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.

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