

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 of 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 to, 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.

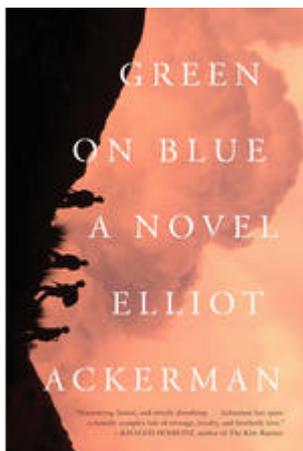
Nathan Webster reported from Iraq in 2007-09 as a freelance photojournalist. He is also an Army veteran of Desert Storm.

His work appears in many publications.

Why Don't Afghans Love Us: Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue*

There aren't many "literary" fiction books out about Afghanistan, and almost none authored by veterans. Brian Castner, a veteran of Iraq, [published an essay in *Los Angeles Review of Books*](#) that examines the phenomenon in more depth. Roy Scranton, another veteran of Iraq and a philosopher, [claims in a different *LARB* essay](#) that there are plenty of war stories by American veterans already available, and that Western audiences should be looking for stories by or about the host nation. This claim has been made by writers like Joydeep-Roy Battacharya and Helen Benedict, as well.

Enter *Green on Blue*, a savagely honest, realistic novel about Afghanistan by Elliot Ackerman. Imminently readable and deeply subversive, *Green on Blue* draws on its author's extensive experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan to paint a stunning and accurate description of why the West is losing and will lose in Afghanistan. The problem and solution both exist within the book's title.



“Green on Blue” is a military term that derives from the color of units on NATO battle maps – blue colored units are friendlies (America, Great Britain, *West Germany*), green are allies (France), and red are enemy (Soviet-aligned countries). Green on blue describes what happens when allies deliberately or accidentally attack friendly soldiers / units. The incidents, therefore, are incredibly troubling – they represent the failure of alliance, the prospect of new enemies arising from botched friendships. They hint at betrayal, in the context of existential struggle.

In *Green on Blue*, Americans are “blue” and Afghans are “Green,” the allies. Crucially to the plot, there are no “red” – there are enemies, but this term, in the context of Afghanistan, is fungible. The plot revolves around an Afghan militiaman named Aziz, who navigates generations of human relationships between Afghans, while attempting not to be crushed by the war. At its heart, the war is described as a competition between groups for social standing – respect from young men, and money from the Americans.

According to the capitalist west, money is supposed to buy respect and loyalty. This forms the basis of an important miscommunication between Americans and Afghans in the novel – a strategic cultural miscalculation of extraordinary significance. Money, in the context of the story, represents a sort of catastrophic idealism, which merely compels individuals to compete in a zero-sum game for resources. Ultimately, American dependence on the coercive power of tangible resources predicts the type of incident hinted at in the book’s title.

On a local level, in Afghanistan, the most important thing is respect – the honor of a group (“*nan*g”), which is under constant threat of insult. Once “*nan*g” has been challenged, the group is required to respond to the insulter with revenge – “*badal*,” which consists of appropriately violent action. The protagonist learns this essential lesson as a child: “*Once, in*

Sperkai, an older child had split my lip in a fight. When my father saw this, he took me to the boy's home. Standing at their front gate, he demanded that the father take a lash to his son. The man refused and my father didn't ask twice. He struck the man in the face, splitting his lip just as his son had split mine..." On this plane, *Green on Blue* operates as a sort of slowly-unfolding national tragedy, wherein the Afghans become their own heroes and villains, and the Americans – representative of "The West" – are simply agents of catastrophe and destruction, casually and unthinkingly paying money to keep the feuds going, hoping to find "High Value Targets" in the war on terror.

Aziz is both nuanced and archetypal – a quintessentially Afghan product of the West's involvement in Afghanistan. At the story's beginning, his father (a fighter for hire), dies at some point between the Civil War period after Soviet rule and NATO's intervention in 2001: *First there was the dust of people running. Behind the dust was a large flatbed truck and many smaller ones. They pushed the villagers as a broom cleans the streets... Amid the dust and the heat, I saw men with guns. The men looked like my father but they began to shoot the villagers who ran.* The gunmen are never identified – they destroy Aziz's village and move on, leaving Aziz and his older brother orphaned. After a difficult childhood where he and his brother struggle against the odds to improve their tenuous life at society's margins, another, similar tragedy involving a Taliban suicide bomber leads Aziz to join the "Special Lashkar," a CIA-funded militia on the border of Pakistan.

In the "Special Lashkar," Aziz learns to fight and kill. The group's leader is an Afghan named Commander Sabir, paid by the CIA to fight against the Taliban. Readers quickly learn that Sabir is enmeshed in his own struggle over "badal" and "nang" – Sabir is hunted by the brother of a Taliban fighter that Sabir killed, a Taliban named Gazan, in revenge for that now-dead brother having killed Sabir's brother, the former leader

of the Special Lashkar. If that seems complicated, it should – alliances and enmities proliferate in the book, ensnaring all and forcing everyone to take sides in the conflict. Nothing is sacred, not love, not honor, not brotherhood – nothing. And behind it all stands the enigmatic, fascinating character of “Mr. Jack,” the CIA officer who runs the Special Lashkar, and who seeks targets for America’s war on terror.

Mr. Jack is my favorite character in post-9/11 fiction. There isn’t much of him in the book, but his influence is seen everywhere – he resonates through the book’s pages, exceptionally powerful, moving in and out of autochthonic settings like he belongs, while making obscene and absurd mistakes that lead only to more preventable strife. Mr. Jack is so unaware of the consequences of his actions, that he becomes an incidental antagonist. His hunt for professional success turns Mr. Jack into a caricature of a man, a careerist who seeks professional success without any understanding of its human cost.

There are no heroes in this book, which could make it a World War II story similar to *Catch-22* or *Slaughterhouse Five* – save that there are no antiheroes, either. There are believable human characters that find themselves at war in spite of themselves, forced to fight for meanings that shift and collapse until the only thing left is friendship, then friendship collapses as well. This resembles the standard Vietnam narrative, like *Matterhorn* or *The Things They Carried*, but the characters in Ackerman’s book are not motivated by ambition or by ideology – rather they seek simply to survive, not to be killed. The characters in *Green on Blue* do not have space for the type of indulgent self-reflection imagined by the typical Vietnam-era author, such as Tim O’Brien or Tobias Wolff – this is a book where there is little room or space for interiors. Perhaps we are on the verge of a new type of fiction – a story that balances deliberately earnest *almost modernist* narrative plotlines, while acknowledging the

New War Literature

The suicide bomber came from the wrong direction. He drove a maroon Toyota Corolla into the middle of a group of Afghan police and militia – just an hour into a massive operation to help defeat the Taliban – and brought everything to a screaming stop. His car was packed with screws, nuts, nails, pots, ball bearings, and explosives, and when the shrapnel and overpressure shot into the crowd, it wounded five of my soldiers. It also killed fifteen Afghans (seven civilians, six police, two militia), and seriously damaged two vehicles.

My boss called me. I was told that if the police pulled out from our location, the mission was a scratch: we couldn't go forward alone. The policemen wailed, wept, and collected the pieces of their dead countrymen. I watched as they loaded the dead into pickup trucks and left, all but four of them – leaving us with a token force for our mission. I thought, *If we stop now, their lives, this all will have been for nothing – worse than nothing. We need more than ever to impose our will on these bastards.* I told my boss that the Afghans were still with us, totally committed to the operation. I lied, bald-faced – without Afghan support, we should've stopped, called it all off. I insisted that we continue forward. I made that choice. More people got hurt, later. I made that choice, too.

If my experience were rendered in the style of most existing war literature, this engagement should've felt completely useless, a total waste. Writers with combat experience from World War II or Vietnam would likely characterize such an event as fruitless, hollow, or even criminal. Instead, when I was there on the ground, it felt like the most important thing in the world – and neither time nor perspective have changed my mind.

How do civilians take in the stories of war? War itself has

evolved: information-sharing technology has helped turn Napoleonic squares of uniformed citizens into essentially fluid conflicts between professional soldiers and hidden insurgents. Civilians get glimpses of it through isolated YouTube videos of drone strikes or firefights, or Hollywood films of SEAL teams and Rangers riding helicopters into raid compounds. But the actual, real-time war experienced by soldiers on the ground doesn't have such a neat beginning and end: war is the omnipresent threat of chaos from any direction. Contemporary war – at least the one I saw – is a place in which nobody is safe, anywhere, ever.

But contemporary war literature has not kept up with contemporary war. We need to develop a literature, one that escapes the limits of both glorified war narratives and cynical condemnations for how war crushes the individual soldier. Neither extreme on this good vs. bad trajectory is true to war today. We must create something new.

To be fair, things used to be different. They really did. Before the industrial revolution, war was smaller, more personal, and comprehensible. Even while nations were fielding armies of greater sizes – tens to hundreds of thousands of people – the means of procurement were villages, hamlets, and towns. During the American Revolution, for example, towns sent small groups of men armed with rifles to ambush British formations, and later to fight in European-style units. Even given the large numbers, however, most soldiers were fighting alongside people they'd grown up with. Communities grieved their losses together, and war was a social as well as personal calamity – the consequences of war were inescapable.

The industrial revolution made every aspect of human society narrower, more specialized, and distant. The Civil War was a transition point, and it catalyzed the growth of increasingly realistic literature, a marked departure from ideal, Romantic representations of war. Ambrose Bierce's story "[An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge](#)" is an example of this progression. In the

spotlight is Peyton Farquhar, who is about to be hung from the Owl Creek Bridge because of his Confederate sympathies; his treasonous support of the Southern army is real, but the act he is being executed for was a set-up by a Union scout. Bierce's characters feel like real people, equally trapped by their institutional or cultural prejudices and the choices they've made.

World War I prompted the dawn of the modern literary modernist movement, which obliterated traditional forms of tradition and narrative. Nearly every memoir or fictional account from the modernists emphasized horror, disassociation, and individual impotence in the face of war on an industrial scale. As poet and soldier Wilfred Owen wrote about a collection of his poems: "This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War." Owen was later killed in battle, a week before World War I ended. Ernest Hemingway, meanwhile, drew from his experience as a wartime ambulance driver when writing *A Farewell to Arms*, a novel emphasizes the ambivalence of soldiers and the depersonalized destruction of war through his short staccato sentences and bleakly simple story. There is no room for flourish here.

Not long later, World War II veterans like Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller wrote literature that confirmed and elaborated on those negative themes, describing mechanized warfare as fundamentally dehumanizing, while emphasizing the absurdity of heroism. In [Catch-22](#), rational choice is circular, leading directly to combat, and death. Orr and Yossarian, two of the main characters in *Catch-22*, are Army officers who attempt everything they can to get out of flying additional bombing missions in WWII. The war is almost over, and the missions seem guaranteed only lead to more chances to be shot down by the Germans or Italians. Awards and positive recognition mean nothing to either of them. From the novel:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.

Revelations about passivity and absurdity in modern war literature paralleled a recognition that similar situations exist in corporate structures; it has been fashionable to describe life within an institution using the language of sarcasm and irony ever since, from Ken Kesey's [*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*](#) to David Foster Wallace's [*Infinite Jest*](#).

But for all that, I didn't see much passivity in Afghanistan.

Very quietly, technological advances (internet connectivity and smart phone technology) in and outside battle have returned soldiering and warfare to their personal, pre-industrial state. Each decision of every soldier can have strategic consequences for good or for ill. Instead of individuals overwhelmed by their inability to make meaningful choices, I saw an incredible, almost debilitating amount of agency and responsibility on an hourly basis, always. We risked getting torn apart by dull or sharp metal every time we left our bases, chucked high by overpressure. We risked the same when we were on our bases – as revealed by the Air Force officer killed by a rocket while jogging inside the perimeter of our base (known as FOB Kunduz).

After a suicide bomber destroyed so much in the middle of our mission, I'd decided to go forward, and we did. The bombing emboldened the Taliban, so as we walked forward under the

blistering summer heat, we were moving toward a savage battle across a half-mile front. Armored vehicles, led by engineers, rumbled forward single file down the broad dirt road. The lead vehicle struck an IED, totaling it. The Taliban mortared one of my platoons and attempted to flank our position from the east, then west, blanketing us with bullets. Brass casings from my machine gunner rained down onto my helmet, a soft, hollow rain of clinking as I fed reports higher, and coordinated the defense. Two "Apache" helicopters arrived. The Taliban shot another two U.S. soldiers, and more Afghan police and militia. We pried two compounds away from the Taliban, but it was night-time before, finally, they stopped fighting.

My boss wanted to know if it was worth staying there, after all. What did we hope to accomplish when most of our Afghan allies were mourning?

We needed to stay, I told him. We'd held our own, and could move over to the attack in the morning. I requested more assets, and more time. I doubled down, hoping, but not knowing, that if we could trade punches long enough with the Taliban, we'd kill or exhaust enough of them to make them quit.

But we could fail. This notion terrified and appalled me. It also reveals that my choice was a real one: it had consequences. Acting – taking ownership for a decision, not backing away from the moment – risks humiliation and high-stakes defeat. Pointing our guns and firing, running forward into the woodline, fighting our way into buildings: we could just as easily have accomplished nothing, or worse.

My experiences and those of, say, Tim O'Brien – who wrote [*The Things They Carried*](#), one of the most important accounts of the Vietnam War – were different. For a long time after returning home, I did not know exactly what those differences were. I couldn't enumerate them. But when I sat down to try my own hand at contemporary literature – [*Afghan Post*](#), a memoir – they

began to crystallize before me.

By writing and reflecting on my experiences I discovered that the challenge in processing my experiences in Afghanistan was not due to a feeling of vulnerability or impotence, but to a stifling sense of horror that a thing I said or did might have terrible consequences. Rather than confirming the lessons I'd gleaned from Vonnegut or Heller or O'Brien – that I'd been trapped in a situation completely beyond my control, the proverbial "Catch-22" – my time in Afghanistan convinced me of the opposite. I was never forced or compelled to move forward into battle, and I never demanded that my soldiers move forward, either. The words "I order you" or "I command you" never crossed my lips, literally or implicitly. There were choices to act, every step of the way.

This is not to suggest that Heller and O'Brien and Vonnegut are now irrelevant. Not as humanists, or satirists, or historians. But they are cataloguing a thing, a state of affairs that has no meaning for soldiers or officers like me, veterans who saw what I did. We are soldiers who chose to take a picture of dead Taliban, or not. Soldiers who chose to give their food or water out to impoverished villagers—in violation of orders, but gaining unexpected goodwill. Other soldiers may have made different choices. Still others may have been posted in cities or forts away from the borders or restive Pashtun areas – places that saw little fighting, where all they could do was observe action on a television screen.

For everyone back home, to whom this war must have been a received event on YouTube or at the movies, passivity really is the way to describe their experience of the war. Michael Lokesson, another veteran of current wars, described the prevailing argument best in an [article](#) he wrote recently in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*:

As war became more mechanized and regimented, and fought on a far larger scale, incorporating new technological implements

of death – rifles and cannons, planes and armor, drones and improvised explosive devices – the agency of the individual soldier, however lofty in rank, has diminished.

I wasn't with Lokesson in Iraq, and cannot claim to know his experience or that of his comrades. But while his logic may hold true up to Vietnam and in Iraq, it didn't hold true for Afghanistan, at the very least. Quite the opposite – the agency of the individual soldier has increased.

If there was a bottom to the “agency” parabola, it was likely during WWII, where entire armies and fleets were destroyed without any effect on the outcome of the war. The Japanese sank most of our fleet in the Pacific, and destroyed some hundreds of thousands of British, Americans, and Chinese. They endured the first and last atomic bombings. The German Wehrmacht gobbled up five Russian armies groups whole – some four million soldiers killed or captured over five months of significant fighting – the consequence of which was that four years later, Hitler committed suicide in his bunker. It is utterly plausible, among the firebombing of cities, dawn of the atomic age, and mechanized warfare, to imagine, as a soldier, that staying awake on guard wasn't going to make much of a difference on any collective individual or level.

Meanwhile, two military police soldiers in Abu Ghraib took pictures of themselves psychologically and physically torturing prisoners, and the world paid attention. Edward Snowden absconded with 250,000 sensitive documents from the NSA, and it had severe repercussions for international relations, repercussions that echo into the present, as former allies and democratic sympathizers such as India and Brazil side with a notorious tyrant (Putin) rather than America. And I and those like me fought through the dust and wet, humid heat, through thin air in the unforgiving mountains, under our own power, by our own choosing.

After that mission in Kunduz Province in early August, I wrote

a letter to one of my best friends. Describing the circumstances surrounding the battle, I wrote that:

We really could've turned the mission into a success if we'd been postured to follow it up, but the way the assets were being committed was too piecemeal, there wasn't any organization or long-term plan. This was my fault. We'd planned to be on the offense for three days, and I made no contingency plans for follow-on operations; we should've planned for more.

The letter is a simple accounting of action, taken by individuals; it is not a nihilistic account wherein the characters are all helpless, subjective or mere tools of an uncaring fate. As it turned out, we were rewarded for the choices we made. Although we had to turn back without accomplishing our objective within the Taliban-held areas, the Afghan police and army came back with a renewed fervor after their mourning was complete, and the story of our desire to fight on their behalf and fight along with them struck a chord with the population. When we returned to our fort after the last day of fighting, the roads of Imam Sahib city were lined with Afghans waving at us – families, children, little girls. Our efforts produced measurable, real effects, and laid a solid foundation that we drew on to go back, and back again, and again, until the Taliban were driven out.

Paul Fussell, an infantryman from WWII and a fine author, wrote a superlative essay for *Harper's Magazine* in 1982 titled "[My War: How I got irony in the infantry.](#)" In it, among a great many other example of the roots of his irony (and that of an entire generation), he describes how the worst battle of his life went forgotten because of its relative unimportance in the overall scheme of WWII:

That day in mid-March that ended me was the worst of all for F Company. We knew it was going to be bad when it began at dawn, just like an episode from the First World War, with an hour-

long artillery preparation and a smokescreen for us to attack through. What got us going and carried us through was the conviction that, sufferers as we might, we were at least "making history." But we didn't even do that. Liddell-Hart's 766-page History of the Second World War never heard of us. It mentions neither March 15 nor the 103rd Infantry Division. The only satisfaction history has offered is the evidence that we caused Josef Goebbels some extra anxiety.

In Khanabad, in Imam Sahib, every time we drove down the new, black paved roads, or along the dusty, cratered dirt trails, or walked into the marketplace, we had an immediate and noticeable effect – we were the war. And yet, current war literature like [The Yellow Birds](#) by Kevin Powers, asserts the opposite: "The war tried to kill us in the spring." This is a stance that lags behind the truth: The war was us, we chose and made it. And so far as I remember, we weren't trying to kill ourselves.

If one's primary interaction with Iraq or Afghanistan has been watching a [ninety-second clip](#) on the nightly news of a tiny fort being overrun in some nameless valley, or a firefight, or one of the ubiquitous recordings of sleek, black-metal American air power sniffing out and destroying nighttime Taliban infiltrators in [black-and-white](#), I understand how one might conclude that war is sporadic or even forgettable. Maybe for people who were driving up and down the same road in Bradley light tanks, or Abrams, some of them getting blown up, some surviving arbitrarily – maybe for them the war was as absurd and unknowable as it was for Yossarian in a B-24 bomber flying over the skies of Bologna in WWII.

But I did not see absurdity where I was in Afghanistan – at least, not WWII-Albert-Camus-grade absurdity. I saw people making choices, for good and for ill. In the mountains and valleys, the places where the 173rd, 101st, 82nd, 3rd, 4th, and 10th patrolled, we didn't wage war with a nuanced appreciation for the infinite variables that affected every

bullet fired on both sides. When we patrolled – scrambling over sun-baked walls, our poorly-designed, sweat-soaked uniforms ripping under the stress, down rocky, uncertain draws, clambering and dragging ourselves and each other up hills, behind the next piece of cover – it was conscious, earnest. The bullets zipping and *ker-twanging* around us were the least ironic of all. They had one purpose: to instruct each of us how fragile and sporadic a thing we were.

No. What I saw while firing my rifle from the trenches that the mujahedeen or Soviets dug to fight one another years ago was a series of intensely personal battles on a tribal level, for local security. The soldiers, sergeants, and officers I worked with helped stitch together the battles we fought in rural thirty-compound villages (with a solitary stream running through the middle for irrigation) into something bigger: security at a sub-regional level. When you're walking forward, putting one sore, boot-clad foot in front of the next, and you know that the boom of a Taliban rocket-propelled grenade and chatter of Taliban machine-guns is minutes or seconds away, you don't feel (*I didn't feel*) passive. I felt that a thing was about to happen, a thing for which I was partly or wholly responsible.

More often than not, at the end of the day I felt content with what happened. After all, I couldn't account for Kabul, or Washington D.C., or Islamabad – those places with people I'd never see. All I saw was my own little slice of the broader struggle to give Afghans a chance at less corruption, a freer society, and a better justice system. By the time I left Afghanistan for good, the Taliban were gone, and I'd seen two women – *two* – wearing blue jeans in the cities under my unit's jurisdiction, Imam Sahib and Khanabad. That seemed like progress.

War literature as it stands today describes a kind of war that is foreign to me. According to Tim O'Brien, Tobias Wolff, and their contemporaries, war (*life*) is unknowable, mediated,

somehow beyond comprehension (Wolff said that war made him stupider). Would that this were the case today! The fact that Iraq and Afghanistan have been more observed than lived by many citizens helps give the notion of passivity traction. I understand its logical roots, but its day as an organizing principle for war has passed. In fact, it's even worth considering whether the idea of soldier passivity during warfare always existed for its audience at home as a way to defend humans from facing their awful, bestial capability during legal, community-sanctioned violence; a way of denying the things that one permits one's sons and fathers (and now daughters and mothers) to experience. After all, even the legendary warriors of Homer were media constructs – the battle between Hector and Achilles is moderated entirely by the goddess Athena, who selects Achilles as victor.

In the end, I can only write the war I know: to try to characterize human behavior in our own time. I'm indebted to those thinkers who came before, but am free from the constraints of their experiences and successes. The great writers of the past have done their part, but the war literature that will speak truly to this age will be as different from *The Things They Carried* as that great Vietnam story was from [Slaughterhouse-Five](#). There are writers out there right now working on taking contemporary war narratives to the next level – among them are Brian Castner, Phil Klay, Brian Van Reet, Matt Gallagher, Kristen Rouse, and Mike Carson. This emerging generation of writers and war veterans (male and female) act, speak, and write – just as they patrolled, built, and suffered – in full possession of their faculties. Not victims of government or circumstance or passion, but, rather, agents who are ultimately responsible to themselves, and for their actions.

This is the legacy of the first all-volunteer American army to head overseas: whatever one's feelings on the invasions, the war didn't happen to us. We owned it, start to finish. It was

ours – it *is* ours.

