

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Clock Strikes Twelve

My year-long run as guest-columnist for The Wrath-Bearing Tree comes to an end this month. I'm not sure if WBT founders Adrian Bonenberger and Mike Carson planned for my stint to last only twelve months, but in my mind it was always the goal. Twelve months, twelve Strike Through the Mask! columns, each with a different subject, obviously, but more personally, each with a different tone or style. My goal was variation within similarity, like a record album of yore: some songs fast, some slow, some mournful, some more upbeat, but all recognizable as the unified work of the creator.

I also welcomed the pressure of a monthly deadline. On my blog Time Now, I publish when I please. But I grew up loving the daily, weekly, and monthly columns of writers I admired in the newspapers and magazines I read—thinkers who wrote lively, interesting columns on a regular schedule. Finally, I realized I could use Strike Through the Mask! to range wider and dive deeper than I typically did in Time Now. Subjects I might not touch in Time Now, such as soldier memoirs and current events, I have explored at length in Strike Through the Mask! Most of all, I wanted to show Time Now readers a little more of the “real me”—my opinions, thoughts, and interests apart from the focus on other peoples' books and artworks in Time Now.

I couldn't have asked for better editors than Adrian and Mike. They have allowed me to write almost without suggestion or guidance, for better and for worse, and their infrequent edits and comments have always been on-point and encouraging. The war-writing community is lucky to have such thoughtful and generous leaders.

So what lies ahead? Time Now seems to have run its course, as well. I won't definitively declare it's over, but it does seem time for other writers more in-tune with the spirit of the 2020s to carry on its work. But who knows? I've read John Milas's *The Militia House* and watched *The Covenant* and I have thoughts.... Navy veteran Jillian Danback-McGhan's short-story collection *Midwatch* is on the way. A movie titled *Fremont*, about Afghan interpreters in America, and *Northern Shade*, about PTSD, are highly recommended and I look forward to watching them. Entire genres related to war-writing, such as YA and romance, lie mostly untouched, awaiting analysis....

I started Time Now in 2012 when it seemed clear that a vibrant writing-and-publishing scene centered on the work by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was emerging. One precipitating event was the 2010 War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air Force Academy. I was fortunate to attend and it was there I first met or heard read authors such as Siobhan Fallon, Matt Gallagher, and Benjamin Busch. Another catalyst was the publication in 2012 of Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, David Abrams' *Fobbit*, and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*—novels published by major houses and widely reviewed and largely celebrated. At the time, I was teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where I had already sponsored a reading by Brian Turner. That had been an early-on, isolated event, however, and now I sensed a cohort of vet-writers and affiliated family members and interested authors with no formal military affiliation coalescing. I also intuited that I, an infantry veteran of Afghanistan with a PhD in English Literature, was in a position to document and promote the emerging work.

Scenes need events, outlets, and platforms to thrive. From that first 2011 WLA conference to the next one, in 2018, a number of events and publishing venues, infused by a sense of community, shared endeavor, and a do-it-yourself ethos, made being a vet-writer exciting and fulfilling. Online publishing

sites a-plenty were available, and publishers and general readers were reasonably open to vet memoir, fiction, and poetry. Seemingly every large city and college campus was hosting vet-writing workshops and the vet-writer presence at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference (AWP) was robust. I regularly attended AWP between 2014 and 2018, where I hosted several panels and met and mingled with many writers in the scene. And until 2015 I had a position at the United States Military Academy at West Point that allowed me to stage events for vet writers and artists to read and perform for cadets.

That physical sense of community has largely faded, and vet-writers now rely on social media to promote, connect, and opine. That's OK, but if writers and artists now coming into print feel isolated rather than connected by the digisphere, I remind them that the cohesion of 2010-2018 was largely generated by the initiative of the participants themselves. If recreating that energy seems desirable, then the answer is to stage readings, host events, create platforms, reach out, form alliances, and keep knocking on doors. I'm not a position to help make that happen much anymore, but I love the spirit and energy when I see it.

To end here, I'll offer some photos of prominent authors in the scene I've taken over the years. Some I've already published on Time Now, but they're too good not to be given another airing. Salute to all the writers and their works!

Brian Turner, author of *Here*, *Bullet*, *Phantom Noise*, and many others, Red Bank, NJ, 2018



Siobhan Fallon, author of *You Know When the Men Are Gone* and *The Confusion of Languages*, West Point, NY, 2018



Phil Klay, author of *Redeployment* and *Missionaries*, Highland Falls, NY, 2014



Matt Gallagher, author of *Kaboom*, *Youngblood*, and *Empire City*, Camden NJ, 2016. (This picture was supposed to be taken in front of Walt Whitman's house, but what can I say? We screwed up and took the photo a few doors down from the Good Gray Poet's residence.)



Hassan Blasim, author of *The Corpse Exhibition* and others, West Point, NY, 2014



Elyse Fenton, author of *Clamor*, Dodge Poetry Festival, Newark,

NJ, 2014



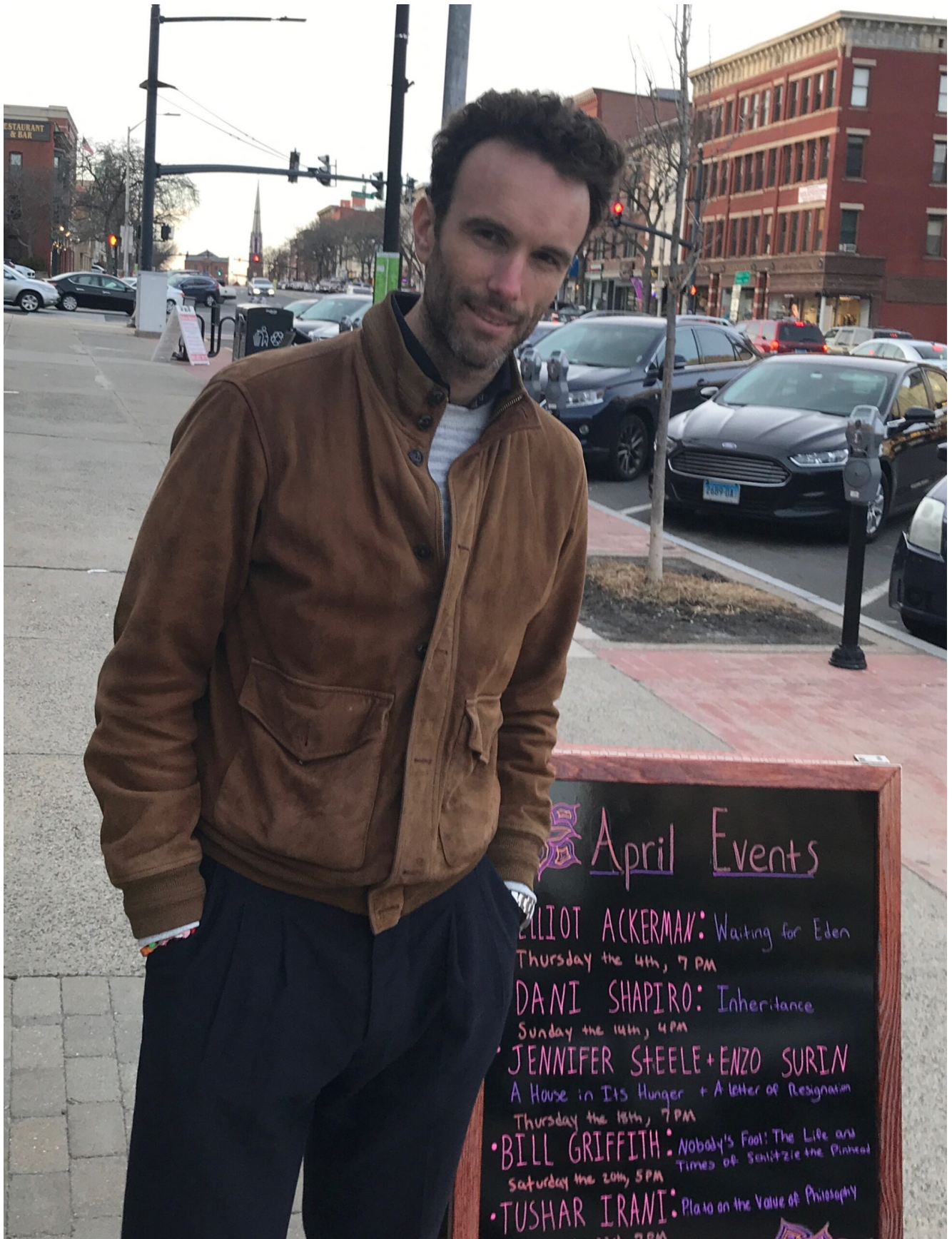
Brian Van Reet, author of *Spoils*, Austin, TX, 2016



John Renehan, author of *The Valley*, Arlington, VA, 2018



Elliot Ackerman, author of *Green on Blue*, *Dark at the Crossing*, and many others, Middletown, CT, 2019



Adrian Bonenberger, author of *Afghan Memoir* and *The Disappointed Soldier*, Branford, CT, 2021



Brian Castner, author of *The Long Walk* and *Disappointment River*, among others, New York, NY, 2020



Playwright Jay Moad and fiction author Jesse Goolsby, New York, NY, 2017. Moad and Goolsby were two of the driving forces behind the United States Air Force Academy's War,

Literature, and the Arts journal and conferences.



Roy Scranton and Jacob Seigel, Brooklyn, NY, 2018. Scranton is the author of *War Porn* and Seigel is the author of the short-story "Smile There Are IEDs Everywhere," from the seminal vet-writing anthology *Fire and Forget* edited by Scranton and Matt Gallagher.



Jennifer Orth-Veillon and Benjamin Busch, New Haven, CT, 2018. Orth-Veillon edited the anthology of writing about World War I *Beyond The Limits of Their Longing* that features a who's-who of vet and vet-adjacent writers. Busch is the author of the memoir *Dust to Dust*, as well as a poet, actor, filmmaker, photographer and illustrator.



Happy Birthday, Afghanistan

October 08, 2019

The war in Afghanistan is now old enough to go to war in Afghanistan.

Yesterday the war in Afghanistan, first to fall under the catchall designation of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), turned 18 years old, meaning that individuals who were not yet born when it started are now old enough to deploy in it.

Growing up, 18 is one of those birthdays you look forward to so much. It means freedom, emancipation from parental

oversight. It means cigarettes and lottery tickets. It means taking part in the democratic process. It means tattoos.

The war is not much different.

Freedom is certainly at the forefront of its goals. 18 years ago it began its existence as Operation Enduring Freedom and it continues (since 2015) as Operation Freedom's Sentinel. At this point there have probably been more cigarettes smoked by US troops than rounds fired. Notably absent from this new longest war is the draft lottery, a staple of the previous longest conflict, The Vietnam War.

As for the democratic process, Afghanistan has gotten it, or a version of it, since the US removal of the Taliban in 2001, having held three parliamentary elections and just completed their fourth presidential election (though the results are still unknown, partly due to ongoing violence, low turn-out, and the usual allegations of corruption).

And tattoos? Well, tattoos are just ink filled scars, and 18 years of war have left plenty of those.

I don't much remember my 18th birthday. I'm sure it was rather unremarkable, taking place during midterms of my senior year in high school, the year we got new US history textbooks that included the September 11th attacks.

It wasn't until two months later that I got my first tattoo, and I didn't move out of my parents' house until five months later. I wouldn't enlist until two months after my 19th birthday, and with full-scale ground wars now in two countries, it was clear that I'd be deploying, especially having joined the infantry.



I received my orders to deploy to Afghanistan on October 2, 2005, just before the war turned four. By this age, much of the country's attention was turned to its younger sibling, the War in Iraq. I went to war just after my 20th birthday.

When I got home in 2006, people constantly asked me what it was like in Iraq. They still do. This was the beginning of the realization that my war would be forgotten, but I never imagined it would reach this scale.

Over the past 18 years, less than half of one percent of this country's population has served in the military. An even smaller percentage has deployed, and of that group even fewer saw combat. The nature of the war in Afghanistan, like the official operational name, has changed. But war is war and US troops are still dying.

According to [DOD's most recent report](#) (October 7, 2019), there have been 1,893 US troops killed in action in Afghanistan since the start of the conflict. 60 of those have come under the banner of Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which allegedly marked the end of combat operations in the country. There have

been another 405 “non-hostile” deaths, and another 20,582 wounded in action. This is to say nothing of the US contractors or Afghan and allied forces KIA and WIA, or the veterans who have died since returning from the war, be it from complications to war injuries or from suicide.

Or the Afghan civilians whose freedom we are supposed to be sentinels of.

Questions I’m consistently faced with as a veteran of Afghanistan include: Was it worth it? Would you do it again? Should we leave? Did we win? How do we win?

The question of worth is a difficult one for me. Can we say anything is worth the number of lives that have been lost? More to the point, can we really make that judgment while we’re still in the thick of it?

Personally, yes, I would again answer my nation’s call and attempt to protect those whose position demands protection. Was it worth the injuries, physical and moral? Again, it’s hard to say in the thick of it, but when I hear that a combat outpost my team opened was closed just a few years later, or that a city we helped clear of the Taliban has fallen back under their control, it’s harder to say.

Should we leave? Absolutely. The challenge is *how* we leave. And I don’t have the answer. When the Soviets left in 1989 (after just 9 years of war), they did so under a cloud of atrocities committed. In some cases they just up and left, leaving behind equipment, mortars and tanks that I would patrol past 17 years later. They left a physical and political mess behind them. We can’t do the same. For the sake of the people of Afghanistan and the US troops who served there, we mustn’t. The feeling of futility, that our actions and sacrifices were entirely inconsequential, is one of the contributing factors to the rise of suicide among veterans.

The last question is the crux of it all. What can we call

winning? Does the fact that the OEF designation ended mean that we secured enduring freedom? Is it only enduring because we are still there as its sentinel? One of the reasons this question is so hard to answer is a lack of missional clarity from 18 years ago.

The Taliban was removed from power. That was not the end of the war. Osama bin Laden was killed. The war went on. The Afghan people democratically elected a second president. Still we were there. We declared an end to combat operations. US troops are still dying in combat.

But if my 18th birthday was unremarkable, the Afghan war's is even more so. Especially when considered in the context of national discourse. There was no Facebook reminder that October 7th was OEF's birthday. There was no corresponding fundraiser.

Rather, the occasion was largely marked by attention being paid to yet another younger sibling: Syria. Headlines, television news, and online platforms were dominated by the administration's latest GWOT decision to remove troops from a younger war. And it is unsurprising.

While withdrawing troops from Afghanistan has been given lip service in debates over the past few election cycles, nothing of substance has been done. During the confirmation for Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, not a single question was asked about Afghanistan. It took two hours for the incoming Secretary of the Army to be asked a question about Afghanistan during his confirmation.

President Trump didn't even mention Afghanistan on its war's birthday. The closest he came was tweeting, "I was elected on getting out of these ridiculous endless wars..." But this was clearly in response to criticism of the Syria decision.

No mention of the war that was voted most likely to be

endless.