



Tyler E. Boudreau: "The Unmaking of A Marine"

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by: Jason Leopold, *truthout* / Report

I often bemoan how the media's policy of sanitizing combat images and its failure to report what the true face of war looks like have caused the public to be detached from the carnage wrought by the occupation of Iraq and the war in Afghanistan.

For nearly a decade, both wars have largely been reported by the media and explained to the public by lawmakers in statistical terms: thousands of U.S. soldiers killed in combat, hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqis dead, and three-quarters of a million veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress.

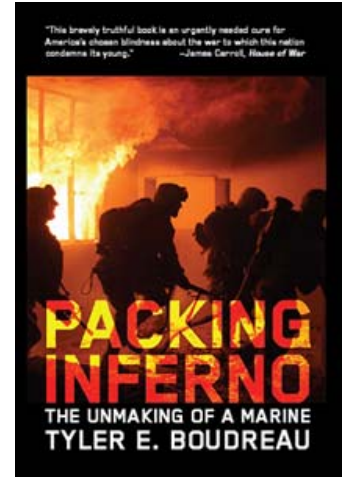
Perhaps the media is not entirely at fault for failing to provide deeper insight into the psychological impact the wars have had on more than one million U.S. veterans and their families.

Until recently, the press has been prohibited from photographing veterans returning from combat in flag-draped coffins, and funerals for the fallen were likewise off-limits.

But by relying heavily on numbers and press releases as a way of covering both conflicts, the public has been rendered incapable of experiencing or feeling any dramatic element associated with the devastation. It's a sad truth that the average person is unable to accurately say how many U.S. soldiers have been killed and wounded since the wars began (4,257 U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq, more than 31,000 wounded, 320,000 diagnosed with brain injuries).

That's how far removed from reality our society has become in the eight years since the fighting first began. We know the U.S. is currently engaged in two wars; we just have no idea what impact those wars have had on the soldiers and veterans who have bravely served our country.

These are the conclusions I arrived at after reading Marine Capt. [Tyler E. Boudreau's](#) first-person exposé of the time he spent in Iraq and the struggles he and his comrades faced in the aftermath of their deployment.





If Boudreau's brutally honest, devastatingly accurate, hard-hitting memoir, *Packing Inferno: The Unmaking of a Marine* were read by the powers that be in Washington, D.C. and by the journalists assigned to cover both military conflicts, there is absolutely no way in hell the plight of our nation's veterans would take a backseat to the issues currently dominating the evening news coverage or the topics of conversations at dinner tables throughout the country.

Boudreau's book is so powerful and so superbly written that I found myself reading whole chapters twice just so I could study his writing style and ensure that the graphic imagery he describes is forever seared into my consciousness.

What makes Boudreau's account such a page-turner is the descriptive nature of his prose. Reading it made me feel like I was embedded with the Marine Corps' veteran. There were many instances in which I felt my heart beat faster, my eyes well up with tears, my adrenaline pump through my veins.

Describing an oncoming vehicle that may or may not be a suicide bomber, Boudreau writes:

"Pulses jumped and our voices grew sharp and edgy. I leaned out the window and aimed my rifle at the truck. We struggled to see inside it, to spot some kind of clue that might tell us with any certainty whether or not the driver was a suicide bomber. My heart was racing. I was breathing hard as it drew closer and closer. Fire? Don't fire? It was so difficult to know what to do. Will we live? Will we die? This could be it. And the truck drew closer still. And still we couldn't seem to come up with a decision. There was no one to ask. There was no manual to reference. There was no time to think it over. There was only now, the moment, and we had to decide. In the end we resolved to hold our fire, and I was glad we did. The truck floated quietly past us without exploding into a million bits of fragmentation in our faces. We stared, agog, at the passengers, a family of four or maybe five crammed into the cab staring back at us, all agog as well."

You know that Boudreau was forced to relive his harrowing experience in Iraq in order to write a book as disturbing and heartwrenching as *Packing Inferno*.

The "story of *Packing Inferno* was conceived under fire," exactly five years ago this month, Boudreau writes in the preface to his book. He eloquently describes how before he was sent to Iraq he had packed dozens of books into his "sea-bag," one of which was Dante's *Inferno*, which he said he didn't recall taking, but nonetheless gave him a title for his memoir.



"I began writing it in Iraq with the war raging around me. When I got home, I found the war was still raging, but it was not outside me anymore, not to touch, or to see, or to hear, or to smell. It was within me. I was no longer packing inferno in my sea-bag, but in my head."

"My wife will sometimes catch a shift in my eyes, while we're talking about groceries, or the kids' school, or the weather, and she'll ask me, "What are you thinking about?" She can see I've drifted off. But she doesn't need me to answer, because she knows, and because the answer is always the same."

And therein lies one of the central themes of Boudreau's 222-page book: the images of the war he has heroically fought have been implanted inside of his mind and are on a permanent loop.

"To say I was duped is not sufficient to lighten the load," he writes.

The post-traumatic stress of the war in Iraq will forever be a part of Boudreau's identity and it will be a lifelong battle to keep it in check. For some soldiers, post-traumatic stress is the precursor to suicide, for others it leads to a life of drug abuse, alcoholism, or crime.

Although the word "disorder" usually follows post-traumatic stress, Boudreau objects to the verbiage, calling it an "antiquated" term.

"While the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) still uses this term, it is widely rejected by those who work in the field of mental health," Boudreau wrote in an Author's Note to his book. "I reject it too... I do not consider the psychological struggle of returning veterans a 'disorder' and so I will only refer to this injury as 'combat stress' or post-traumatic stress."

Removing the word "disorder" has helped to eliminate the stigma some veterans say persists when they are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress or the ridicule they endure after seeking help for their deteriorating mental state.



When I spoke with Boudreau recently, he told me that part of the stigma has to do with the fact that Marines are supposed to be "tough" and saying that "you feel all broken up because you shot a guy" could make a soldier's situation worse.

Boudreau said "the smallest action or phrase from a commander can influence Marines and other soldiers not to seek help."

"I knew the day I left that I would eventually have to return in nine months and manpower is always a struggle," Boudreau said. "My boss won't say to deny treatment. But his outlook of me will be negative" if most of the unit has been discharged due to post-traumatic stress.

Boudreau expanded upon this notion in a recent op-ed published in the Boston Globe.

"The pressure to prepare ourselves quickly was intense. When the first Marine came to my office and asked to see the psychiatrist about some troubling issues from our time in Iraq, I was sympathetic. I said, "No problem." When another half dozen or so Marines approached me with the same request, I was only somewhat concerned."

"But when all of them and several more returned from their appointments with recommendations for discharge, I'll admit I was alarmed. Suddenly I was not as concerned about their mental health as I was about my company's troop strength."

"As all those Marines in my company began filtering out, some from essential positions, I started to worry about the welfare of those remaining. I worried, quite naturally, that if the exodus continued, we might not have enough to accomplish our mission or to survive on the battlefield. My sympathies for those individuals claiming post-traumatic stress began to wane. A commander cannot serve in earnest both the mission and the psychologically wounded."

This underscores a larger issue, one that the U.S. government was totally unprepared to deal with as it planned for the Iraq war.



Prior to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, documents released by the Department of Veterans Affairs said it expected a maximum of 8,000 cases of post-traumatic stress disorder.

However, according to a study released last year by the RAND Corporation, there are more than 320,000 veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars suffering from major depression, PTSD and/or traumatic brain injury. The report found that the VA has been and continues to be ill-equipped to deal with these cases when soldiers return from combat, especially after multiple tours.

An Army task force last year also found major flaws in the way the VA treated and cared for veterans suffering from traumatic brain injuries.

Boudreau said the treatment of post-traumatic stress is antithetical to the mantra of "Mission Accomplished."

"The mission will always supersede treatment," Boudreau said. "And because of that the treatment will always be dubious."

"And all the talk from bureaucrats about putting an end to multiple deployments, which has been blamed on the skyrocketing cases of post-traumatic stress and suicides, is inconceivable," Boudreau said.

"I've heard the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff say 'we have to change this ethic,'" Boudreau said. "But it's not going to happen. Why? Because the military cannot afford a 20 percent reduction in its force."

Since writing *Packing Inferno*, Boudreau has become an outspoken advocate for veterans.

Over the past four months, he has penned op-eds on veterans issues that have been published in *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe* and *The Progressive*.

In a *New York Times* op-ed, Boudreau argued that the decision not to award Purple Hearts to veterans is wrong and feeds into the cultural stigma the military has for veterans who bear the psychological wounds of war.



"Why, for instance, if a veteran has been given a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress and awarded benefits, should he not also be awarded a Purple Heart?"

"Perhaps a new decoration, a new medal, could be established specifically for those suffering from post-traumatic stress. It would be awarded to those whose minds and souls have been sundered by war."

"I suggest we call this medal the Black Heart. Certainly the hearts of these soldiers are black, with the terrible things they saw and did on the battlefield. Certainly the country should see these Black Hearts pinned on their chests."

In addition to his work on behalf of veterans, Boudreau has taken on the Iraqi refugee crisis and recently traveled to Jordan to call attention to the matter. Last year, he and his colleagues formed the nonprofit organization Iraq Veterans' Refugee Aid Association (IVRAA) in response to inadequate measures by the U.S. government to effectively deal with the crisis, he said.

This summer, Boudreau is undertaking a cross-country bicycle tour with other veterans to search for "what's on 'the other side' of the battlefield."

"It is very much about veterans who have found themselves hurled suddenly to the other side of a catastrophic injury, or Post-Traumatic Stress [sic], or an inexplicably dysfunctional life in the aftermath of war. But it is also about the nature of warfare itself. There is a great mythology associated with battle. We seek 'the other side' of that mythology. We seek the other side of ourselves. We travel to 'the other side' of the country to find it," Boudreau explains on his website.

Three years ago, Boudreau, who spent much of his entire adult life in the military, resigned his Marine Corps commission.

"In 2005, after 12 years of active service in the Marine Corps and with growing reservations about the war, I relinquished command of my rifle company and resigned my commission," Boudreau writes in *Packing Inferno*. "It struck me that, in our headlong pursuit to deliver freedom and democracy and to expel an oppressive regime and combat terrorism, we had inadvertently lost sight of the very people we'd been deployed to help."



Packing Inferno is one of the most important historical documents to come out of the Iraq war if for no other reason than it shows what the true face of the Iraq war looks like. It's a remarkable achievement in war reportage and it deserves to be shelved next to the Great War Books and should be required reading for every lawmaker and students of American history.

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