter full of journalists fly off an LZ, leaving Herr behind –"one rifleman turning to another, and giving us all his hard, cold wish: 'Those fucking guys,' he'd said. 'I hope they die.'"

I did none of those things. I was aware of them all, though, when my internet surfing tripped up against the news that Michael Herr had died. The journalist that I, like all my

peers who once reported from Iraq, Afghanistan, Panama, Yemen and all the other places, wished we could have been.

It had been a long time since Herr had written anything, the last a short book about his dead friend Stanley Kubrick. The ultimate sin for any writer is silence, and by my reckoning Herr had chosen silence since 2001—an interview in a documentary "First Kill," and nothing since. The author of *Dispatches*, the book that is the accepted highest standard for embedded reporting, had nothing to say about 15 years of war in the Middle East and South America in which journalists of all size and stripe broke their backs to emulate his style, approach, and see-it-all mindset. He had nothing to say about any of it— no comment on Sebastian Junger's calling his own book *War*, as though it could somehow be definitive; no television commentary on Fox News or PBS, no taking a stand one way or the other; Herr neither boasted nor complained when reporters and freelancers, present company included, aped his surrealistic style in ways much more akin to plagiarism than homage.

I emulated him from my first moment in Iraq as a reporter in 2007. I got off a helicopter at the LZ at Forward Operating Base Summerall and a young captain offered to take my bags. "I packed them," I told him, "I'll hump them." I learned that lesson from Herr, who wrote "I never let the grunts dig my holes or carry my gear." And I thought of Herr when I first introduced myself to the soldiers at the Bayji Joint Security Station, where I arrived a month after a truck bomb nearly destroyed the place. The soldiers would look at me with either a scowl or a strange grin. Like Herr said, "It was no place where I'd have to tell anyone not to call me 'Sir.'"

When I got back, I couldn't wait to talk about it, sending photos and stories here, there, everywhere, hustling up any publication I could. That was 2007.

Goodbye to all that.

Now, it's been eight years since my last time in Iraq. I think about it every day. I wonder how my life would have played out, if I hadn't gone? Would I have been one of the ignorant yahoos yelling at TV, certain that my opinion was the right one?

Maybe Herr's silence was a form of discipline. If he realized he had nothing left to say, maybe it makes sense. Otherwise it was a sin, for bottling up his wisdom and pulling a Salinger while the world crashed down around him. Call it coping, choosing peace and quiet over the endless cacophony that's only gotten worse—why demean oneself in such a world? Would his opinion or observation have carried any extra weight because of a book he wrote in 1977? Chances are much better that in raising his voice, he would have only made another more target for revisionist history. What did he make up? Is *Dispatches* really nonfiction? Composite characters? Is he a fabulist? Did he even *go* to Vietnam?

Iraq and Afghanistan were chockfull of Pentagon lies, media misperceptions, and first-person "so there I was" memories. What would one more blowhard have added to the mix?

Instead, Herr retreated into the silence—not even mystery, since there was no Salinger-esque clamor for his reemergence. Surely, we was sought out now and then, but those entreaties didn't reach the public (at least as far as a Google search can find).

Three movies, three books; that was his output, more or less. And hardly full credit for all of them – he wrote voiceovers for *Apocalypse Now* and *The Rainmaker,* and co-wrote the screenplay for *Full Metal Jacket*. Most of *Full Metal Jacket's* dialogue came directly from Gustav Hasford's underrated *The Short Timers*. R. Lee Ermey took a lot of credit for improvising the drill sergeant's dialogue—but plenty of his

profane monologues are right from the book; anyway, Hasford died in 1993, so he's not around to correct anybody.

And Hasford's no saint. I own his personal copy of *Dispatches*, annotated with quite a few short references, including a few times where Hasford wrote in pencil: "Problem. Did I steal this?" next to scenes that appear suspiciously like moments from *Dispatches*. Nothing major: a scarf on a character, a description of a spooky night. Maybe the word "spooky" itself, which both Hasford and Herr loved and used in equal measure.

Herr co-wrote the screenplay for Full Metal Jacket with Stanley Kubrick, but Kubrick didn't have the balls to go for Hasford's original vision—in the movie, the drill sergeant is killed by Vincent D'Onofrio's tubby Private Pyle. It's the same in the book—with the vital change that the Gunny knows what's coming, knows Pyle has lost his marbles and is about to shoot him dead—and the Gunny is proud of him. He created a killer and he knows it.

The second change is even starker. In the movie, a sniper kills Joker's friend Cowboy, and later, Joker kills the female sniper.

In the book, the sniper is never seen, picking off members of Cowboy's squad one-by-one until finally Cowboy is in the sniper's sights, shot in the legs so he can't move. The sniper intends to draw each desperate man in the squad out from cover as they try to rescue their wounded.

Joker knows this, so Joker shoots Cowboy, who knows it's coming and whose last words are "I never liked you, Joker. I never thought you were very funny."

In 1987, it's unlikely a movie audience would have accepted a conclusion where one American soldier mercy-kills another. A lot had changed since 1979's *Apocalypse Now*, which ended with Martin Sheen's Willard decapitating Marlon Brando's Colonel Kurtz.

The modern version would probably feature Navy SEAL Team Six swooping in at the last minute, rescuing Cowboy and Joker as Mark Wahlberg laid down suppressing fire and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson karate-chopped whatever faceless Muslim jihadist villain presented a threat. He would probably choke a female Muslim terrorist to death with her own *hijab* headdress – saying "That's a wrap, *bitch*."

It makes sense that Michael Herr remained silent, given our current culture. He'd lived long enough to see Vietnam demystified and reconstructed—turned into "do we get win this time?" foolishness matched with Vietnam's real-life economic boom. Vietnamese tourist posters once used the English slogan "A Country, Not a War." By 2017, it's doubtful that clarification is even necessary.

Herr became a devout Buddhist, meditating at his home in upstate New York. It certainly sounds like a man at peace with himself, who was coping just fine with everything he'd seen and done.

This generation eof soldiers, journalists, and contractors has just started reckoning with these issues. As a coping method, "silence" is certainly the last choice many of us have made. Dignity, modesty, humility—all surrendered just like the old Iraqi firebases were lost to ISIS, overrun while we weren't even looking. Who can blame us? This merry-go-round has too many brass rings hanging just within reach: book deals, screenplays, talking slots on news programs and bytes of space in internet columns, essays in collections that might be read, might not. So much to say, and too many years to go before Herr's perspective is finally attained.

What it comes down too, maybe, is trying to add to the obituary – to overcoming that sense of dismay when one realizes its first paragraph is likely written. Herr got there – he knew what the first paragraph would basically say: "Author of this, screenwriter of that; lauded as a visionary

journalist who created a new method of war reporting, who turned the businesslike voice of Ernie Pyle inside out, crafting war reporting as a surrealistic nightmare—and yet so entertaining." They didn't say that in so many words, but it would have been honest if they had—and I'm not sure to call it "entertaining" is a compliment. Herr did show that war reporting—embedded reporting, specifically—could capture the soldier's voice and life while keeping the real focus on the writer. Pyle didn't, not really. Herr's prize—and curse—was presenting his story first and foremost. For those of us today writing in first person, third person, it doesn't matter—it's a means to an end, and the byline is often the subject.

My bookshelf is full of novels and nonfiction telling war stories from dozens of points of view. There is the patriotic jerkoff next to the self-flagellating regret; the melodramatic tale of a bright-eyed lieutenant rests on top of the cynical observer laughing at his own joke; a detached reporter unwilling to choose a side rests on a shelf full of world-weariness and guilt. My own literary attempt is right there with them—all my reporting packaged in my own self-produced creation, a marketing tool and manuscript to send to publishers back when I had something to say. It doesn't hold up—my conclusions fall apart, what I think I saw in 2009 revealed as a mirage just a few years later. I'm glad it wasn't published.

I'm certainly like to hear myself talk like the rest of them—I write reviews of books related to the wars, offering my take on somebody else's. Now and then, I trundle to a library or small venue where the silverhairs spend an evening, and I narrate my photos and encapsulate my three summers spent in Iraq. It's a paying gig; I can reuse my script and just make sure to change the venue's name when I thank them for having me. I know the questions that they'll ask. It's all very familiar, and if it's boring to me, I tell myself it's maybe new to them, and isn't that worth something?

I was in the Army, went to Iraq in Desert Storm decades ago. I play the veteran's card when I can, an easy comeback against the sunshine patriots of this rancid and toxic modern era. But like my presentations, it all starts to feel a little hoary, my version of Fat Elvis creaking out "Love Me Tender."

Still, in writing classes, I do enjoy using different drafts of my work as examples of revision—to show how the overblown melodrama of the first draft becomes a reasonable conclusion by the final. It's a form of coping, the drafting and revision that is—working out the absurdities that no audience should be subjected too. But like I tell the students: You don't know that at the time. I meant it when I wrote it. Nobody sets out to write a bad first draft.

Think of our emotional investment with a first draft as a kind of reverence—we're so pleased with our words, with our thoughts and with ourselves. The revision process requires us to be—in Lester Bangs' perfect words—*contemptuously indifferent*, to be willing to cut things out without passion or prejudice.

In that vein, I have deliberately disconnected with the soldiers I spent that Iraq time with, eliminating our ties on social media—no harm done, no big blowups, just a casualty of their grotesque Trumpian politics and my disinterest in tolerance of the same. We weren't friends. What was it we spent together in Iraq? A month? Three? In the scheme of my 50 years, no time at all. It's an edit; a paragraph in my story that doesn't fit anymore.

If I walked into a classroom and started spouting the virtues of *Dispatches*, I'd be preaching to a room of those who have never heard the name of the book or the author. I would have to spend time raving about it, and who is interested in hearing some old man run his mouth about the "bad old days of jubilee?" There are so many other books to read, and who says *Dispatches* is better than any other? I thought it was Michael

Herr, you thought it was David Finkel or Sebastian Junger or Clinton Romesha or Siobhan Fallon, or *Zero-Dark-Thirty* or *Lone Survivor* or whoever or whatever you thought spoke to what you expected a war experience to read like, to look like, to capture the violence and the chaos in a way that made you say: "they got it." You wouldn't believe me if I said there was a time when we agreed on Michael Herr. He's been copied and parodied and distilled and diluted until he's just another name from another time, another war, and what's he really got to do with what we're talking about anyway?

Elvis Presley died in August, 1977, and *Dispatches* would be published two months later. In the next 10 years, Herr would then help on *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*—that trio arguably the most iconic creative outputs born from Vietnam. But from 1987 to his death in 2016, nothing of true note. Still, enough that, for a time, Michael Herr was the agreed upon war reporting standard—the center of the spoke from which everything would radiate.

What does Elvis have to do with it? Because Lester Bangs' 1977 prediction was right: When it comes to rock and roll, my generation has never agreed on anything like our parents once agreed on Elvis. When it comes to war reporting, no future generation of reporters will agree like we once did on Michael Herr. And nobody—*nobody*—will ever repeat his decision to sit on the sidelines during 15 years of war filled with reportage from so many of his imposters—and say *nothing*.

I am the most envious of that. His ability to take himself out of the game, to accept that what he had to say was said, in a book on a shelf. If we ever want to know what he thinks, we can always go right there, to words that will not change.

I've left behind my own record, of stories here and there, of essays and reviews in this publication or that. In my reporting, I did my part to make these wars palatable for the masses. I feel a hint of moral crime in that participation.

And it happened during a war. Put war and crime together, and what do you come up with? Did that thought occur to Michael Herr? Did he see all his copycats and sycophants and think “be careful what you wish for?”

Michael Herr showed us how to cope in a world riven by noise and discontent. Just be quiet. He has been dead for many months, but I need not bother to say goodbye to his corpse. I only wish I could say goodbye to you.

With much respect for Lester Bangs, and Elvis Presley.

Nathan Webster reported from Iraq in 2007-09 as a freelance photojournalist. He is also an Army veteran of Desert Storm. His work appears in many publications.